

SOUTH WEST FUTURE FLIGHT INNOVATION ZONE



SOMERSET AND DEVON FUTURE AVIATION SKILLS

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Executive Summary

Somerset and Devon are strongly positioned to play a leading role in the UK's Future Flight economy, underpinned by the South West Future Flight Innovation Zone (SW FFIZ) and a well-established aviation and aerospace sector. The region already supports thousands of high-value jobs and global companies, but skills shortages, rapid technological change, and infrastructural barriers to involvement pose risks to future growth.

This report assesses current and emerging aviation skills needs across the region and identifies the actions required to build a resilient, inclusive, and work-ready talent pipeline. Employers consistently report shortages in critical roles, particularly those combining technical, digital, and engineering expertise. At the same time, advances in autonomy, digitalisation, hydrogen and electric propulsion, artificial intelligence, and uncrewed aerial systems are reshaping workforce requirements at pace.

While further and higher education provision across the South West is strong, there are notable gaps in Future Flight-specific pathways, including the absence of dedicated drone engineering apprenticeships and undergraduate courses focused on future aviation technologies. Infrastructural challenges, such as transport connectivity, housing affordability, SME capacity, and intense competition for skilled talent, also constrain access to training and careers. Increasing diversity and inclusion across the sector represents a significant opportunity to widen the talent pool and enhance innovation.

To address these challenges, the report proposes the creation of a South West Future Aviation Skills Hub to coordinate aviation training provision, employer engagement, and careers support across the SW FFIZ. It calls for the development of new Future Flight training pathways, stronger early-years and early-careers engagement, deeper collaboration between industry and education providers, targeted action to remove access barriers, and a strategic commitment to inclusion and diversity. Together, these actions will help secure the skilled workforce required to sustain regional prosperity and position Somerset and Devon at the forefront of the UK's Future Flight sector.

1. Introduction

Purpose and Scope of the Report

The SW Future Flight Innovation Zone (SW FFIZ), <https://swffiz.co.uk/> is a strategic initiative aimed at accelerating smart, sustainable aviation and advanced air mobility technologies. Leveraging the South West's exceptional capabilities, the zone serves as a real-world testbed for innovations including drones, unmanned aerial vehicles, and hybrid, electric, and hydrogen-powered aircraft. By fostering cross-sector collaboration, SW FFIZ is helping to commercialise innovative solutions, strengthen the UK's global competitiveness, and drive the long-term decarbonisation of the aviation industry. The initiative is led by Somerset Council and is supported by a Sustainable Aviation Programme Board comprised of local, regional and national stakeholders. The initiative is currently funded to operate across Somerset and Devon.

Ventura System Solutions and CRG Consultants Ltd have been contracted to develop a sustainability strategy for SW FFIZ through industry and stakeholder engagement, market analysis, and public-facing events. The project has also explored how to bring together the regional drone ecosystem - operators, tech developers, and end-users - while identifying skills needs and talent development pathways. This report on our future aviation skills needs analysis with recommendations for talent pipeline development is a key output, and it sits alongside a strategic report outlining viable business models for the future of SW FFIZ.

Methodology and Evidence Base

This study assesses the regional skills needs through desk-based research and stakeholder engagement, providing strategies for talent development aligned to industry demand.

Activities include:

- Desk Research: including a review of the DfT Future Aviation Skills Strategy, the Great Western Industrial Workforce Plan, and the Devon & Somerset Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP).
- Stakeholder Engagement: including Yeovil College, Exeter College, Exeter University; Local companies in the sector; Industry groups such as ADS, WEAFF, and ARPAS-UK; Somerset Council; Devon County Council; and Business West who are developing the new Somerset LSIP.
- Options Analysis performed that identifies models and partnerships to address skills gaps.
- Recommendations: Findings and strategies summarised for talent pathways, linked to industry needs and regional priorities.

Outcomes

- Identification of future aviation skills needs.
- Options to address gaps and strengthen pathways.
- Actionable recommendations for partnerships and workforce development.

Skills and recruitment remain a key challenge for Somerset's businesses. As the county's employer representative body, Somerset Chamber supported the development of the Devon & Somerset Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) in partnership with Devon Chamber. The LSIP aimed to strengthen collaboration between businesses and education providers to address employers' skills needs. A new programme of work is now underway to refresh the LSIP, with separate plans being developed for Somerset and Devon. During our project, we have engaged with both LSIP teams to validate our approach and help inform their work. We do not intend to duplicate the LSIP refresh activity and are focusing solely on skills relevant to the future of aviation.

2. Somerset and Devon's Aviation and Aerospace Landscape

Aviation and aerospace skills support high-value employment, productivity and inward investment, they can strengthen local skills pipelines into advanced engineering, digital and defence-related roles, and contributes to inclusive economic growth through apprenticeships, reskilling and progression pathways.

Aviation skills in Somerset and Devon underpin some of the region's most productive jobs, largest employers, export success, and future growth sectors. The counties are core contributors to UK aviation, and the South West represents the second largest cluster in Europe, with 17 major international primes based in the region.

Both counties are at the heart of the South West Future Flight Innovation Zone (SW FFIZ).

Aerospace manufacturing, maintenance and related engineering make a significant contribution to Somerset's economy, especially in South Somerset. Aircraft manufacture, repair and maintenance alone generate around £333 million in gross value added (GVA) and support nearly 4,800 high-productivity jobs, a far higher share of employment than the national average .

In 2022, a total of 5,100 people were employed in the core Aerospace sector, 4,000 in Somerset and 1,100 in Devon (including Plymouth and Torbay). When the broader Aerospace sector including the supply chain is considered, 27,000 people were employed in the same year, 11,000 in Somerset and 16,000 in Devon.

These roles rely on specialist aviation skills - from precision engineering and composites to avionics and systems integration - skills that are difficult to replace once lost.

Somerset is home to Leonardo Helicopters in Yeovil, one of the UK's most important aviation manufacturers. Leonardo directly employs around 3,300 people locally and supports thousands more jobs through its supply chain, contributing £890 million to UK GDP in a single year and billions in exports over the past decade.

Without a steady flow of trained engineers, technicians and apprentices, such companies cannot compete internationally or justify further investment in the region.

The study has identified that across the South West's aerospace industries, skills gaps are widespread. Discussions with the organisations we engaged with reported skills shortages, with most saying these gaps are directly limiting performance and growth.

We have found that aviation employers increasingly need hybrid skills - traditional mechanical and electrical engineering combined with software, data management, and sustainability knowledge - making local training and education even more critical.

Aviation skills are transferable across defence, space, advanced manufacturing and clean energy, helping Somerset and Devon remain resilient to economic demands.

3. Drivers of Change in Aviation Skills

The aviation industry is currently undergoing a significant period of transformation. Rapid technological advancement, ambitious sustainability targets, evolving regulatory frameworks, and shifting workforce demographics are reshaping not only how aviation operates, but the skills it demands.

From digitalisation and automation to new propulsion systems and data-driven operations, the pace of change is accelerating. At the same time, the industry faces pressing challenges around skills shortages, diversity, and the need for continuous upskilling and reskilling. This is compounded by wider labour market challenges across the region, framed by a:

- **Tight Labour Market:** The unemployment rate is lower and there are fewer people per job vacancy than the national average, intensifying competition for talent.
- **Ageing Workforce:** A growing proportion of residents are over 65, and the working-age population is shrinking, presenting a decline in workforce availability.
- **Skills Mismatch:** Higher-level qualifications and high-skilled occupations lag behind the national average, limiting its capacity to meet future demand for advanced skills.

A further challenge is an unprecedented wave of investment in nationally significant projects that are already underway or planned. This includes the Agratas Battery Cell Manufacturing Facility within the Gravity Enterprise Zone – supporting the energy transition and advanced manufacturing; the UK’s first new nuclear plant in over 20 years at Hinkley Point C; the Celtic Sea Floating Offshore Wind – accelerating the UK’s net zero goals and energy security; and developments at the Devonport Royal Dockyard. Across the four counties of the Great South West region, this will amount to an estimated over 27,000 additional workers needed over the next decade. The scale is immense.

Understanding these drivers is essential for employers, educators, policymakers, and professionals alike, ensuring that today’s workforce, and tomorrow’s talent pipeline, can adapt, innovate, and sustain a safe, resilient, and competitive aviation sector.

Aviation is a strategic advanced manufacturing sector with strong multiplier effects, and future skills investment supports SME resilience, supply chains and export-led growth. In addition, it reinforces Somerset’s role within the wider South West aerospace and defence ecosystem.

Our research has shown that there is a continuing need for basic engineering skills and knowledge, including mechanical and electrical engineering, hands-on practical experience, manufacturing techniques, computer aided design, analytical and problem solving, and mathematics.

However, aviation and aerospace are experiencing a new dynamic, brought about by the growth of new technological innovation and digitalisation. This includes the influence of net zero initiatives, the importance of sustainable aviation, defence modernisation, security needs, plus regulatory and safety requirement developments. These have a direct impact of the skills needs and opportunities that future aviation brings.

The adoption of drone technologies is starting to be realised. Influenced by the war in Ukraine, heightened geo-political tensions, and the increased use of drones in these conflicts, the social, economic and environmental benefits of drone use is starting to gain traction in the sector and the needs on colleges and universities supporting the industry.

Top level skills may be summarised into four areas – technology, aircraft, airports, and general skills. Examples of these are presented below:

Specialisation	Example skill areas
Technology	AI, Autonomy, alternative fuels, automation, digitisation, data management and analysis, blockchain, airspace management, cybersecurity, datalinks, communication systems, digital tooling, enhanced simulation and virtual reality

Specialisation	Example skill areas
Airports & Infrastructure	AI, Autonomy, alternative fuels, automation, digitisation, data management and analysis, airspace management, cybersecurity, communication, passenger experience, diversity and inclusion, ground handlers, fuel handlers
Aircraft	eVTOL, UAS, drones, next gen aircraft, advanced materials and manufacturing, new materials, composites, electric and hybrid-electric propulsion, alternative fuels (hydrogen, SAF, next generation), battery technology
General	Environmental, safety engineering & management, maintenance engineering, aircrew, pilots, cabin crew, digital literacy, leadership, management, computer programming, foundational skills in English and maths, training systems, enhanced simulation and virtual reality, human-machine interaction (HMI), human centred design, human factors

4. Future Skills Demand

According to CAE's biennial Aviation Talent Forecast, an estimated 1.5 million civil aviation professionals will be needed worldwide by 2034 as growing air travel demand and widespread retirements are said to be accelerating the need for training and recruiting new joiners. The forecast also projects that 71,000 new air traffic controllers will be needed worldwide by 2034. To meet the demand, the industry needs to be proactive.

Whilst no figures were provided for the UK, CAE anticipates that 550,000 new roles will be created in Europe by 2044. These do not reflect the influence new aircraft types – drones, eVTOLs, electric aircraft - will have on skills requirements.

A soon to be published analysis by ADS Group indicates that the introduction of Advanced Air Mobility (AAM) and hydrogen technologies in aviation in the UK brings the following occupations and skills requirement opportunity:

	Key occupations	Most demanded skills
AAM	• Manufacturing engineer • Operators • Quality engineers • MRO engineers • Composite technicians • Sustainability engineers • Assembly technician	• Data analytics • Automation • Tooling design • Metrology • Prototyping • Non Destructive Testing • Digitalisation • Composite manufacture and repairs
Hydrogen	• Manufacturing engineers • Stress engineers • Materials engineers • Test & certification • Operators • Digital & automation engineers	• Assembly • Tooling • Process validation • Composite materials • Automation • AI • Additive manufacturing

Key occupations		Most demanded skills
		• Data analytics • Business management • Health & Safety

ADS Group has also noted that advanced skills will no longer be limited to engineers and researchers. Technicians will also be required to hold higher proficiencies in increasingly demanded skills such as automation and digital literacy. Technical proficiency will be critical for operating and maintaining sophisticated aviation technologies.

The study also suggests that the listed occupations will require proficiency at engineering level or above. This will drive upskilling, reskilling and new joiner needs, and hence drive greater demand.

A study report published last year exploring future aviation jobs and the role of technology in shaping skills and competencies identified the following emerging Job Roles¹ in addition to those reported by ADS Group.

Category	Job Roles
Drone Operations	Drone Pilots
	Drone Operations Managers
	Drone Operators and Technicians
Data Analysis and AI	Data Scientists and Analysts
	Data Analyst for Air Traffic Management
	Data Analyst for Autonomous Aircraft
	AI and Machine Learning Engineers
	AI and Automation Engineers
Cybersecurity	Cybersecurity Specialists
	Cybersecurity Specialists for Autonomous Aviation
	Cybersecurity Analysts
Autonomous Systems	Autonomous Systems Managers
	Autonomous Systems Engineers
	Human-Machine Interaction Specialists
Urban Air Mobility	Urban Air Mobility Specialists
	Urban Air Mobility Planners
Sustainability	Sustainability Managers
	Sustainability Officers
Electric and Green Aviation	Electric Propulsion Engineers
	Electric Aircraft Engineers
Customer Experience and Training	Customer Experience Managers
	VR Training Instructors
Regulatory and Compliance	Regulatory Compliance Officers for Emerging Technologies
Remote Operations	Remote Operations Specialists
System Design and Operations	Vehicle System Flight Controllers
	System Design and Operations Trainers
Ethical and Legal	Ethical and Legal Specialists

¹ [Future aviation jobs: The role of technology in shaping skills and competencies - ScienceDirect](#)

In addition, to technical skill demands, there is a growing need for more “softer skills”. These were identified in our discussions with all stakeholders, and is a leading requirement for all students in the forthcoming Somerset and Devon LSIPs. These may be summarised as:

- Communication and collaboration: Communication and teamwork are essential in the highly interconnected aviation industry.
- Problem-solving and critical thinking: These skills are vital for addressing complex challenges and ensuring efficient operations.
- Adaptability and continuous learning: The ability to adapt to new technologies and continually learn is crucial in the rapidly advancing aviation sector.
- Safety and compliance: Understanding and implementing safety protocols and regulatory requirements are indispensable for maintaining high safety standards
- Transferable skills: capacity to learn, hard working
- Leadership and management capabilities

5. Inclusion and Diversity

Somerset Council is committed to creating a fairer, more inclusive county where everyone feels respected, represented and able to thrive. They endeavour to embed equality, diversity and inclusion into everything they do - from how they design services and make decisions, to how they support the workforce and engage with communities.

There is an opportunity for the county to take the lead in inclusivity in the Future Flight sector in the UK.

The “Equal Skies Charter” 2025 whitepaper noted that, as the Future Flight sector emerges, there is an opportunity to acknowledge some of the barriers which have led to a lack of diversity in the broader aviation industry and take positive action, such as championing role models and making accessibility a cornerstone of vehicle and job design, to encourage people from under-represented demographics to consider the sector as an exciting career or transport option that is open to them.

There is an opportunity, as the Future Flight ecosystem grows, for Somerset, Devon and the surrounding region, to champion diversity and inclusion across the sector. It has been suggested in our discussions that this will provide a wider talent pool for employers to access, lead to access to hidden talents, greater innovation, and improved employee retention rates.

6. Education, Training and Skills Provision

The aviation and aerospace Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) offer in Somerset and Devon, focusing on formal education and accredited training is summarised below:

6.1 Somerset

University Centres Somerset (Part of the UCS College Group)

- One of the largest FE providers in the South West with strong engineering and advanced manufacturing provision.

- Offers Level 2 to 5 Engineering, including pathways aligned to aerospace manufacturing, maintenance, and systems engineering.
- Strong employer links with the Yeovil aerospace cluster (Leonardo Helicopters supply chain).
- Provides Higher National (HNC/HND) and foundation degree–level engineering programmes.
- Engineering courses support progression into aerospace, advanced manufacturing, and defence sectors.

Yeovil College

- Supports FE/HE learners through projects, CPD, and employer-led training, linked to Leonardo Helicopters.
- Level 6 Aerospace Apprenticeships
- Engineer Technician (Aerospace) Apprenticeships
- Facilities include a Battery Evaluation Rig and the YC Hydrogen Lab

Weston College

- Based in North Somerset
- Recently unveiled plans for £2.6M Skills Academy at Airbus Filton
- Industry-led training environment. Partners include Airbus, GKN Aerospace, Ministry of Defence and Rolls-Royce
- Higher and degree-level Apprenticeships

6.2 Devon

Exeter College

- Engineering and Aerospace-related provision, including:
- Advanced engineering
- Manufacturing and maintenance pathways
- Employer-responsive short courses and apprenticeships
- Strong links with Exeter Airport–based aviation employers.

South Devon UTC

- University Technical College specialising in Engineering, Manufacturing, and Digital (ages 14–19).
- Curriculum aligned to aerospace, marine, and advanced engineering employers in the South West.
- Key feeder into FE, apprenticeships, and engineering degrees.

Devon does not host a dedicated aerospace engineering university department, although Exeter Airport is a major MRO and aerospace skills hub. They support graduate employment, placements, and apprenticeships in aircraft maintenance and support engineering.

Across Somerset and Devon, there is a strong offer in post-16 and adult aviation training, which complement FE/HE pathways including:

- Aircraft maintenance and MRO training (Exeter Airport and Yeovil area)

- Part-66 aligned maintenance pathways

7. Apprenticeships Pathways

An example Future Flight Apprenticeship Pathways, based on our findings and a current Aerospace pathway, is summarised below:

Age Range	Example Future Flight Apprenticeship Pathways
Age 16–18	→ Engineering Technician (Level 3 – Manufacturing / Maintenance / Avionics)
Age 18+ / Adult	→ HNC / HND Engineering (Level 4– Level 5) via apprenticeship
Higher Level	→ Aerospace Engineer Degree Apprenticeship (Level 6)
Professional Outcomes	→ Part-66 Licensed Engineer / IEng / CEng

8. Gaps in Current Provision and an Opportunity

There is currently no undergraduate course in the UK for Future Flight and supporting infrastructure, and nor is there a “Drone Engineer” apprenticeship standard in England. Currently, FE colleges are not creating standalone “drone courses”, although it is noted that Yeovil College is currently delivering a Somerset Council-funded drone bootcamp which may provide an agile, cost effective mechanism for developing those drone skills and experience. As initial demand for drone-specific skills grows, FE colleges are considering embedding Uncrewed Aircraft Systems (UAS) capability into existing engineering, digital, and aviation pathways, aligned to employer needs and CAA regulation.

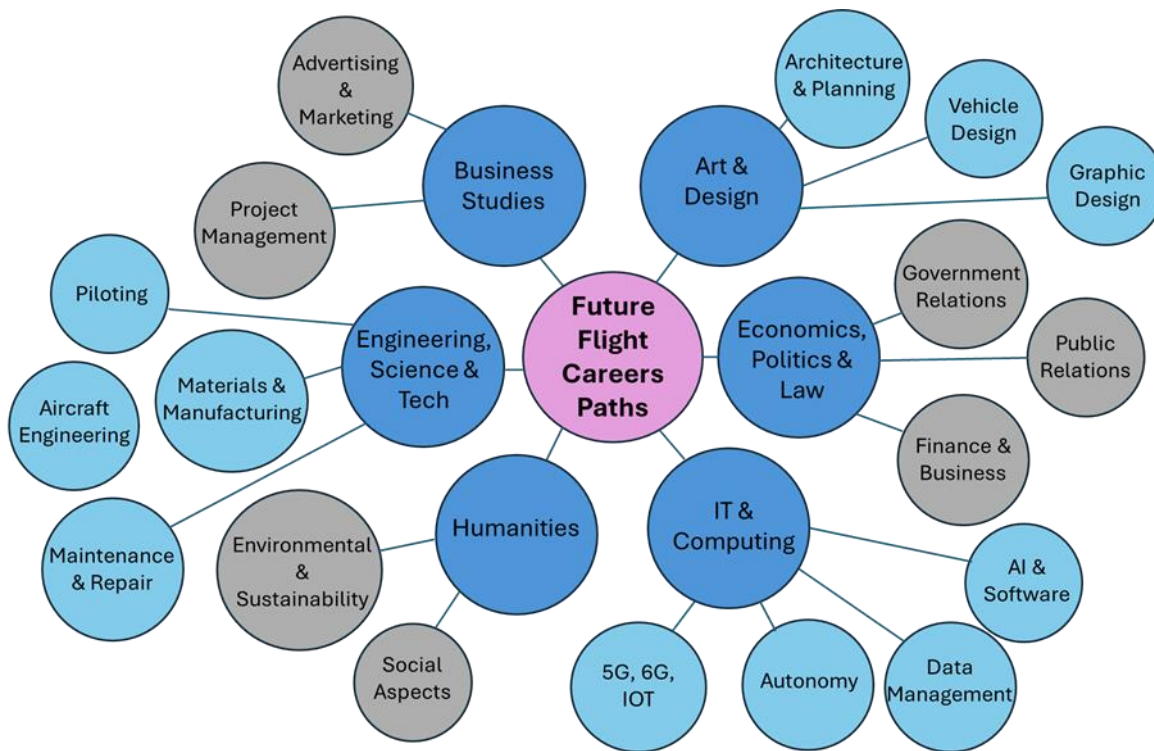
One initiative to grow the use of drones at work, is the development of sector-led UAS courses, linked to sector operating approvals. An example of which is the ECITB Foundation UAS drone training course which provides an understanding of drone functionality and how to conduct operations on industrial sites safely, effectively and efficiently. Independent verification of technical competence in using industrial drones can be gained through ECITB's technical tests. These courses are available across the UK, and may provide a model for other industry sectors, including business sectors based in Somerset and Devon. These might be linked to FE/HE education courses, and possibly embedded into other courses where drones are used as a tool, but not necessarily drone careers, more like “careers with drones” – enabling the adoption of drone technologies and services in multiple sectors.

There is a potential opportunity for Somerset and Devon, utilising the services available in the SW FFIZ, to promote and facilitate the ECITB Foundation UAS drone training course in the region, with tailored curricula for specific business sectors.

9. Talent Pipeline and Careers Pathways

A strong talent pipeline and careers pathways approach for aviation must start from the recognition that today there is no single, linear route into the sector. Every journey into aviation is different, and the future of flight must be accessible to all. Careers no longer follow the historically perceived straight line; instead, they are shaped by modular learning, transferable skills, and the

ability to be agile. This diversity of pathways reflects the evolving needs of the industry and opens opportunities to people from a far broader range of backgrounds, skills and geographies.



Example career pathways for people from a far broader range of backgrounds²

Employers are increasingly seeking agility in their workforce: individuals with strong core and soft skills, adaptability, and the capacity to retrain, followed by targeted investment in specific technical competencies aligned to growth priorities and future-proofing. Technical skills development must be informed by industry input to ensure relevance, while apprenticeships, flight training and early-career programmes continue to provide high-value entry points. These pathways are particularly important for young people in rural and coastal communities, where aviation careers can reduce outward migration of talent by offering meaningful, skilled employment close to home. Bootcamps have proven valuable for adults transitioning or upskilling, a recent example being the Somerset Council-funded Drone bootcamp delivered by Yeovil College, but they may not go far enough for younger people; structured work experience remains one of the most effective ways to build genuine, “work-ready” capability.

Early and sustained engagement is critical. To achieve long-term change, children need meaningful exposure to aviation before the age of 11, when interests and aspirations are first formed. The sector needs visible champions - pilots, engineers, air traffic professionals, technicians and operators - who can inspire and demystify aviation for young people. Many children simply do not know what is available to them, and too often aviation is reduced to aero-engineering alone. Clear promotion of the full breadth of roles, from piloting and air traffic management to transport, operations and the opportunities drones and emerging technologies bring, helps young people understand how their individual strengths and interests can translate into viable career pathways.

Managing expectations, particularly for Generation Z, is also essential. Young people want purpose, progression and clarity about where opportunities lead - with real jobs at the end.

² Adapted from Flight Crowd diagram – accessed 11th December 2025

Effective signposting can help bridge this gap, connecting learners, educators and career-changers to trusted routes and networks such as Flight Crowd, ARPAS-UK, Somerset Careers Hub, and the potential for a SW FFIZ dedicated skills, education and knowledge platform. Alongside this, the expansion of apprenticeships, bootcamps and higher technical qualifications should be actively supported, as should workforce transition from adjacent sectors such as manufacturing, automotive and energy.

Finally, peer support and mentoring - still relatively new in aviation - are becoming increasingly important in retaining talent and supporting career progression. By combining early engagement, flexible pathways, strong employer involvement and clear signposting, the future aviation sector can build a resilient, inclusive talent pipeline that meets future skills needs while opening the future of flight to everyone.

10. Challenges and Risks

Future aviation skills face growing pressure from skills shortages and recruitment challenges, with employers increasingly competing for a limited and shrinking talent pool.

Businesses across the region are often fighting for the same pool of people, while other sectors and regions can offer higher pay (particularly in the South East), clearer progression, or more attractive living conditions. This competition is intensified by net migration of young people out of the region and the difficulty of attracting skilled workers from outside the area, particularly where wages do not keep pace with national competitors. For many smaller companies, we have found a lack of five-year workforce plans, with most companies only able to look six to eight months ahead, responding tactically rather than strategically as they navigate cost-of-living pressures, market uncertainty, loss of business, and rising operating costs. They have little time to consider, or develop, younger talent.

Infrastructure and capacity constraints are a major barrier to building and sustaining a future skills pipeline. Housing affordability remains a significant issue, particularly close to major towns, directly limiting access to local jobs for new starters, school leavers, and college students.

Many younger people are staying at home longer than in previous generations, increasing the need for work that is close to home or accessible via regular, reliable, and affordable public transport. However, transport connectivity is widely reported as poor, especially for industrial estates and SME locations, with limited or unreliable links to colleges and workplaces. Students and employees often require access to a car, creating exclusion for those who do not have that option. In some cases, daily travel to education can exceed three hours, compounded by buses that fail to turn up. While there is potential for Mobility as a Service (MaaS) solutions, this would require sustained investment and local delivery capacity.

Funding and policy barriers further constrain long-term skills development, particularly for SMEs. Many small businesses lack the time, financial resource, or internal capacity to invest in career development, training, or early engagement with future skills needs. The cost of onboarding new joiners is high, and investment in new technologies is often delayed until customers explicitly demand it. As a result, skills development linked to emerging technologies is frequently seen as a “distraction” rather than a priority. Businesses respond reactively rather than proactively, which limits their ability to shape future aviation skills and reduces resilience across the supply chain.

Access to education and careers information also presents a challenge, particularly in areas affected by digital poverty, such as parts of Somerset. Many young people are keen, motivated, and want to engage, but lack consistent access to the information, role models, and networks that would allow them to see what is possible and what career paths are available to them, especially locally. The concept of “how to be what you don’t know you want to be” remains a real barrier, especially where aviation and advanced manufacturing careers are unfamiliar or poorly understood. While the region benefits from a strong network of universities, colleges, and training providers, challenges persist around careers awareness, STEM uptake, retention within further and higher education, funding cuts, and the sustainability and commercial viability of provision.

There are also structural barriers within the talent pipeline. Entry requirements, particularly in mathematics, can act as a gatekeeper to the Tech and aviation sectors, excluding capable individuals who may have strengths elsewhere. At the same time, there are economically inactive people and under-represented groups who represent hidden talent, but who require targeted support to engage. Broadening engagement to include both STEM and non-STEM backgrounds is essential to diversifying and strengthening the future workforce, especially as opportunities for young people to gain initial employment or apprenticeships remain limited. High-profile employers report overwhelming interest but very few places, leading to frustration and the loss of potential talent to other sectors.

There has been a reported reduction in the number of apprenticeship opportunities offered by some companies, despite exceptionally high levels of interest. For example, Leonardo Helicopters last year offered just 10 apprenticeship places, which attracted 220 applications in the first week alone, prompting the company to close further applications. Similarly, Airbus’s internship programme this year offered 140 places and received over 10,000 applications, highlighting the growing imbalance between demand and available opportunities.

Generational expectations also need careful consideration. Employers report that Generation Z employees often require higher levels of pastoral care, expect regular pay rises and promotions, and can be unpredictable in terms of timeliness and reliability. Some young people may also be reluctant to work for military-linked companies, further narrowing the available talent pool for some parts of the aviation sector. Without clear progression pathways, supportive management, and realistic expectation-setting on both sides, retention becomes as significant a challenge as recruitment.

Ultimately, the success of future aviation skills development depends on sustained investment in enabling infrastructure. The provision of housing in the right locations, improved transport connectivity between places of work, study, and residence, and affordable access to education are all critical enablers. While examples such as colleges funding student transport for day release demonstrate what is possible, these solutions remain fragmented. Without coordinated action across housing, transport, education, and employer investment, the region risks continued skills leakage, unmet demand, and a widening gap between ambition and delivery.

11. Opportunities for Somerset and Devon

Future Flight presents a significant opportunity for Somerset and Devon to position themselves at the forefront of innovative, sustainable aviation. To realise this potential, Somerset Council and its partners must articulate a clear, consistent narrative – rooted in clean energy, aerospace

excellence, and defence capability – that speaks directly to current Government priorities. This is not simply about advancing technology, it is about place making which establishes the South West as a credible and ambitious region for future aviation, aligning local investment, and long-term economic growth around a shared vision.

Achieving this will require a politically driven, locally funded plan that nurtures a truly inclusive ecosystem – one that supports businesses, job seekers, educators, students, and the wider community alike. Every pathway into aviation is different, and the future of flight must be accessible to all, with flexible routes that reflect diverse backgrounds, aspirations, and stages of life. Skills development cannot be an afterthought, it must be embedded from the outset, clearly codified, and responsive to real industry need. Talent pipelines should be actively promoted across sectors, with early and sustained engagement with schools, colleges, universities, and communities to build awareness, aspiration, and trust.

A step change is required in how education and local industry collaborate. Businesses must be engaged earlier, facilities shared where appropriate, and partners encouraged to collaborate rather than compete. Student placements, internships, apprenticeships, part-time roles, short-term projects, and work experience – including opportunities with drone and emerging technology companies – are essential to sustaining a young and diverse talent pipeline. Financial support mechanisms such as grants, sponsorships, bursaries, crowdfunding, and subsidised paid placements will be critical to ensuring participation is not limited by circumstance. Alongside this, early exposure through workshops, museum visits, open days, careers fairs, “open door” events, mentoring, and a diverse range of speakers can help young people see themselves in the sector from an early age.

The ambition should be to deliver a genuinely South West solution to future aviation education, skills, and employment – working as “One South West.” The SW FFIZ can act as both catalyst and facilitator for this collaboration, potentially through a dedicated Future Aviation Skills Hub: a virtual or physical space providing a single, accessible point of reference for future skills needs, local training and education providers, aviation career pathways, and key industry contacts. Complementing existing careers services in the region and working with employers and colleges in Somerset and the wider South West, this focused, independent, economically driven function would strengthen coordination and clarity across the system by raising awareness of career opportunities in the Future Flight sector, channel more towards the sector, and provide targeted support to enable transition.

Industry-led models demonstrate what is possible. Airbus, for example, aligns next-generation aircraft development, fuel technologies, materials, and composites with bespoke training mapped onto standard curricula at Weston College, embedding employer needs within existing qualifications. Scaling this approach across Somerset and Devon – in partnership with aerospace companies and Future Flight technology innovators – would ensure education and training provision is directly aligned to employer demand, strengthening competitiveness, addressing acute skills shortages, sustaining high-value jobs and exports, anchoring global companies locally, and safeguarding the region’s position at the forefront of UK aerospace.

Abbreviations

AAM	Advanced Air Mobility
AI	Artificial Intelligence
DfT	Department for Transport
EICTB	Engineering Construction Industry Training Board
eVTOL	electric Vertical Take Off and Landing
FE	Further Education
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GVA	Gross Value Added
HE	Higher Education
LSIP	Local Schools Improvement Plan
MaaS	Mobility as a Service
MRO	Maintenance Repair Organisation
SAF	Sustainable Aviation Fuel
SME	Small Medium Enterprise
STEM	Science Technology Engineering Maths
SW FFIZ	South West Future Flight Innovation Zone
UAS	Uncrewed Air System
UCS	University Centres Somerset
VR	Virtual Reality
WEAF	West of England Aerospace Forum

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- Flight Crowd
- Greater Devon LSIP
- Somerset Careers Hub
- The Hydrogen Skills Alliance
- West of England Aerospace Forum
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