

[Give councils powers to tackle skills gaps post-Brexit](#)

By [Cllr Nicolas Heslop](#) | 02 October 2017

The South East's buoyant economy has long been a draw for workers from the European Economic Area (EEA). With Brexit on the horizon, many public and private sector organisations in the South East are fearful that impending skills shortages could damage productivity and harm the economy.

Factors such as a weaker pound, uncertainty about future rights and strengthening EU economies are already discouraging some workers. The most striking example of this is a 96% drop in nurses from the EU registering to practise in the UK between July 2016 and April 2017.

South East England Councils (SEEC) members want to see local authorities play a key role – working alongside central Government – to avert a skills crisis. We believe urgent action is required in 3 key areas:

Direct local authority input into which skilled workers should be given priority to enter the UK to work

Post-Brexit – assuming there is a system to prioritise migrant workers who have required skills – local authorities need to be able to influence which skills are given precedence. Some Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) are already making the case for workers with high level skills such as engineers. While these are clearly important, many businesses and public bodies in the South East depend on lower-skilled migrant workers in fields such as social care, agriculture and construction.

Data from the University of Oxford's Dr Carlos Vargas-Silva highlighted to SEEC members that currently 384,000 working age South East residents are EU nationals. Of these, some 200,000 work in public administration, education and health, distribution and hospitality or construction sectors. Local authorities need to be able to influence policy to support public services and sustain local economic development by ensuring businesses have access to the skills they need.

For example, social care is a growth area in the South East as the number of residents over the age of 75 is forecast to nearly double to over 1.5 million by 2039. Recruitment is often a problem in the sector and it has historically depended on migrant workers. If workers stop coming from overseas it will place further pressure on social care providers already struggling with shrinking margins and local authorities will find it extremely challenging to ensure vulnerable residents receive the care they need.

Construction skills are also likely to be a priority in the South East as over 30,000 EU nationals are currently employed in this sector. With new homes and infrastructure vital for future economic growth, a shortage of construction workers would hold back our potential.

Employers could be encouraged to employ and train UK nationals in preference to overseas workers but a new system to enforce this would need to avoid significantly increasing bureaucracy for businesses. Lack of skills in sectors dependent on seasonal workers, such as tourism or agriculture, could also damage the economy so maintaining access to temporary workers from outside the UK will be important – again regulated by light touch licensing to minimise bureaucracy.

A single funding pot for skills and employment investment – controlled by councils

SEEC members want to see much better targeting of skills funding to ensure the right skills are available locally. At present, when councils identify a mismatch between training being provided and the skills needed in the local economy, they have no ability to target funding to meet the demand.

SEEC members have called for control of a single funding pot for skills and employment investment. By leveraging local knowledge and connections, councils could bring together industry, LEPs, schools, Further Education providers and technical institutes to create a more integrated skills system with strong links to local business. This would help train local people to fill skills gaps, ensure training meets business needs and create direct routes for students into employment.

Councils are also keen to see a dialogue with industry bodies about how a genuine career path can be created in industries such as social care and hospitality/ leisure to encourage more entrants and improve staff retention, but this won't happen overnight.

A central role for local authorities in careers advice

SEEC members believe local authority control could deliver a better and more responsive careers advice service. They argue the current model does not work well in schools and does not cater for adults. A dedicated, all-age, locally commissioned service could respond better to the needs of students and workers who will increasingly require career advice and re-training opportunities as the nature of work changes throughout their lifetimes.

As the political agenda focusses on Britain's future relationship with Europe, local authorities want to work with Government and play a central role in ensuring our communities have the skills necessary to secure future economic growth.

Cllr Nicolas Heslop is Chairman of South East England Councils (SEEC) and leader of Tonbridge and Malling BC

This article originally appeared online in the Municipal Journal (www.themj.co.uk)