

## Major Norfolk conference to put workforce skills in the spotlight

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Business leaders from across Norfolk are joining forces to ensure the county has a skilled and world-class workforce that's fit for the future.

Two hundred people, including bosses of top local companies, government decision-makers, entrepreneurs and experts from education and training, are expected to take part in a major conference early next year to turn the spotlight on Norfolk's skills needs.

Skills and aspirations of the local workforce have long been a concern among business leaders, and the size and rural nature of Norfolk presents numerous challenges to training providers.

To help put skills high on the agenda, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and Norfolk Chamber of Commerce, in association with Shaping Norfolk's Future, are holding a Norfolk Skills Conference on February 20 at the De Vere Dunston Hall Hotel, near Norwich.

The key driver for the event is the Leitch Report. Published last December, the report – Prosperity for all in the Global Economy: World Class Skills – examines the UK's long-term skills needs and sets out ambitious goals for 2020 to help make it a world leader.

They include increasing the number of adults achieving basic skills of literacy and numeracy; boosting the number of apprentices to 500,000 a year; and ensuring more than 40 per cent of adults are qualified to Level 4 and above, up from 29 per cent in 2005, with a commitment to even higher figures. This conference will debate how Norfolk can rise to the challenge and maximise the opportunities within the county.

Graham Brough, area director of LSC Norfolk, says: "The rate at which adults in Norfolk acquire skills will have to accelerate considerably if we are to meet Leitch's ambitions and those of local businesses. Our county currently compares relatively poorly with many other parts of the East of England in relation to the qualifications held by the workforce. To increase achievement in Level 2 to 95 per cent would mean, for example, an additional 157,600 people of working age in Norfolk acquiring a Level 2 qualification."

Mr Brough adds: "If the challenges are considerable, then so are the opportunities. The Train to Gain Service is providing very significant funding to support employers and their employees to access Skills for Life, Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications.

"Our Further Education and apprenticeship programmes provide more opportunities and our colleges are rolling out an ever wider range of foundation degree programmes. We have seven Centres of Vocational Excellence in Norfolk and one of the first National Skills Academies, in Financial Services, in central Norwich."

Caroline Williams, chief executive of Norfolk Chamber of Commerce, says: "Our high-profile conference will explore why the messages in the Leitch Report matter, what they mean for Norfolk, and how we can ensure provision is made as accessible as possible for businesses, especially small and medium enterprises.

"The event is being structured so that it will reach leading Norfolk industries as well as small business owners and will be fully supported by training providers, brokers and key government agencies. There are some really excellent and exciting examples of how businesses have accessed support, invested in their people and have, as a consequence, seen a range of benefits. We plan to showcase some of these at the conference."

The conference's keynote speaker will be Professor Mike Campbell, director of development at the Sector Skills Development Agency where he is responsible for championing and leading the Skills for Business network's thinking on the skills and productivity.

Mrs Williams adds: "The conference will begin with a business breakfast for senior business leaders, hosted by Norfolk Chamber, followed by a series of key note speakers and case studies presented by local businesses followed by round table discussions on how we might drive forward and enable the take-up of skills in the county."

For further information and to reserve your free place at the major conference, contact Margaret Read via [margaret.read@norfolkchamber.co.uk](mailto:margaret.read@norfolkchamber.co.uk) or visit [www.norfolkchamber.co.uk](http://www.norfolkchamber.co.uk) to book your place online.

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