

Future Skills in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly

Networks, Knowledge and Accessibility

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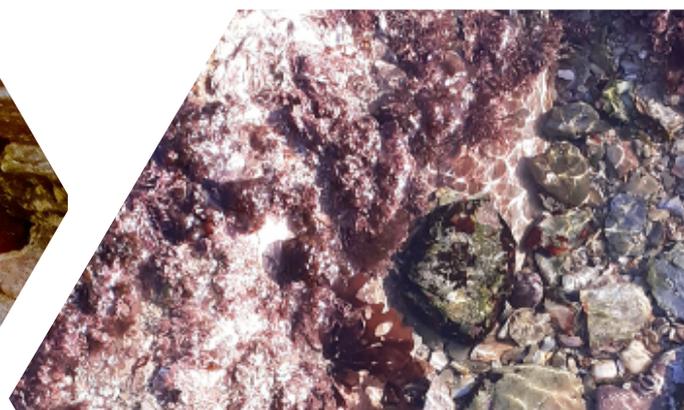
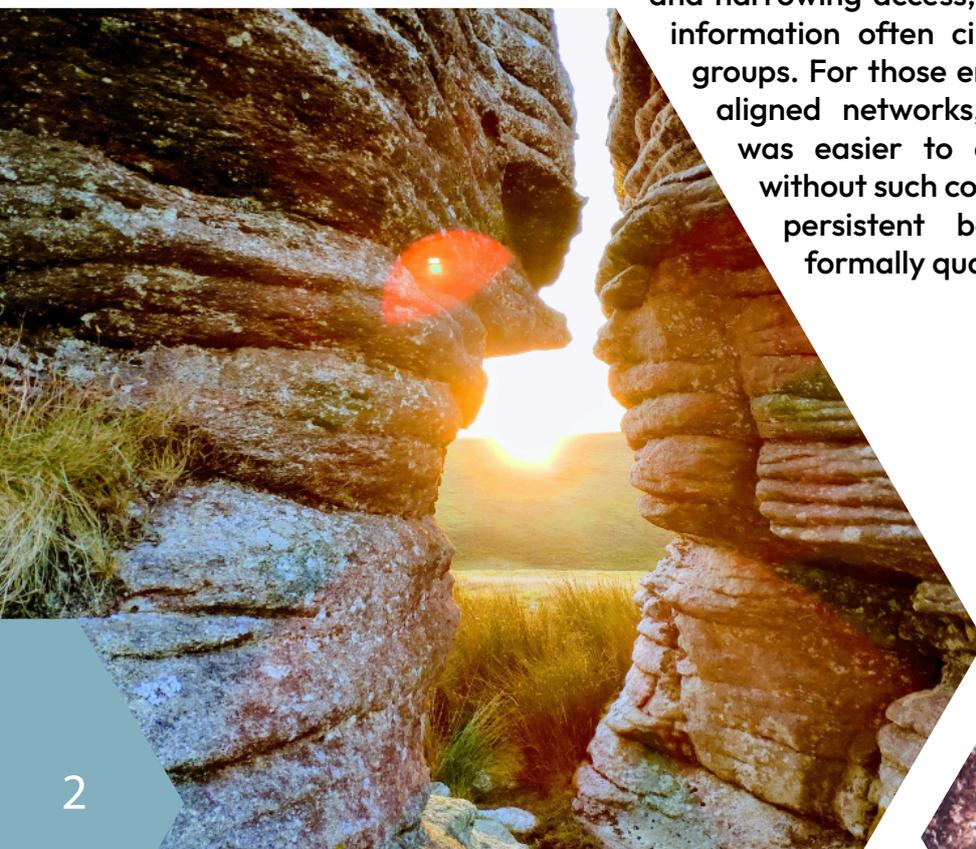
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Executive Summary

This report explores the skills landscape in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly (CloS), investigating the factors that shape access to employment and training opportunities in the region. While skills gaps and recruitment challenges are well-documented, this research moves beyond traditional supply-side explanations, offering a more holistic view informed by complexity theory and systems thinking.

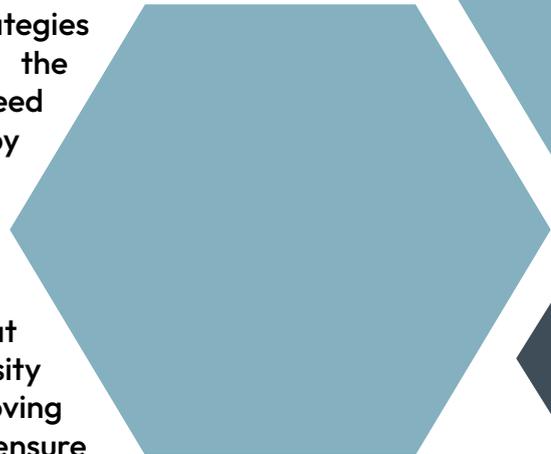
Drawing on a combination of desk-based research and 32 in-depth interviews with workers, employers, educators, and policymakers, the study examines how individuals navigate the local labour market. The findings demonstrate that structural challenges—such as geographic isolation, the prevalence of small enterprises, housing pressures, and transport limitations—intersect with skills development and employment accessibility in critical ways. These barriers cannot be understood purely through the lens of skills provision, but must be seen as part of a wider ecosystem that shapes opportunity, mobility, and career progression.

The research highlights the critical role that personal and professional networks play in securing employment in CloS. 80% of interviewees reported that at least one significant employment opportunity arose through a connection rather than formal recruitment. While networks provide essential routes into work, they also risk reinforcing exclusion and narrowing access, as opportunities and information often circulate within closed groups. For those embedded within well-aligned networks, career progression was easier to achieve, while those without such connections often faced persistent barriers, even when formally qualified.



Financial constraints, caring responsibilities, and the availability of affordable housing were also found to influence career decisions, often forcing individuals to prioritise immediate income over longer-term skills development. The research identified a mismatch between the types of jobs most visible to the public—particularly in hospitality, care, and retail—and the more specialised or emerging opportunities that are equally in high demand. Awareness of growing industries remains low among potential workers, partly due to a lack of accessible information and effective storytelling about the local economy.

The findings point to a need for strategies that move beyond simply increasing the supply of skills. There is a clear need to enhance network accessibility by supporting initiatives that foster wider, more inclusive professional and social networks, particularly for young people and career changers. It is also important to develop communication strategies that raise awareness of the breadth and diversity of Cornwall’s economy. Finally, improving institutional flexibility will be essential to ensure that education and training providers can respond more quickly to evolving skills needs.



Project Introduction & Context

In quarter two, 2021, there were 10,699 job postings in CloS. Concurrently, 29,125 people were actively seeking employment and 77% of employers reported experiencing recruitment difficulties, suggesting “a serious mismatch between the skills available and those that employers seek” (CIOS LEP, 2021).

The term mismatch, as highlighted in the previous statistic, served as a key prompt for the researchers involved in this project to shape the focus of their inquiry. While this data point is indicative, it should be interpreted with caution as it was collected in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Brexit referendum—both of which had wide-ranging impacts on the economy and labour market of CloS. The statistic is used here not as definitive evidence, but to reflect a perceived disconnect between the needs of CloS businesses and the needs of the local labour force. In this context, we need a better understanding about the experiences of job seekers and recruiters and it is this gap which this research seeks to fill.

From a desk-based review of key skills gaps across the region, we know that there are recruitment difficulties across all sectors. However, skills gaps are particularly acute in health and social care, hospitality, construction, and manufacturing, while presenting less of an issue in digital and creative sectors (CIOS LEP, 2021). Skills areas reported to be most in demand across the CloS economy were leadership and management, new technology, and digital skills (CIOS LEP, 2021). CloS’s digital/tech sector was forecasted to grow by 26% between 2022 and 2027 (CIOS LEP, 2022), so demand for digital skills such as software engineering, development, and programming was expected to increase (CIOS LEP, 2022).

More generally, digitisation is affecting all businesses regardless of sector, therefore there is a growing need for employees to be digitally literate (FSB, 2023). New technology reflects the diversification of working practices across industries brought about by automation and technological development, as well as the relatively new technology used in growing industries such as renewable energy. Leadership and management, again crossing all sectors, points towards the need to increase CloS's low productivity rate which sat at 24% less than the national average in June 2023 (ONS, 2023). Leadership and management were viewed as a key skill when it comes to navigating the impacts of climate change, meeting CloS's target to reach Net Zero by 2030, and adhering to sustainable working practices enforced through changing regulation (FSB, 2023).

According to ONS statistics up to December 2023, unemployment in CloS stood at 2.7% which was lower than the UK average of 3.6% (ONS, 2024). While unemployment may be relatively low, the type of work available has a direct link to the range of skills that can be developed. At the time, three sectors in CloS accounted for 45% of total employment; accommodation and food services, wholesale and retail, and health and social care; these employers typically offer elementary level jobs with limited progression pathways (CIOS LEP, 2021). There were 24,852 registered businesses in CloS, however, 9 out of 10 are small or micro-enterprises; 88.9% have under 10 employees and 9.6% have 10-49 employees (CIOS LEP, 2021). The absence of large industries means there is a lack of both good quality local opportunities and a bank of higher level and transferable skills in the workforce (FSB, 2023). Between 2010 and 2019 the largest employment growth was in atypical employment, self-employment and those in part-time and/or zero-hour contracts. In the context of skills this is important as full-time employment is more likely to feature employer-sponsored training (CIOS LEP, 2021).



CloS has a dispersed settlement pattern and little to no agglomeration effects (FSB, 2023). Although CloS has strong further and higher education provisions (CIOS, LEP 2021), access to learning centres is not equitable, with some facing prohibitive commutes, particularly those in the west of the peninsula (FSB, 2023). The embedding of new technical skills in the workforce requires access to equipped training facilities and skilled teachers. Certain sectors, such as construction, reported being unable to source training services in the area (FSB, 2023), which poses problems for small businesses who are less able to spare the time required to send employees further afield (CIOS LEP, 2021).

The severe housing crisis has made it harder for prospective recruits to relocate to the area for work, making it more difficult to import missing skills (CIOS LEP, 2021). The housing crisis also affects internal mobility, restricting CloS-based workers from responding to opportunities within different parts of the county (FSB, 2023).

While recent improvements to network infrastructure have helped CloS's digital sector and the pandemic brought about a change in attitudes towards remote working, local levels of pay don't compete with regional or London salaries - particularly in the case of coders and IT workers - so the benefits are not necessarily felt by CloS-based businesses (CIOS LEP, 2022).

CloS's transition to a green economy requires a workforce who are highly skilled to level 4 and above. However, in 2021, only 46% of young people progressed to higher education compared to the UK average of 58% (CIOS LEP, 2021). When consulted, young people reported little to no career advice during their education and displayed a general lack of awareness of the breadth of opportunities available (CIOS LEP, 2021). This was particularly the case in relation to vocational options and apprenticeships. It is important to note here that these types of training are particularly important for disadvantaged students who were also disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (CloS LEP, 2021).



Clearly, whilst there are areas of demand—particularly in leadership, digital literacy, and new technologies, there are also structural and contextual challenges shaping the region’s workforce. Recruitment difficulties, uneven access to training, and limited progression opportunities cannot be understood solely through the lens of upskilling. Rather, they reflect deeper issues tied to economic structure, geographic isolation, housing pressures, and employment patterns.

What emerges is a more complex picture in which skills gaps are not only about what individuals know, but also about the opportunities they can access, the risks they can afford to take, and the quality of work available to them. This understanding shaped the direction of our research, moving beyond a narrow focus on supply-side solutions and towards a more holistic exploration of how people live, work, and navigate the labour market in CloS.



Method

In response to the complex picture revealed through the desk-based review, our research adopted a qualitative, participant-led approach which aimed to explore the lived experiences behind the statistics. We sought to understand how individuals in CloS engage with work, training, and opportunities in practice. In this section, we set out the methods used to gather and analyse that insight, detailing our approach to participant recruitment, interview design, and thematic analysis. Finally, we reflect on the ethical considerations and limitations inherent in our study. This research was conducted during a period of significant fluctuation. A region-wide reduction in Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) investment coincided with the launch of a wide range of publicly funded, skills-related resources. These included short, medium, and long-term training opportunities, new education programmes, opportunity portals, and business and education taskforces. Navigating such a rapidly shifting landscape is inherently complex. While these combined efforts create a dynamic environment for study, it was considered too early to assess their impact, as many of these new resources were shaped by the timeline of a funding period—within which this project itself also operates.

Research Design

The research design combined both top-down and bottom-up perspectives in order to gain a multi-layered understanding of the skills system. This concurrent approach allowed us to explore how strategic decisions and lived realities interact, overlap, and diverge.

Top-down interviews included:

- * Policymakers.
- * Strategic project managers.
- * Educators.
- * Employers and business leaders.

Bottom-up interviews included:

- * Workers.
- * Employers and business owners (particularly micro and small enterprises).

In total, we conducted 32 semi-structured, in-depth interviews, ranging in length from 20 minutes to 2 hours. The research took two phases. In the scoping phase, we took a more general approach to topics, exploring the wider issues that individuals faced or observed. In the in-depth phase, we drew on our earlier interviews to gain a better understanding of specific issues, including how people know about opportunities in Cornwall, how they navigate the training and labour market, and how this intersects with career journeys in priority areas. This format allowed participants to express their views freely, while ensuring consistency across key areas of inquiry. Interviews were guided by an open-ended framework and were adapted in response to each participant's role, expertise, and lived experience.

Participants included businesses and sector leads working in space, floating offshore wind, digital, advanced manufacturing, Agri-Tech, and sustainable land management. We also spoke with strategic project workers, further education programme leads, a foodbank manager, parents of young adults in further education, a higher education student and part-time occupational therapist, an artist, a plumber, a renewable energy project manager, a software developer, a full-time parent on maternity leave, a taxi dispatcher, an upper-level manager in higher education, a sustainable land manager, a land manager, and an emergency health technician. A total of 80 stakeholders were invited to take part in the research.

Interviewees were invited on the basis of recommendations from the wider community. Further recruitment was carried out through a combination of snowball sampling and online research.

Conceptual Framework: Complexity Theory

The design of this research was guided by complexity theory and the principle of multi-causality, which allowed us to explore the skills ecosystem as a complex adaptive system (Willett, 2021; Fonte Francesco, 2024). This approach enabled us to examine the interactions, dynamics, feedback loops, and signal flows within the labour market, and to recognise that observed outcomes are not always linear or predictable.

Features of a Complex Adaptive System:

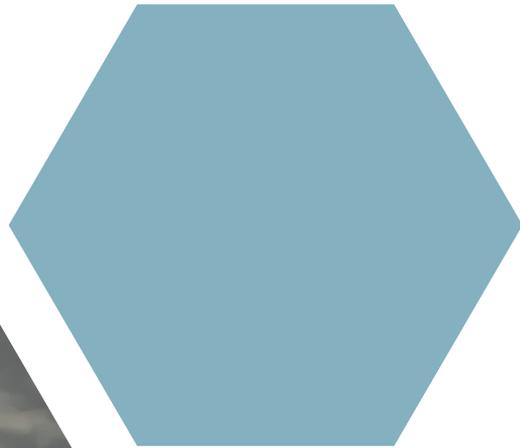
- * **Interactions:** elements of the system form a web or network.
- * **Emergence:** the system as a whole is different from the sum of its parts; understanding one element does not predict overall behaviour.
- * **Dynamic behaviour:** the system's stability can change over time.
- * **Self-organisation:** control is decentralised and embedded in patterns of cooperation, interdependence, and competition.
- * **Adaptation:** the system can respond to disruption and disturbance.
- * **Non-linearity:** small changes can create disproportionately large effects.
- * **Feedback loops:** outputs can reinforce or inhibit future inputs.
- * **Signal flows:** access to information across the system influences how it behaves and adapts.

This framing acknowledges that labour market issues such as skills gaps are not isolated events but are shaped by a web of interdependent factors.

Systems Thinking in a Regional Context

Regional complex systems research reminds us that the many different elements of a regional economy do not exist independently of each other. Instead operating as a system which includes institutions, histories, geographies, social capital as well as infrastructures as being significant for a well-functioning, growing economy (Froy 2023; Bristow and Healey 2018). In our research, we identified the themes of having the correct type of institutions to support firms and industries (Frenken et al 2023; Crescenzi et al 2016), and well-functioning feedback loops and connections which help to enable the region to operate as a system.

We focus here in particular on connections, which can be defined as flows of information between different parts of a system, that help to ensure each element is able to supply and be supplied by other enterprises, institutions, and organisations. This might, for example, be about connections between employers, educators, and the public to ensure that relevant courses are put on and communicated in ways that members of the public can pick up.



Methodological Rationale

Guided by our complexity lens, particular attention was paid to signal flows - how information about opportunities, industries, and initiatives travels through the system. This included consideration of both formal communication mechanisms (such as strategic reports and websites) and informal channels (such as word of mouth or peer networks).

We were interested in whether opportunities - particularly in new or growing sectors - are being communicated in ways that are accessible, timely, and meaningful to those they are intended to reach. This included attention to how emerging industries are introduced, whether they are intelligible to the public, and what narratives (if any) are attached to them.

Through this lens, storytelling became a key area of analytical interest - not as a superficial marketing tool, but as a way of understanding how people make sense of work, opportunity, and change.

Our method remained open to how narratives are formed, shared, and either resonate or fall away within different parts of the regional labour market.

To strengthen the validity of our findings, we used triangulation, which is the convergence of insights from multiple sources. This included comparing perspectives from different stakeholder groups, cross-referencing interview data with desk-based policy reviews, and identifying points of alignment or contradiction across the system. Triangulation was particularly important given the evolving policy environment, as it helped surface tensions between design and delivery, or between institutional intent and individual experience.

During our desk-based review, it became evident that existing reports and strategies relied heavily on quantitative data, with relatively little emphasis on qualitative analysis. Moreover, stakeholder engagement appeared largely top-down, shaped by institutional needs rather than the lived realities of local people.



Limitations

This research was conducted during a period of rapid change in the regional skills landscape, with the introduction of numerous new initiatives funded through the Shared Prosperity Fund. Many of these were still in early stages at the time of data collection, meaning their longer-term outcomes could not be assessed. As a result, our findings reflect a specific moment in time and may evolve as the local policy environment matures.

The research design prioritised qualitative depth over breadth. While we engaged a diverse range of participants across sectors and roles, participation was ultimately shaped by availability and self-selection. This may have limited the inclusion of individuals who are less visible, less networked, or more distanced from existing support systems- this is particularly relevant when considering the importance of networks in rural recruitment. Our findings point to the significance of informal connections and place-based relationships in shaping employment pathways, but we acknowledge that the full extent of these dynamics may be broader than this study could capture.

Similarly, while storytelling emerged as a key concept in understanding how people engage with opportunities - particularly in relation to new or unfamiliar sectors - our exploration of this was primarily observational and interpretive, rather than based on systematic analysis of communication campaigns or public narratives. The complexity theory lens allowed us to attend to signal flows and meaning-making processes, but further research would be needed to map communication strategies in a more comprehensive way.

Finally, as with all qualitative research, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable. Rather, they offer situated insight into how individuals experience the skills system in CloS, with attention to the structural and relational factors that shape those experiences.

Findings

Accessibility

Skills gaps and recruitment challenges need to be situated within the wider context in which they arise - namely, the long-standing structural barriers unique to CloS, which were referenced in multiple ways throughout our interviews. CloS is a geographically peripheral region characterised by a dispersed and rural population. The local economy is predominantly composed of micro and small enterprises, which form the backbone of employment across the area. The region faces significant structural challenges, particularly in terms of transport and connectivity. Limited transportation infrastructure - both in terms of public transport and road and rail links - can restrict mobility for workers and limit access to employment opportunities, especially in more remote communities.

Compounding these issues is a well-documented housing crisis (Willett et al. 2025). High property prices, a shortage of affordable housing, and the prevalence of second homes and short-term holiday lets have made it increasingly difficult for many residents - particularly younger people and low-waged workers - to find secure and affordable accommodation. This not only contributes to population displacement, but also affects the ability of employers to attract and retain staff locally.

The CloS labour market is marked by a high proportion of low-waged and often seasonal employment, with limited availability of higher-paid, year-round roles (CloS LEP, 2021). Together, these factors create a complex economic landscape in which businesses, workers, and jobseekers alike must navigate a range of logistical, financial, and social barriers, influencing patterns of recruitment, retention, and career development.



During the scoping stage of this research in 2024 a foodbank manager provided insight into the circumstances of service users **“they’re working but still struggling to afford rent and food”** (Interviewee 016). This points to a more systemic issue related to pay and the cost of living, rather than a short-term or isolated disruption. He continued by sharing the example of some foodbank users, explaining that **“a couple of youngish painter and decorators, twentyish so at the £10.18 minimum wage set by the government; they have work but they are sleeping in tents because they cannot afford any accommodation”** (Interviewee 016).

People with caring responsibilities have additional financial constraints, particularly single parents when it comes to participating in training opportunities. **“I’ve been offered the nursing associate course which I can do, but I just can’t child wise now I am on my own with three children, I can’t manage it. I don’t have anyone to have my children, I can’t afford to pay anyone to have my children”** (Emergency health technician, Interviewee 004).

The structure of certain sectors demands that individuals possess personal resources in order to participate - resources which, if unavailable, may lead them to prioritise secure employment over roles aligned with their expertise. One participant explained that after training as a hairdresser, they found it impossible to continue in the profession once the industry shifted towards a self-employment model. They described how, **“with having children, you need a regular income... The salon I was with when I did my training was, in a way, perfect for someone where I am now, because you got paid as a wage and then commission on top. A lot of hairdressing now is self-employed. I don’t have a clientele behind me, so I am still having to pay out to use the chair, and then there’s just not enough behind me in order to support my children and my household”** (Taxi-dispatcher, Interviewee 007).

Beyond financial barriers, this individual also faced logistical challenges, noting that **“ideally you need a driving licence; you could do it on foot, but you’re going to be paying out a tax for public transport. You need public liability insurance, and then all your products”** (Interviewee 007). Without access to private transport, due to a chronic neurological disorder, and with the additional responsibilities of single parenthood, the combined financial and logistical pressures effectively forced this participant to step away from their trained profession. This case illustrates how multiple, overlapping barriers - economic, infrastructural, and familial - can restrict an individual’s ability to remain within their chosen sector, even when they are formally qualified to do so.

Our research highlighted that when individuals face financial insecurity, caution can guide their decisions. As a result, the region risks losing valuable skills from its local labour force, including specialist and in-demand expertise. As discussed earlier, participants with caring responsibilities emphasised the need for stable and predictable income, which shaped their ability to pursue certain opportunities. However, this pattern was not limited to those with dependants, as explained by one participant, a qualified geo-scientist who took secure work in an unrelated field: **“It was an anxiety about not having stuff overlapping and then not being able to afford living back at home or not knowing what the next step was”** (Land manager, Interviewee 010). A full-time parent also suggested that an individual’s financial background can limit their aspirations, telling us: **“I think there’s a sort of lack of aspiration. When your situation is kind of limited financially and aspirationally”** (Interviewee 001).

Training and education services were criticised for their long-standing inability to keep pace with the evolving needs of businesses. A software developer told us that; **“I didn’t go to university. I did a college course in 97 on IT, but I never ever used it, and within a few years... I mean it was practically out of date when I finished it... it was all very redundant, the stuff we were learning”** (Interviewee 003). These sentiments were shared by workers, sector leads and educators. An interviewee working in further education (FE) observed that **“the system isn’t fast enough, businesses need training for skills like retrofit and EV technology now, but funding and qualification approvals take too long”** (Interviewee 015). They also noted that **“Leadership and management qualifications, which are critically needed, are currently not fundable”** (Interviewee 015). These comments highlight gaps in the current FE provision, particularly in relation to emerging and cross-sector skills.

Some participants expressed that there had been limited opportunities to apply their skills in professional settings as part of their education, leaving qualified individuals without the practical experience needed to translate their learning into real-world contexts. One interviewee who is now a full-time parent, said that **“When I went to university, the textile design course was brand new. They didn’t do work placements or anything, so... yeah. I think if I’d done a work placement, I maybe would have found a few more places in Cornwall that were doing textiley stuff – I don’t know anywhere that does them, there probably is I just don’t know where they are”** (Interviewee 009). This issue was also highlighted in reference to work experience opportunities for young people who are in the process of making decisions about their future careers, **“trying to get any sort of opportunities of jobs that she could possibly think of doing and access to find out what they’re like is absolutely impossible at the moment. That’s what I’m battling. It’s like banging my head against a brick wall trying to get anything to give her a flavour of what’s out there”** (Parent of FE student, Interviewee 002).

Educators and sector experts identified obstacles that adults looking to pivot into new industries have to face. An FE interviewee told us that, **“retraining is a challenge - if someone did a Level 3 qualification 20 years ago, they might not be able to access funding for a new course in a different field”** (Interviewee 015). Individuals who want to retrain or upskill can face significant financial and logistical barriers. Boot camps and formal qualifications are often prohibitively expensive or require full-time study, making them inaccessible to those who are already working. This digital sector participant observed **“There’s been a fair amount of money being pumped into boot camps from the government and they’ve been 40 hours a week or even 20 hours a week, and it’s just too much for people”** (Interviewee 029).

Addressing skills gaps in CloS and supporting the growing and changing economy, is not only about increasing the skills of the resident population as it is sometimes presented. Instead, there are many challenges that people face in being able to take up opportunities and building pathways that are accessible.



Networks and Informal Recruitment

A key finding from the interviews with workers was the role that networks play in securing employment and skills development more generally. 80% of those interviewed could recall at least one period of employment that materialised through, or was supported by, a personal or professional connection, such as family members, friends, partners, neighbours and previous colleagues.

We collated case studies of professionals whose skill sets were effectively aligned with the needs of employers seeking their expertise. One interviewee currently holds a secure, well-remunerated full-time position as a software developer within the marine sector. Having developed an interest in coding during childhood, the individual is entirely self-taught and does not possess formal qualifications. Prior to securing stable employment, they balanced freelance work – managing a small portfolio of private contracts – with part-time roles in retail and hospitality. The transition from irregular, ad-hoc work to full-time professional employment took place over a ten-year period, with the initial breakthrough being facilitated by a personal connection. He recalled that **“A friend of mine worked there and I think he said they’re looking for... They weren’t advertising, they were just keeping an eye out for anyone who could do this sort of thing... So, he put my name forward and I went in and had a very very laid-back chat with them... They explained what they were doing, and I explained what I can do... Fashioned a job out of it I guess”** (Interviewee 003).

In this context, while the digital sector shows some openness to assessing skills through portfolios rather than formal qualifications, work experience remains a critical requirement. The same interviewee went on to say: **“The problem you have is that if you’re self-taught with no experience, no one will touch you.”** (Interviewee 003). This case illustrates two dynamics: the role of informal connections in accessing unadvertised roles, and the importance of initial work experience in supporting longer-term professional development, enabling the worker to broaden their skill set, increase their earning potential over time, and acquire a professional title.



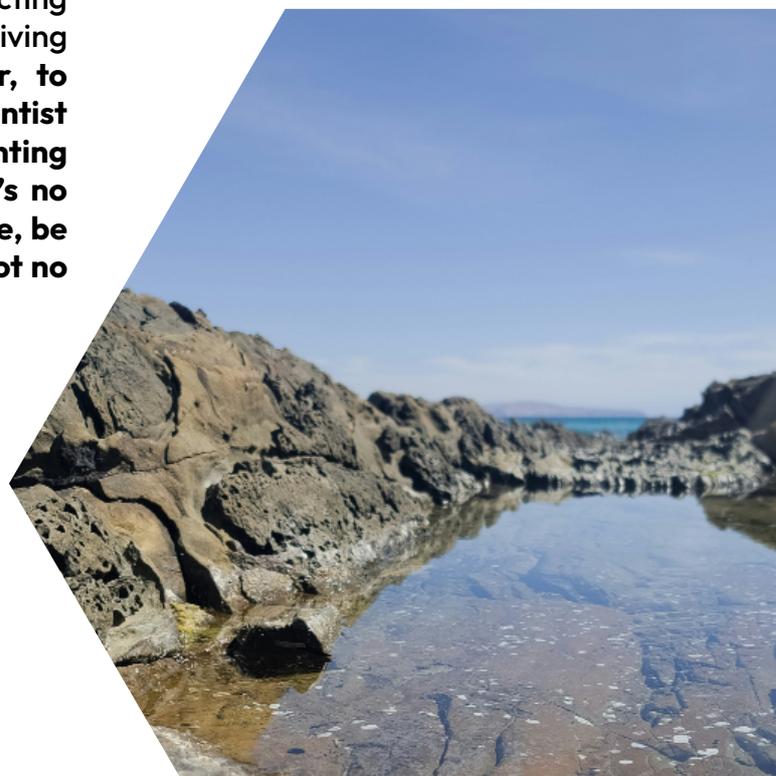
Personal networks were also described as playing a significant role in career transitions. One project manager working in marine foundations shared a non-linear career journey that began with training in trades, followed by upskilling in underground and then offshore drilling. When offshore work became incompatible with starting a family, the worker returned to trades. Following this, he was contacted by an acquaintance from primary school: **“He rang me and said are you interested in a role and I said I’m not interested in going offshore, no way. He said no, I want you to be office based. I said let’s have a discussion and I went up for an interview and then they offered me [the job]”** (Interviewee 005). This participant does not hold the formal qualifications commonly associated with his current position and now works within a team of academically trained specialists. His direct, hands-on experience of field-based drilling offers a perspective grounded in real-world conditions. In both this case and the example above, access to employment opportunities was not dependent on formal qualifications but was instead facilitated through personal networks.

A land management professional shared an account in which networks and local support structures were also critical. This participant is now the owner-operator of a Cornwall-based sustainable land management business. Over several decades, he was guided and supported by key individuals, including landowners on whose properties he worked and then went onto manage, those who helped him access funding and training opportunities and organisations who share crucial resources such as equipment. He highlighted the particular characteristics of agricultural work in Cornwall, noting its inaccessibility to those without existing resources: **“No young person is going into farming and starting from scratch, because there is no way that anyone could ever afford it”** (Interviewee 006). This case points towards a collaborative, community-oriented norm in this sector.

Not all participants reported having access to such supportive networks or resources when seeking employment. Some participants described long-standing difficulties in securing work aligned with their qualifications, despite sustained efforts. One full-time parent explained that despite their training in textile design, both of their long-term roles were in retail and hospitality and secured through personal connections, “[The area manager] knew [a friend from school] and that’s how I got the job, that’s how I got a foot in, but I probably wouldn’t have got it if I didn’t know the person...” (Interviewee 009). Although these connections provided access to employment, the roles did not speak to the participant’s actual qualifications, and they described many years of unsuccessful attempts to find work in their trained field. Reflecting on this, they shared “I feel slightly unemployable” (Interviewee 009).

A qualified Geo-Scientist, now working in land management, described contacting potential employers directly, but receiving no response: “I sent a cover letter, to say like oh I’m basically a Geo-Scientist living in your area and you’re wanting to hire a junior geologist, but there’s no jobs advertised, so here’s my CV. Like, be good to have a conversation, and I got no response, no reply” (Interviewee 010).

Another participant working in higher education recounted a two-decade effort to secure employment at the local university after graduating with a science degree. Their experience included several years in fixed-term roles before gaining a permanent post: “having applied to the university for various positions, probably for about 20 years, right since I finished my degree came home to Cornwall and started looking for work and I never got shortlisted for anything ever. So, I gave up applying to the university for a while” (Interviewee 008).





In some cases, family members and partners were described as key sources of influence and information about career pathways. One higher education student and part-time occupational therapy worker explained: **“Yes, so, she’s a nursing student so she took a different route to becoming a nurse than I would have done if I had stuck to it, but yes, she knew about the apprenticeship programme and she knew about further ascensions up the NHS ladder... and it is a ladder...”** (Interviewee O12).

Accounts also differed in how participants described their engagement with networking more broadly. For some, networking was perceived as a formal, structured professional activity that could feel inaccessible. One higher education interviewee reflected: **“I don’t really do that direct networking, and because I’m an introvert, I’m not very good at it, I don’t really like it”** (Interviewee O08). Others described networking as something that happened informally through everyday encounters. As one software developer noted: **“I seem to have had a lot of jobs where you get chatting to someone in the pub and the next minute you’ve got a different job. I never seem to apply for a job, I just drift around and if something sounds interesting, I go in that direction”** (Interviewee O03).

From the perspective of employers, participants described how recruitment often occurs through both word-of-mouth hiring and personal networks, alongside formal recruitment processes. This informal approach was noted as a way for employers to find workers when conditions are challenging. As one consumer product manufacturer explained, **“When we’re struggling to find people, we get more creative... and sometimes that means looking through our networks first before we put a job ad out”** (Interviewee O19).

Informal recruitment practices were also evident through processes of skill verification, particularly among small businesses, where former employees' capabilities are confirmed to prospective employers within the same network. One participant, who runs a small digital business, spoke about the interest in candidates that he was providing entry level training for, **“the couple of business owners that we spoke to are really interested in tapping into the talent, so they want to know about the students that are kind of graduating this program and they want access to that recruitment basically”** (Interviewee O24).

Some employers actively seek candidates who are culturally aligned with their business, with a particular emphasis on local connections and community ties in their hiring practices. This approach often involves a deliberate focus on recruiting individuals from the immediate geographical area. In addition, barriers to housing were identified as a factor influencing recruitment practices within certain sectors. As one participant from the space sector explained, **“All of our recruitment has been a referral from someone as a result of ‘Oh, we need to talk to this person, they’re really good at X’ or ‘They’re looking for work’... We don’t have a formulaic recruitment process. We don’t have someone come into a room and sit down for an interview. We go on referrals, we talk to the person, then start a conversation with them. Then we say, ‘Come in and have a look at how we operate’ and from that, we create a job description”** (Interviewee O18).

Storytelling

Awareness of emerging industries, perceptions of opportunity, and access to career progression in Cornwall are shaped as much by information flows and local narratives as by the actual structure of the labour market.

One interviewee working in the offshore wind sector commented on the limited public understanding of new industries in Cornwall, stating that **“Most people know nothing about floating offshore wind, even though it’s about to have a massive impact on the region”** (Interviewee O28). Similar concerns were raised by an interviewee from the digital sector and the potential causal factors at play, **“If parents don’t know an industry exists, they won’t encourage their kids to pursue careers in it”** (Interviewee O32). The same participant went on to observe that **“many students just assume they have to move away for work, without realising that Cornwall has a growing tech sector”** (Interviewee O32).

Individual business interviewees described feeling under-represented within Cornwall’s broader economic landscape, particularly in terms of local media coverage. One interviewee working in the digital sector expressed frustration that their business, despite working with major international clients across gaming, healthcare, and defence, received little local attention, stating, **“Local media should be promoting the work we do because it’s really impactful, yet we get more interest from outside of Cornwall than within”** (Interviewee O24). Another interviewee reflected on the importance of improving labour market awareness more broadly, suggesting that **“it’s not just about educating young people; it’s about educating teachers about what the labour market is looking like”** (Interviewee O13). A further interviewee, working in a highly specialised manufacturing sector, emphasised the need for greater regional pride and visibility, explaining, **“Cornwall should be proud of the cutting-edge work being done here, but it feels like it’s not being shared widely enough”** (Interviewee O25).

Several interviewees described the challenges of pursuing career progression within the region. One interviewee reported feeling that they would need to leave Cornwall to achieve career growth, even when securely employed and reasonably well remunerated **“everyone that I speak to and has got children say they gotta move out of Cornwall to get a decent job”** (Interviewee 005). The breadth and diversity of Cornwall’s economy were not widely recognised by those seeking employment, with sectors such as care, hospitality, and retail dominating perceptions of the available labour market. All workers were asked where they go to find out about job opportunities. The leading answer for 75% of participants was the website ‘Indeed’.

A parent shared how perceptions of suppressed wages and limited options influenced their children’s aspirations, explaining, **“I mean, my eldest is already gone and my youngest doesn’t really see that there’s much here. You know, for her to be able to hold on to. And live a decent life, really”** (Interviewee 001). Another interviewee, an emergency health technician, commented on the scarcity of appealing roles, stating, **“Not being funny, but the trains is one of the only decent jobs down here, and everybody goes for it don’t they”** (Interviewee 004). A further interviewee, a student and part-time occupational therapist, reflected on the types of work commonly available, observing, **“From personal experience it’s an awful lot of hospitality and catering, that is a massive avenue of work for people”** (Interviewee 012).



Interviewees working on employment and training projects also raised concerns about perceptions of opportunity within the region. One strategic project participant explained that **“teachers sometimes say, ‘There are no jobs in Cornwall.’ But that’s just not true and saying that in front of students has a huge impact on their mindset”** (Interviewee 013). An interviewee based in further education described discussions held among businesses during a recent meeting of the Cornwall Chamber of Commerce, noting, **“We’re a member of the Cornwall Chamber of Commerce, and they had a meeting with all of us members yesterday and there are a lot of companies and businesses on the call, kind of saying, well, you know, we keep seeing things about, you know, there are no jobs and opportunities in the county, but actually all of us are really struggling to recruit”** (Interviewee 015). The same strategic project interviewee summarised the wider challenge, commenting, **“There’s a common mindset that ‘there are no opportunities in Cornwall,’ and it’s harming young people’s motivation”** (Interviewee 013).

Workers were asked to distinguish between the concepts of a “career” and a “job.” A career was described as something pursued deliberately, associated with ambition, planning, and development over time, whereas a job was characterised primarily as a means of earning an income, often unrelated to long-term aspirations. One higher education interviewee reflected on their own experience, commenting, **“I don’t think I ever managed to actually have a career. I’ve sort of got a random eclectic collection of strange experiences. I don’t think I can really describe it as a career”** (Interviewee 008). Another interviewee described career progression in terms of structured development, explaining, **“I’d say a career is a bit more... You can do extra things to get extra qualifications, and you can work your way up to a better position. I worked my way up to the manager’s position of the restaurant; I couldn’t go any further”** (Interviewee 009).

These reflections underline how perceptions of opportunity, as much as opportunity itself, are shaping the skills ecosystem and career pathways in Cornwall.

Discussion

Cornwall's workforce and skills are an ecosystem which, when working together well, enables our economies to flourish. The focus of this research has been about understanding where connections between different parts of the system are mutually supportive, where they can be improved, and how they can be supported to work better.

Reliable transportation, and sufficient personal resources all play a crucial role in determining an individual's ability to successfully pursue their desired career path. For those who do not face significant barriers in these areas, there is greater flexibility to take professional risks, such as accepting lower-paid roles to gain valuable experience or investing in further training and development to enhance their long-term career prospects. The absence of immediate financial constraints allows individuals to make strategic choices that prioritise career progression over short-term stability. Conversely, for those who do experience such barriers, opportunities become significantly more restricted.

A key finding from this work was the major role that networks play in the labour market, insights into which were volunteered – directly and indirectly – by all stakeholders. If we analyse this information through the lens of signal flows, it becomes evident that while networks are not inherently restrictive or problematic in isolated situations, they do direct the flow of information and that this presents as an economic weakness overall. Rather than labour market information reaching a diverse and wide-ranging audience, we see how job opportunities, knowledge, and resources tend to circulate within a closed group of connected individuals, limiting broader access and visibility.

For companies based in remote locations recruiting from local networks can sidestep inadequate transport links. The housing crisis which is heightened in certain areas of CloS can result in a severe lack of affordable housing supply which has pushed some businesses, particularly those who are rapidly expanding, to diversify their recruitment practices. For several employers, specifically small and medium sized enterprises and micro-entities, sourcing verified candidates via a professional network reduced the risk inherent in recruitment. While justifiable, these methods contribute and potentially create a distorted picture of the opportunities available, not only limited to roles that need to be immediately filled, but the wider view of which skills are in demand and opportunities available in CloS generally.

When speaking with workers, we saw the other side of the coin. It became evident early on that those embedded within the right networks - networks where their skills were most relevant and aligned with their career aspirations - experienced clear advantages. In two cases, individuals who were well-connected secured employment informally despite lacking the 'correct' qualifications for the roles. It could be argued that had they applied through formal recruitment channels, they may not have been considered eligible, nor would they have perceived themselves as suitable candidates.

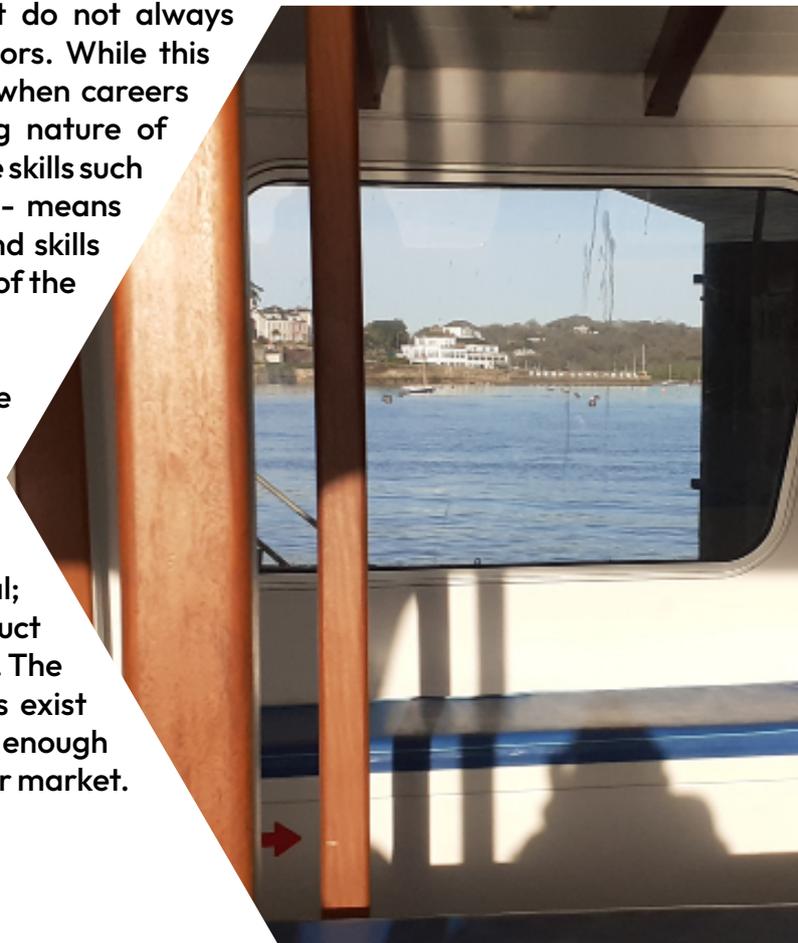
For those unable to secure employment in their chosen field - particularly individuals who were formally qualified for the roles they applied for, but could not speak of a relevant contact in that field - there was evidence of an internalised sense of failure. Many of these workers appeared to withdraw from pursuing their original career ambitions, instead shifting towards a more pragmatic and needs-driven approach to employment. This 'course correction' often reflected a reassessment of work not in terms of personal fulfilment, but as a means of financial stability, highlighting the broader impact of inaccessible labour markets on individual aspirations and long-term career trajectories.

In addition, we also encountered instances where networks acted as a constraint, limiting workers to specific sectors that aligned with their personal circles rather than their actual skill sets or ambitions. In such cases, valuable skills present within the labour force remained underutilised and effectively dormant due to a lack of opportunities for activation, leading to underemployment.

Indirectly, insights shared during the scoping phase of this research also highlighted the way in which networks, or closed networks, can influence the next generation of workers. Here we heard about the vital role that parents play in shaping their children's aspirational boundaries. That what children learn about the world of work in the home stays with them throughout their education, influencing their decisions at key stages. In this scenario, the networks that parents operate within trickle down to their children, becoming a cultural and social inheritance.

We also witnessed the way in which industries more broadly form tight knit circles that do not always overlap with networks in other sectors. While this may have been sufficient in an era when careers were typically lifelong, the evolving nature of work – particularly the way that some skills such as digital will cut across all sectors – means that tight knit circles of expertise and skills are no longer aligned with the needs of the modern economy.

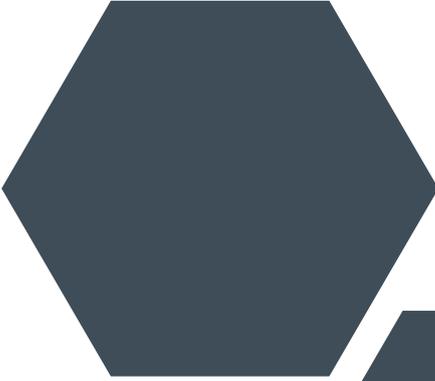
If we think about the distinctive geography of CloS, the dispersed settlement patterns and limited transport links, a strong presence of and dependance on networks could be considered perfectly rational; a social infrastructure that is the product of living in a specific set of conditions. The issue, then, is not that the networks exist but that networks are not accessible enough to be utilised by all actors in the labour market.



Mark Granovetter's theory (1983) on the strength of weak ties provides a useful analytical framework to examine the impact of network structures on employment accessibility and labour market fluidity. Granovetter's research highlights that weak ties – connections with acquaintances, distant colleagues, and broader professional networks – act as bridges, extending an individual's access to information beyond their immediate circle. In contrast, strong ties – close relationships with family, friends, and long-term colleagues – offer a high level of trust and support, but can also reinforce existing network boundaries. If an individual's network is typified by close ties, they may be limited to the professional networks found within their close friends and family. Should a mismatch occur between the network they exist within and the aspirations they have, their chances of success, based on the findings in this research, are comparatively lower than an individual that has either a good mix of strong and weak ties, or happens to belong to a strong tie network that aligns with their ambitions.

Going one step further, Roanld Burt's (1992) structural holes theory brings into the picture the role of brokerage. Structural holes refer to gaps between clusters in a social network where there are few or no bridging connections. Burt argues that social capital is a function of brokerage across structural holes rather than a closure within a network. The need, then, is to trigger brokerage that ensures information can travel easily between social groups and sectors.





There are norms bound up in the concept of social capital; that it is something a person is responsible for cultivating for the sole purpose of social mobility, and therefore not a collective task but an individual one - a healthy characteristic of a marketplace driven by competition. There is, however, also a view of social capital, access to resources and networks, that is vital at both a community and individual level (Flora and Flora, 2003). Our findings support this claim. The community, or in this context the economy, suffers if workers cannot access opportunities and if young people are not informed about the breadth of opportunities. For businesses that lack access to a readily skilled workforce, sustaining operations and achieving growth becomes increasingly challenging.

Beyond individual career progression, this research points to broader economic consequences. When workers struggle to access opportunities due to network constraints, businesses equally suffer. The findings suggest that inaccessible networks not only limit individual mobility but also create inefficiencies within the labour market, restricting innovation and long-term economic resilience. Additionally, the influence of networks extends generationally, shaping young people's perceptions of career possibilities and reinforcing existing patterns. Moving forward, efforts should focus on enhancing network accessibility and testing mechanisms that find novel ways to socialise individuals and businesses outside of their existing social and professional groups.

Next Steps

Cornwall's ability to operate as a well-functioning skills ecosystem is impacted by its signal flows. As we have seen in this report, there are a series of missing or broken connections which inhibit the flow of ideas, people, and information. Our next steps should be addressing these to ensure that the wider public are not only 'work ready', but that new opportunities are visible to job-seeking individuals.

Our first suggestion is to build sustainable networks which connect industry-curious people with employers, learning about the sector, which kinds of businesses exist, what they do, and the kinds of formal and informal skills that are needed. Our second suggestion is with regards to telling different kinds of stories about Cornwall, and the third is about having institutional flexibility to be able to ensure that people are not stopped from developing and using their talents through structural barriers.

For the team moving forward, we intend to develop our Mappa storytelling app, sharing stories about different parts of the Cornish economy.

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