LONDONDERRY CHAMBER

Skills and Workforce Survey 2026

Key findings, trends and implications for the Skills Sub-Committee

Built from the 2026 Skills Survey, the 2025 Business Sentiment Survey and the 2025 Member Satisfaction Survey.

March 2026

What matters most

The signal from members is clear: growth ambition remains, but skills capacity is now the binding constraint.

The North West does not have a demand problem; it has a skills conversion problem between vacancies, training provision and uptake.

69%
expect headcount to increase over the next 12 months

82%
cite difficulty recruiting suitably skilled staff

87%
see skills constraints as a moderate or major risk to regional growth

100%
would invest more or possibly more in AI if local support existed

What this points to

- Training demand exists, but firms want shorter, more flexible and more local provision.
- Apprenticeships and HLAs have strong latent demand; friction sits in cost, supervision and process.
- AI use is spreading faster than capability: adoption is moving, maturity is not.
- The same themes recur across three Chamber surveys, which strengthens the policy case.

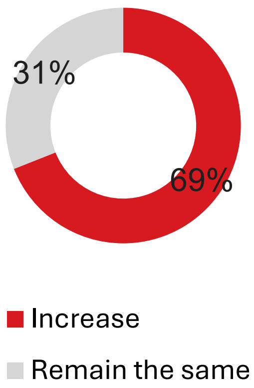
Survey basis
Skills survey: 17 responses, with a strong construction component and no hospitality, retail or digital respondents. This deck is therefore best read as directional evidence rather than a full market census.

Source: Skills Survey 2026. Percentages rounded; some questions have 16 respondents.

Businesses still want to grow but shortages are affecting delivery

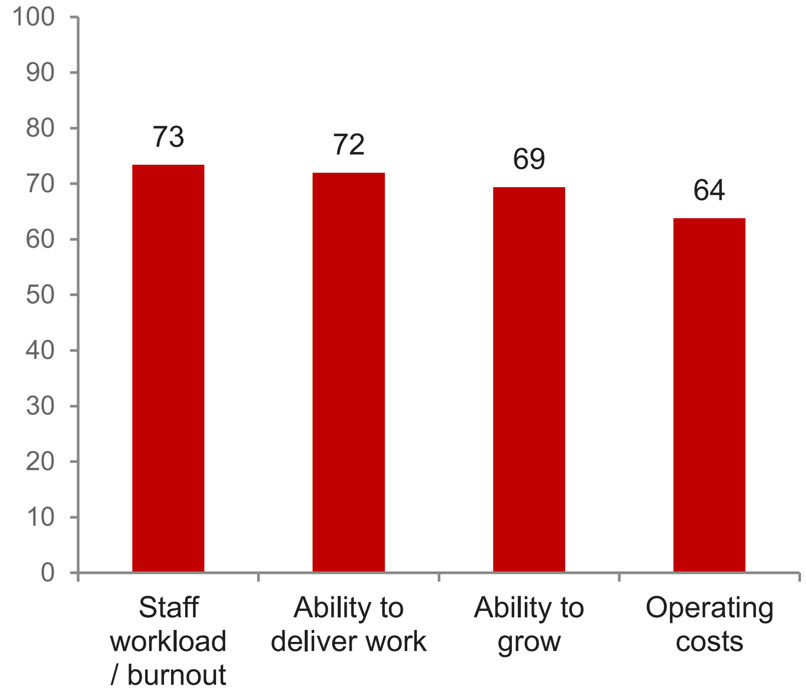
Members are not describing a lack of ambition. They are describing a lack of staff capacity.

Headcount outlook



No respondent expected headcount to fall.

Impact of skills gaps on business (weighted average / 5)



Scaled from the survey's 1–5 weighting to a 100-point index for readability.

Further evidence of constraint

25%
turned down work or opportunities in the past 12 months because of skills shortages.

87%
judge skills and workforce constraints to be a moderate or major risk to future investment or growth in the North West.

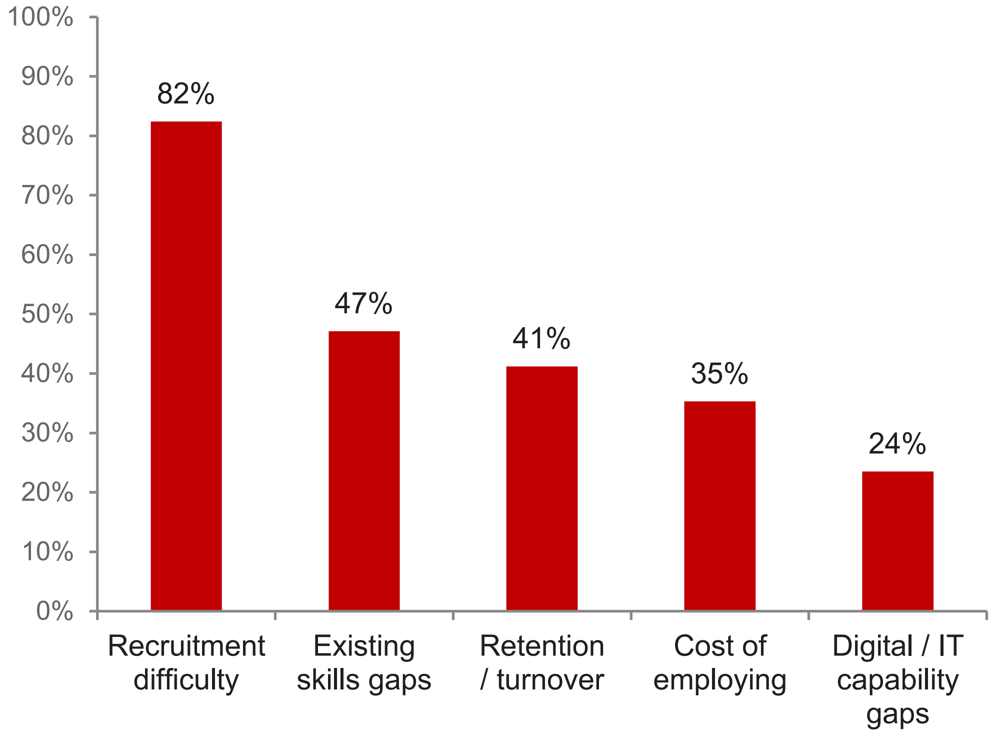
> *"We did not have the capacity in staff to take on certain projects."*

Source: Skills Survey 2026, Questions 3, 6, 19 and 20.

Where the shortages are sharpest

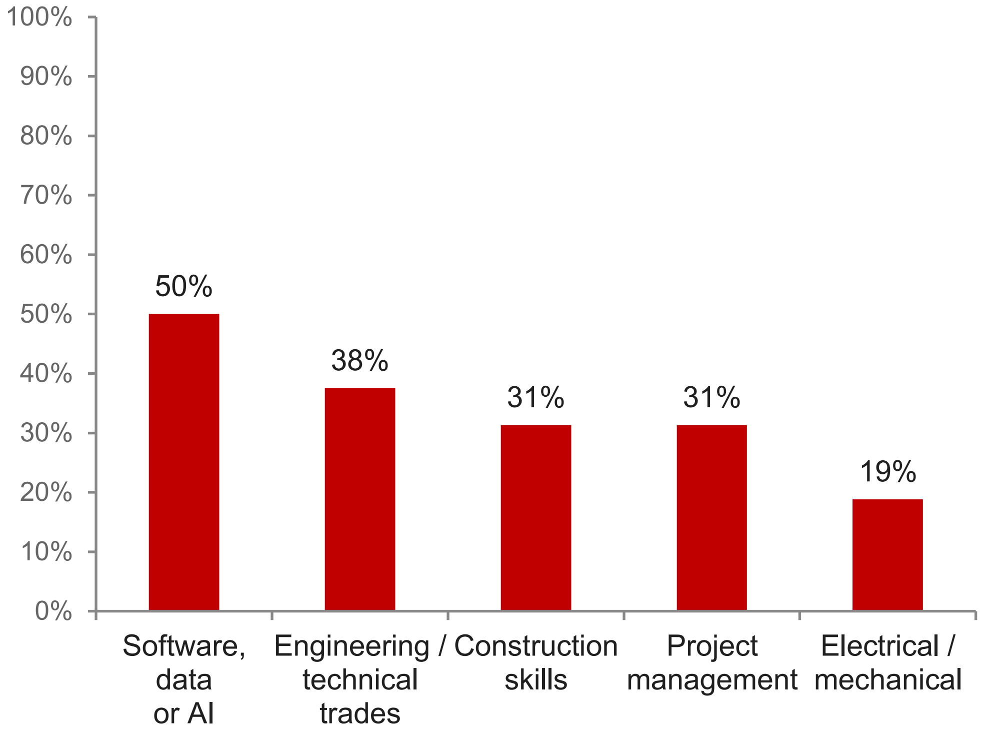
Recruitment pressure sits alongside specific gaps in technical, digital and project capability.

Skills issues causing the greatest negative impact



Recruitment is the dominant operational pain point, well ahead of any other issue.

Specific skills in short supply



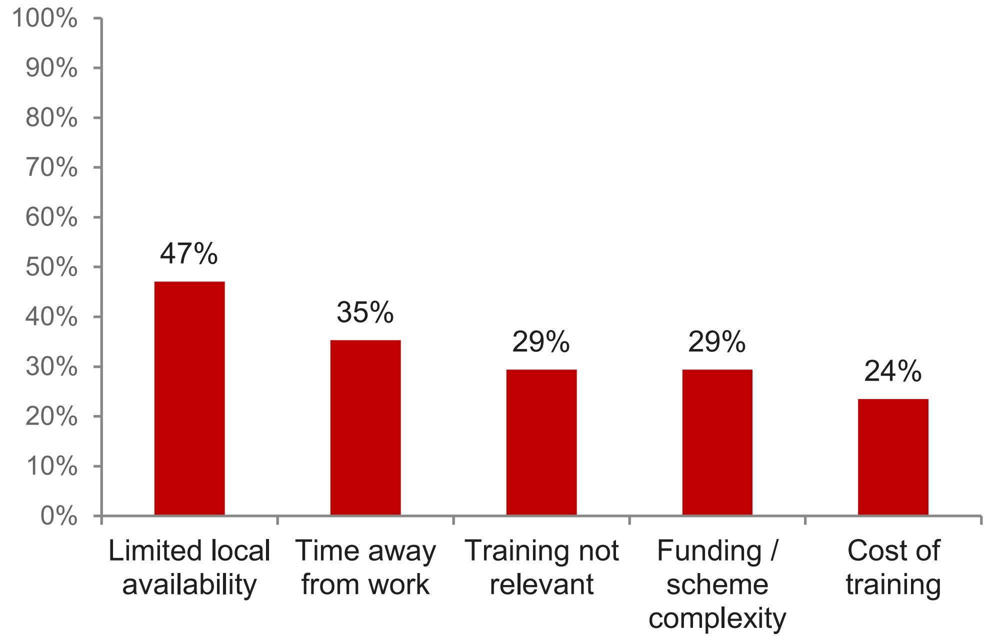
The skills picture is mixed: traditional trades remain scarce, but digital and project skills are now part of the same shortage story.

Source: Skills Survey 2026, Questions 4 and 5.

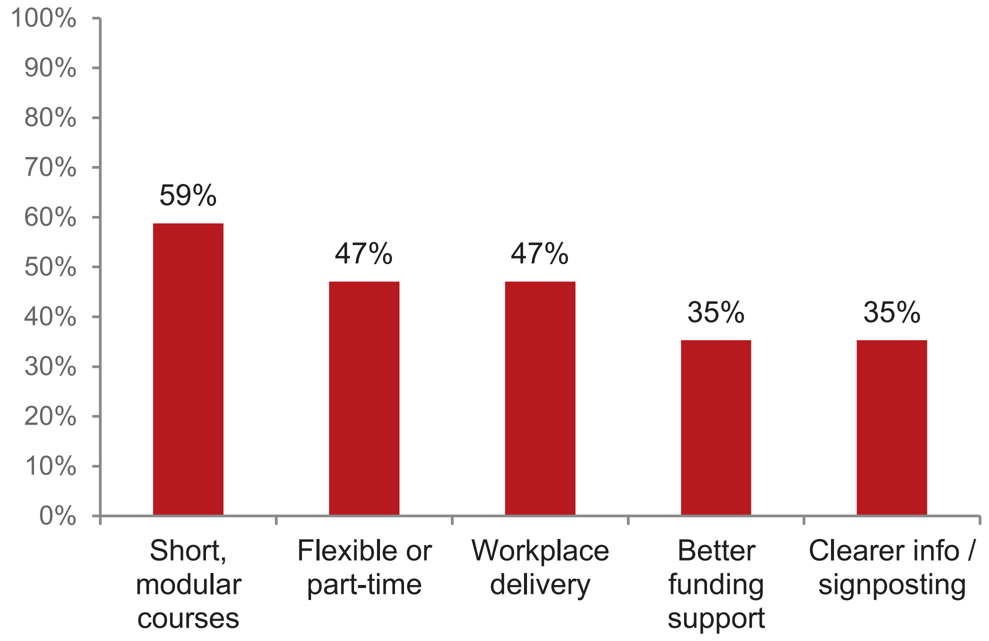
The training offer is not yet aligned to how firms can use it

Businesses are asking for provision that is local, modular, flexible and clearly relevant to their day-to-day operations.

What stops firms investing more in training



What would make training more useful



Only 18% say existing training meets business needs well, 35% say it meets them poorly or very poorly.

"Currently no option to train gas engineers in the North West, they need to go to Belfast to achieve this qualification."

"On-site training, clear advice on use cases for individual roles, but with an over-arching business view."

Source: Skills Survey 2026, Questions 8, 10 and 11.

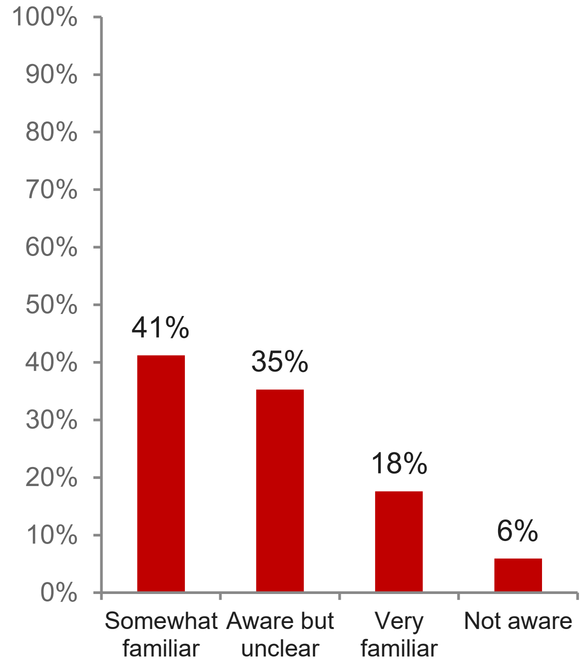
Apprenticeships and HLAs: appetite is high, but the system is the friction

This looks less like a lack of employer demand than a conversion problem in the route to participation.

94%
would consider recruiting or upskilling through an apprenticeship or HLA in the next 2-3 years.
That is a strong latent market for a region of this scale.

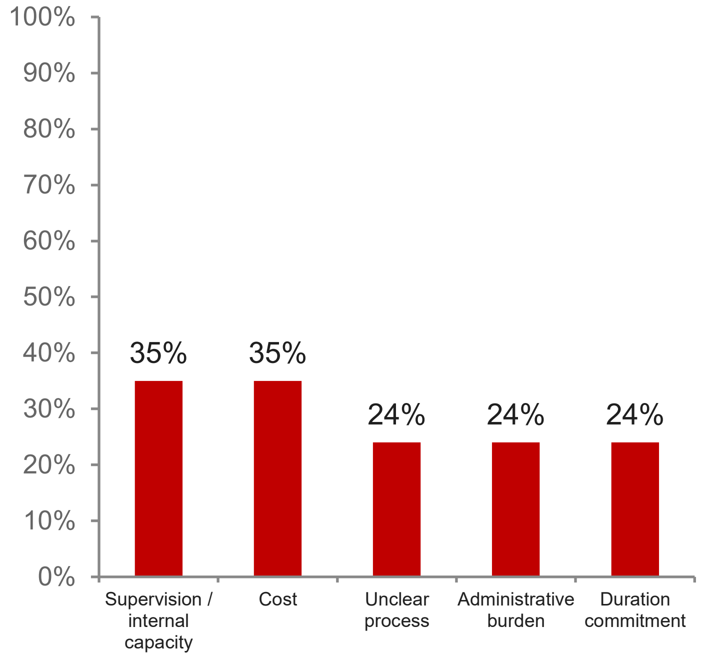
> *"Local provision between FE and HE providers, and mentoring, direct support, would help move firms from interest to action."*

Current familiarity with HLAs



Only 18% are very familiar; most firms are either only somewhat familiar or still unclear on the detail.

Main barriers to greater engagement



The case for the committee is practical: simplify the journey, reduce the time burden and de-risk participation for smaller firms.

Source: Skills Survey 2026, Questions 12, 13 and 14.

AI adoption is spreading faster than capability

Across Chamber surveys, AI has shifted from a workshop topic to an operational reality, but maturity remains shallow.

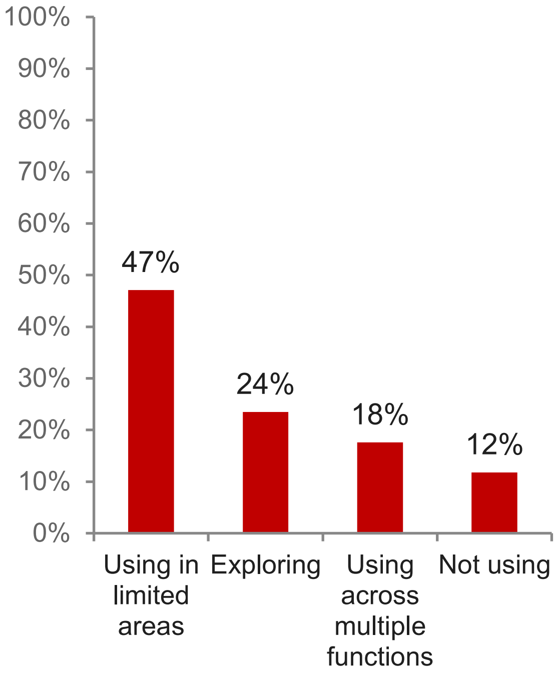
AI exposure in operations

2025		2026
80%	→	**88%**
Business Sentiment Survey using or exploring AI		Skills Survey using or exploring AI

Earlier member satisfaction feedback already pointed to AI as a top workshop demand. The 2026 survey shows that demand has now become operational.

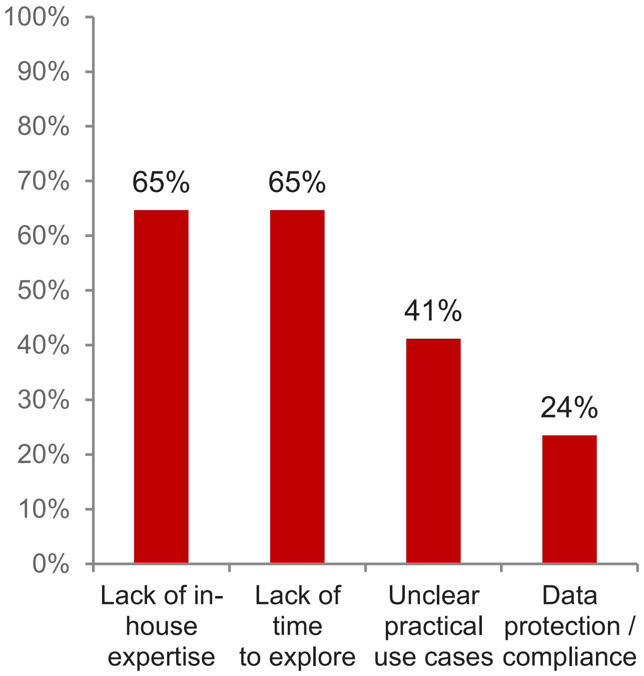
Question wording differs slightly between the two surveys, so the comparison should be read as indicative rather than strictly like-for-like.

Current AI maturity (2026)



Most firms are in early deployment rather than deep integration.

What is holding firms back



Every respondent said they would invest more or possibly more if practical local support was available.

Source: Business Sentiment Survey 2025 (Q16), Member Satisfaction Survey 2025 (conclusions), Skills Survey 2026 (Q15–17).

What members have been telling us consistently

Read together, the three surveys show a coherent story rather than isolated datapoints.

Summer 2025
Member Satisfaction

- AI, social media, networking and management workshops were the strongest asks.
- Members strongly preferred in-person delivery, but still wanted some webinars.
- Support was rated 4.6/5, which gives the Chamber credibility to convene solutions.

Implication: members were already asking for practical capability-building, especially around AI.

Autumn 2025
Business Sentiment

- Skills shortages were already a top-three business challenge for 40% of respondents.
- 60% were either actively recruiting or planning to recruit.
- Around 80% were already using or exploring AI in operations.

Implication: the labour market issue was visible before the skills survey and sits inside a broader growth agenda.

Spring 2026
Skills Survey

- Recruitment difficulty has sharpened: 82% now cite it as their main negative skills issue.
- One in four has already turned down work because of shortages.
- Firms want local, modular, practical training and targeted support to adopt AI.

Implication: the committee now has a stronger evidence base for policy and programme intervention.

Across all three surveys, the recurring member ask is practical, locally delivered capability-building, not generic provision.

Source: Member Satisfaction Survey 2025 conclusions; Business Sentiment Survey 2025; Skills Survey 2026.

3 Messages

1. **The region has demand for growth, but not enough workforce capacity to convert it.**

   Prioritise local, modular and employer-designed training with FE/HE and private providers.

2. **Apprenticeships and HLAs are an access problem, not a market demand problem.**

   Create a single front door: better signposting, mentoring and light-touch admin support for firms.

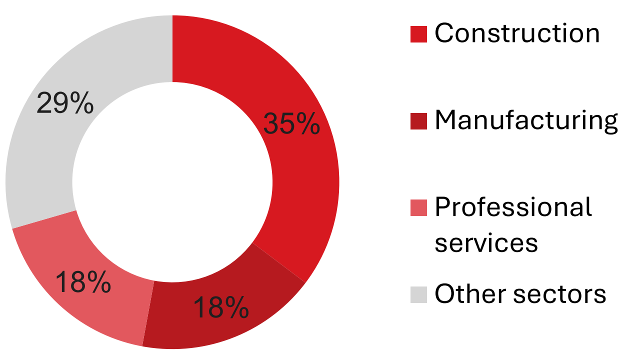
3. **AI is already in business operations; the gap is skills, confidence and practical support.**

   Develop practical AI adoption support: role-based use cases, compliance guidance and peer learning.

Policy push Use the evidence base to argue for regional skills provision in the North West, simpler funding routes and closer alignment between employers, FE, HE and government schemes.

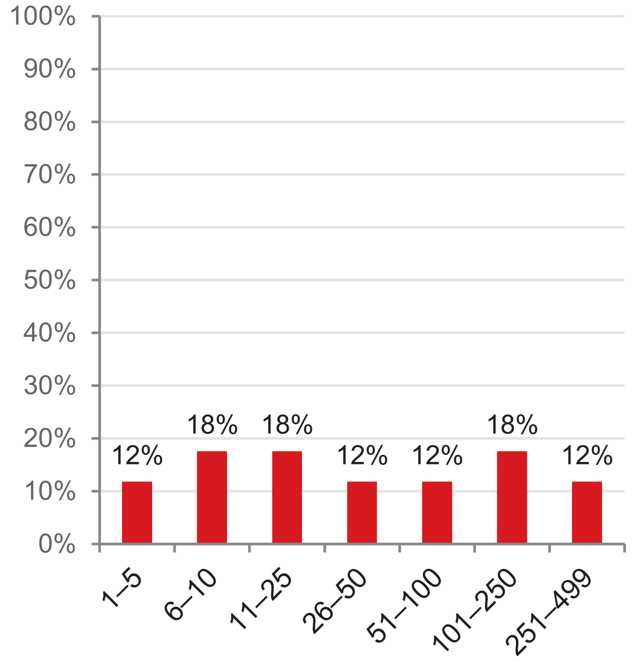
Appendix 1: survey basis and respondent profile

Sector mix (Skills Survey 2026)



No respondents came from hospitality, retail or digital / creative businesses.

Business size



Method and caveats

- 20-question survey launched via email, social media, direct messaging and WhatsApp.
- Fieldwork ran from 19th February to 5th March 2026.
- Average completion time: 11 minutes 47 seconds.
- The respondent profile is broad by firm size, but sector coverage is uneven.

Use the survey as directional evidence for committee discussion and policy lobbying, not as a definitive census of the local economy.

Source: Skills Survey 2026 methodology slide and raw workbook.