



University  
of Exeter

South-West Social  
Mobility Commission

The Hg  
Foundation

# The Tech Frontier one year on: Project impact update

May 2025

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**Why tech in the  
South West?**



**The Tech Frontier  
Report**



**Impact since then**

# Contents



**Why tech in the  
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**In January 2024, the South-West Social Mobility Commission, with funding from the Hg Foundation, set out to answer this question:**

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How can we get more young people in the South-West peninsula, **especially those from under-resourced backgrounds**, to work and thrive in tech jobs?

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# For context, the UK is the third largest tech market globally and the South West plays a crucial role in this

2023 Tech industry valuation by country (top 5 shown)

Similar to USA

(Exact Value  
Unknown)

\$1,800B

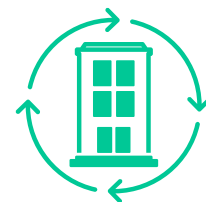
\$1,000B

\$467B

\$308B



## The South West Tech Market



**18,527** Tech  
Companies



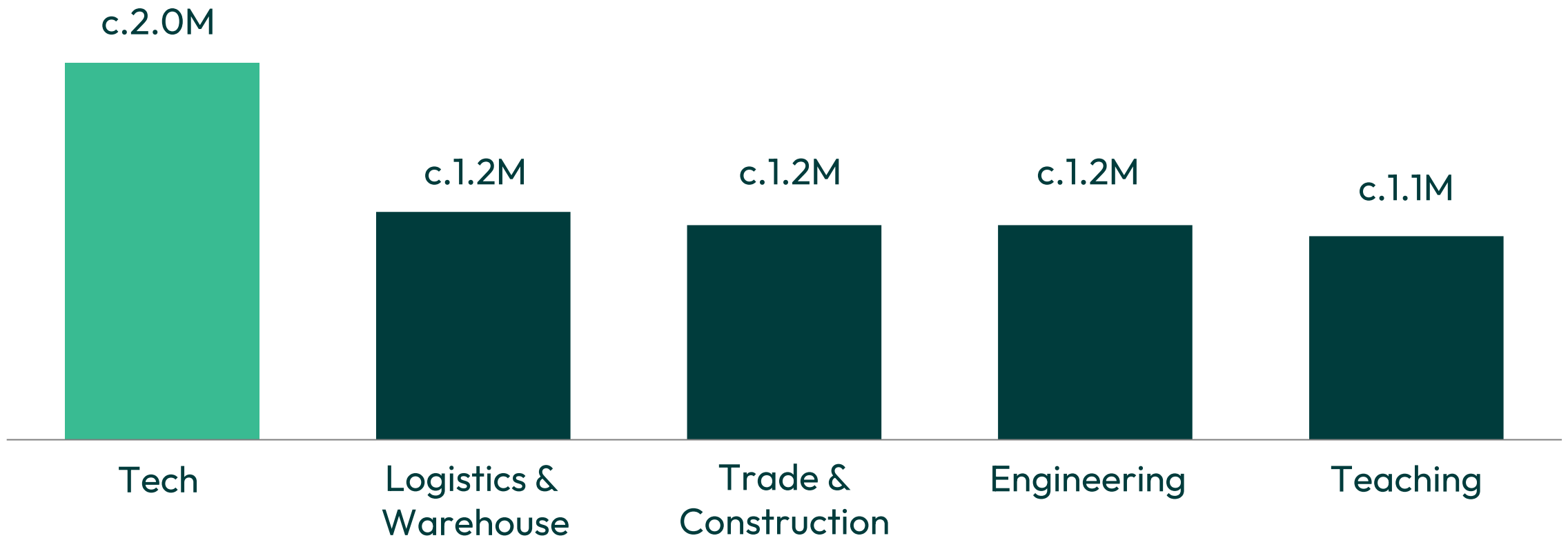
**£46.7B** 2023  
Turnover



**105,208** Total  
Employees

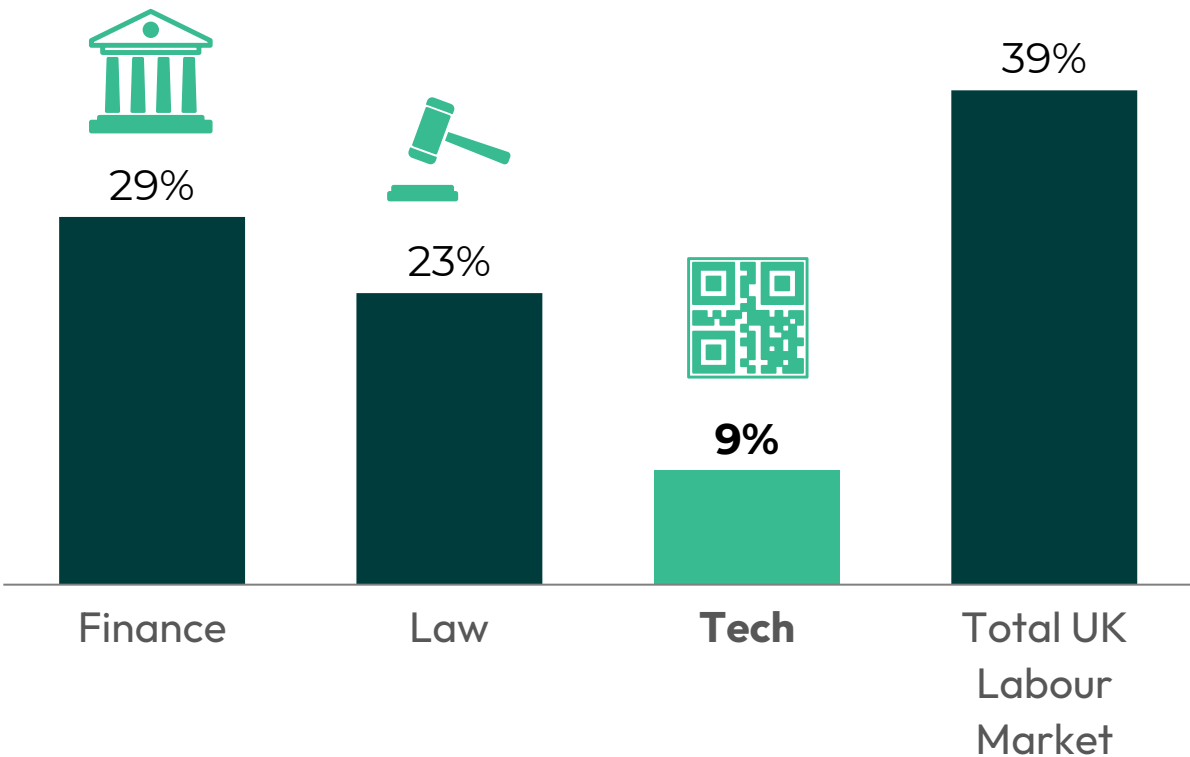
# However, tech in the UK has a talent pipeline problem

*Number of jobs vacancies by sector in the UK (between May 21-22) - only the top 5 job sectors included*



# ...As well as an extreme lack of socio-economic diversity

*Proportion of workforce that comes from a lower socio-economic background in the UK (2024)*



Source: The Times Business Recruitment Article (2024)

44

Business Recruitment

Tech seeks working-class heroes

Only 9 per cent of staff in technology business come from lower socioeconomic groups, writes Jane Hamilton

If you asked to picture the most unequal British industry, what springs to mind? Banking? Law? Or another gilded occupation? The answer, perhaps surprisingly, is technology. Despite employing more than two million people, or about 6.5 per cent of the UK workforce, only 9 per cent of technology employees come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

This is a far smaller figure than the traditionally "elite" professions of finance, at 29 per cent, and law, at 23 per cent, as well as the 39 per cent of the nation's overall labour force.

While, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, technology firms rushed to launch diversity, equity and inclusion programmes, the Tech Talent Charter, the technology sector's government-funded diversity body, recently announced that it was folding, citing a "lack of commitment" from within the industry.

"We are at a pivotal moment for the future of the UK's tech sector. Great progress has been made, but now too many companies are 'quiet quitting' [diversity, equity and inclusion programmes] and there is real risk of going backward," Debbie Foster, the Tech Talent Charter chief executive, said.

There has been significant change in the past decade, with a doubling in the number of technology roles held by women in Britain. However, as technology is the country's fastest-growing sector, with an estimated economic impact of £82.6 billion, more must be done to ensure a level careers playing field.

Foster believes that greater access to jobs will not only plug "the gaping chasm between supply and demand for tech skills" but also ensure that the industry does not "leave behind those sectors of society not adequately represented within its ranks".

It's a view echoed by Sarah Atkinson, boss of the Social Mobility Foundation. Its annual Social Mobility Employer Index is the national benchmark of working-class progression, yet Atkinson laments that while the tech sector prides itself on being innovative and forward-thinking, "it is dragging its heels on social mobility. Currently, very few tech companies enter our Social Mobility Employer Index".

So what can employers and the government do to help work working-class candidates climb with technology careers? Atkinson highlights unequal technology education, with 95 per cent of state schools in the wealthiest areas offering a computer science GCSE, compared with only 60 per cent in underprivileged areas. Alongside this, many poorer households lack access to a computer or a stable internet connection.

"Employers should make allowances for this when hiring and look for transferable skills," she argues.

Visibility of rising working-class technology stars is also vital. The Syrian father of Mustafa Saleem, DeanMind's co-founder, worked as a taxi driver in north London, while Gary Iannawa, chief executive of Tangent, the recruitment platform, grew up in a low-income, single-parent household and is now helping others to follow his route.

"If the tech sector continues to rely on nepotistic recruitment channels, it will continue to suffer from a lack of diversity of thought and will miss out on the large amounts of potential we have in our country," Iannawa said. "It's time for change."

1

Embrace and listen to inclusive leaders. Create a culture where different viewpoints, including those of disabled people, are valued in decision-making.

2

Ensure you are truly accessible. Discover the barriers employees and customers face to fully access your business, both in-person and digitally, and find solutions.

3

Create a brand with broad appeal. Intentionally emphasise diversity and inclusion, including a range of success stories, as it will help to attract a wider audience of both talent and customers.

4

Drive continuous development. People need to be moving forwards, otherwise they will move on. Provide opportunities for career development, growth and leadership training based on individual skills and goals.

5

Stay flexible. Businesses need to ensure that progress isn't reversed. Encourage flexible scheduling, remote work and supportive policies.

6

Transparent communication. Create trust by openly discussing disability issues. Too often people feel they must hide their needs. Encourage teams to communicate requirements, concerns and experiences and find shared solutions.

6

Appointment of the week

Communications director for alcohol charity

Drinkaware, the alcohol charity, is hiring a director of operations and programmes. The organisation's mission is to give government, industry, communities and individuals the knowledge and support to make informed decisions about alcohol and how to reduce the harm it can cause. The appointee will have a crucial role in leading delivery of social impact. Working with funders and internal departments, they will oversee the strategic and operational delivery of Drinkaware's advice, content, products and programmes, as well as ensuring implementation of public-facing information and behaviour change campaigns. Channels include evidence-led advice to governments and industry.

independent research, consumer

Applicants must be fluent in the use of data. Preference will be given to those with a background in senior operationally focused roles, as well as a record of developing and delivering successful programmes and services. Drinkaware is particularly interested in candidates knowledgeable in digital service design and delivery. Apply at [appointments.thetimes.com](https://appointments.thetimes.com)

6

Working week

All should take time off

Almost two-thirds of employees do not use their full annual leave entitlement, according to a survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. The survey also found that 40 per cent of employees do not take any leave at all. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development says that taking time off is essential for mental and physical health, and for maintaining productivity. It encourages employers to encourage their staff to take their leave.

Listen to other views

Boomers who actively seek out opposing feedback can make better decisions, according to Michael Smeets of Oxford University. It allows leaders to foster an environment where their team can speak truthfully and sharpeners bosses' "triple intelligence". He said: "Doubts are to bosses what nerves are to elite athletes: a source of focus and insight when harnessed constructively, a threat when it becomes a performance when not."

Out of office, in the know

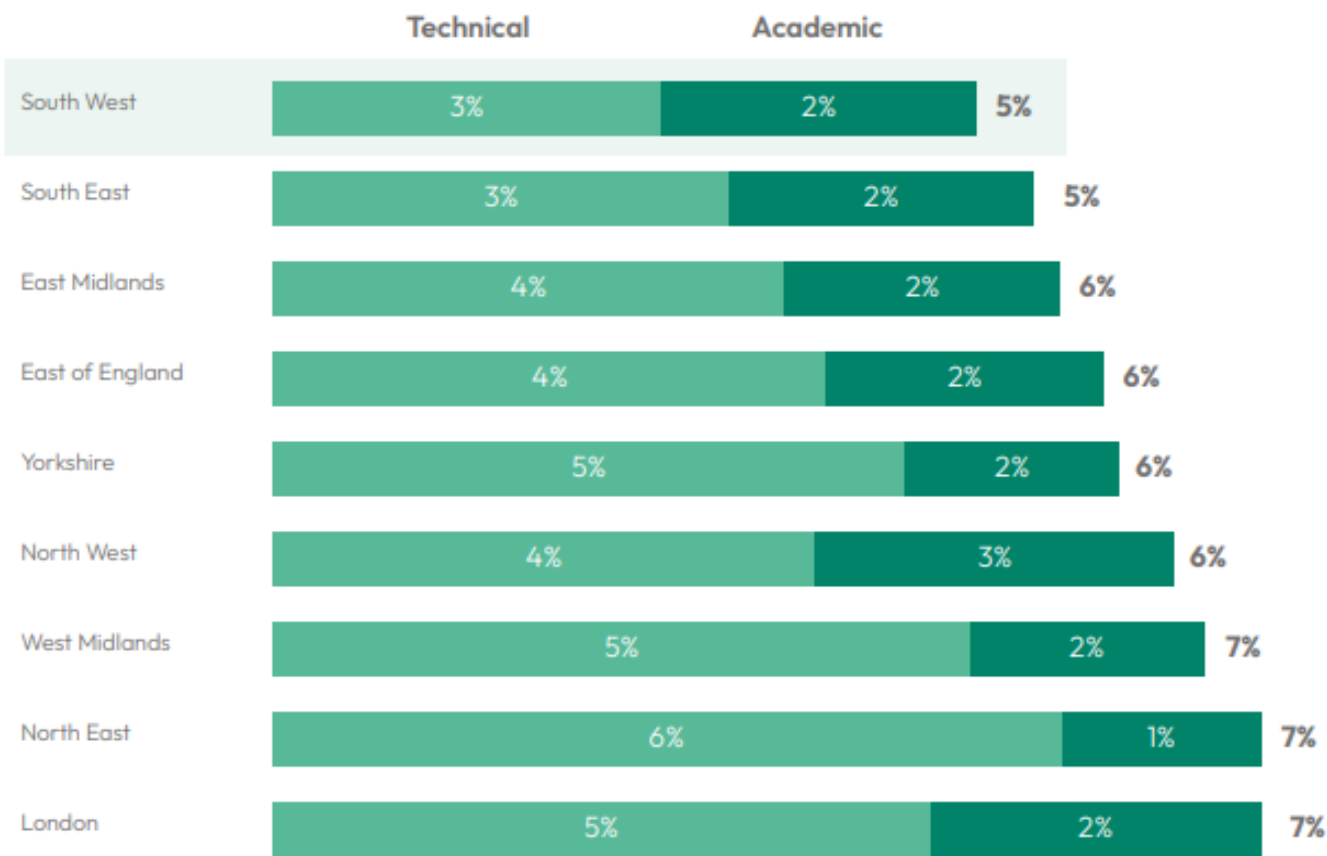
This week is the most booked-off of the entire year, and firms are cracking down on unprofessional out-of-office messages. Natasha Letford, senior associate at Wilson Solicitors, said: "If a seriously misjudged out-of-office message gets a negative reaction, this could be dealt with as a disciplinary matter, but this would be easier for an employer to pursue if they had provided guidance on acceptable communication styles."

Don't rely on AI for a CV

AI may be changing recruitment, but AI-generated content in a CV is considered the biggest red flag. A CV Genius study found that 57 per cent of recruiters dislike seeing the same AI-created generic phrases. Eva Chan, a careers expert, said: "With so many people relying on them, it's getting easier to spot. AI-generated content. Take the time to personalise your CV, and it could be what helps you get that interview."

# In the South West, the talent pipeline issue is even worse, with fewer students taking IT qualifications than elsewhere

*Proportion of students awarded Level 3 IT qualifications in 2019*



72%

*of tech companies in the South West said that the biggest barrier to growth was finding the right talent*

Source: EPI analysis of National Pupil Database; Tech SW Tech From the Edge Report (2023)

# Tackling this issue is therefore an opportunity for the South West to improve both its economic growth & social mobility



## Economic growth

*Reducing the talent supply-demand gap will help organisations to grow, supporting the tech sector and South-West economy...*



## Social mobility

*...and tech jobs typically pay more<sup>1</sup> potentially benefitting young people with well-paid, future-proofed, skilled work*

1. On average, tech jobs pay 80% more than non tech jobs in the UK (from Tech Nation's People & Skills Report 2022)  
Source: Tech Nation's People & Skills Report 2022; SWSMC Analysis

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South West?



**The Tech Frontier  
Report**



Impact since then

**‘The Tech Frontier’ report was published in April 2024 and was positively received across various media outlets**



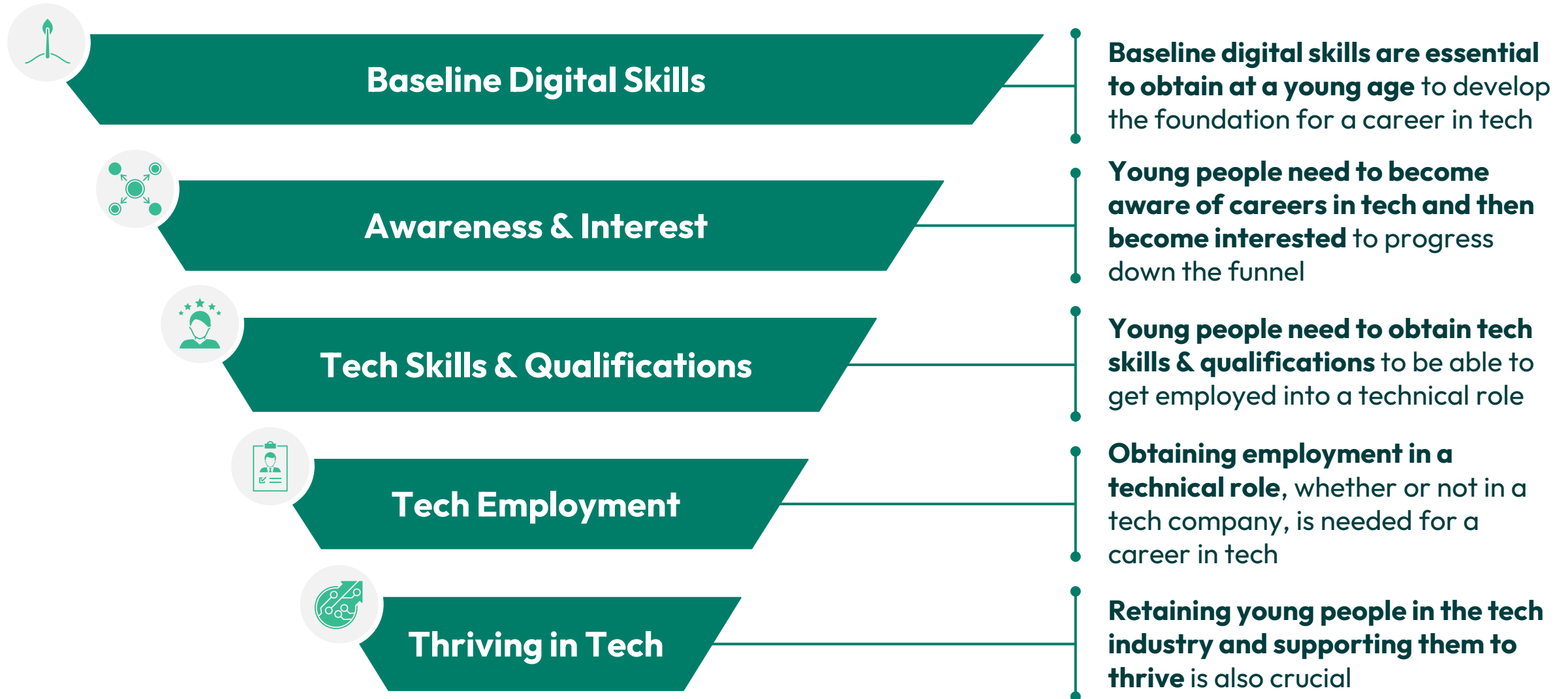
**B B C RADIO**  
**CORNWALL**



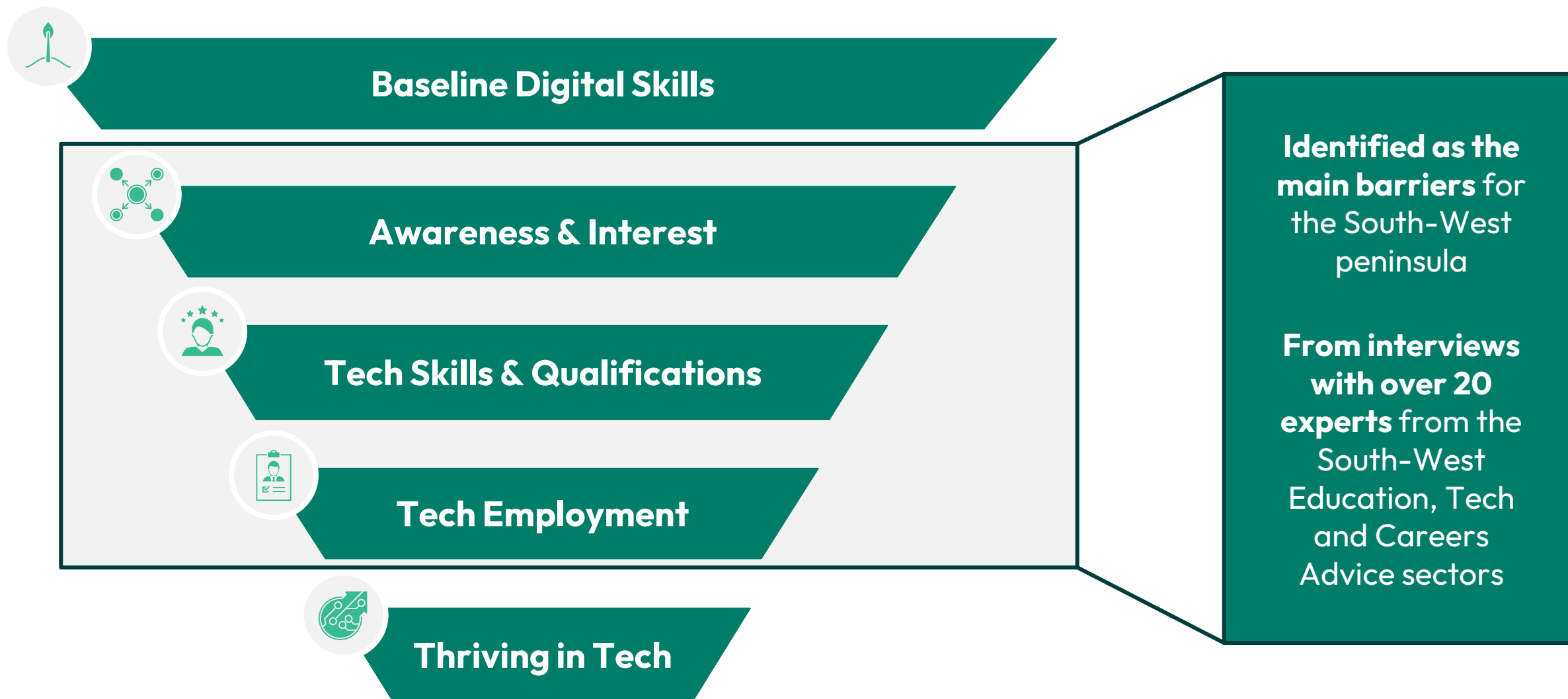
**BusinessLive**

1. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6ZpSZ8QXHOhaNqzwgkOb2N?si=34d409b0950f4f96>

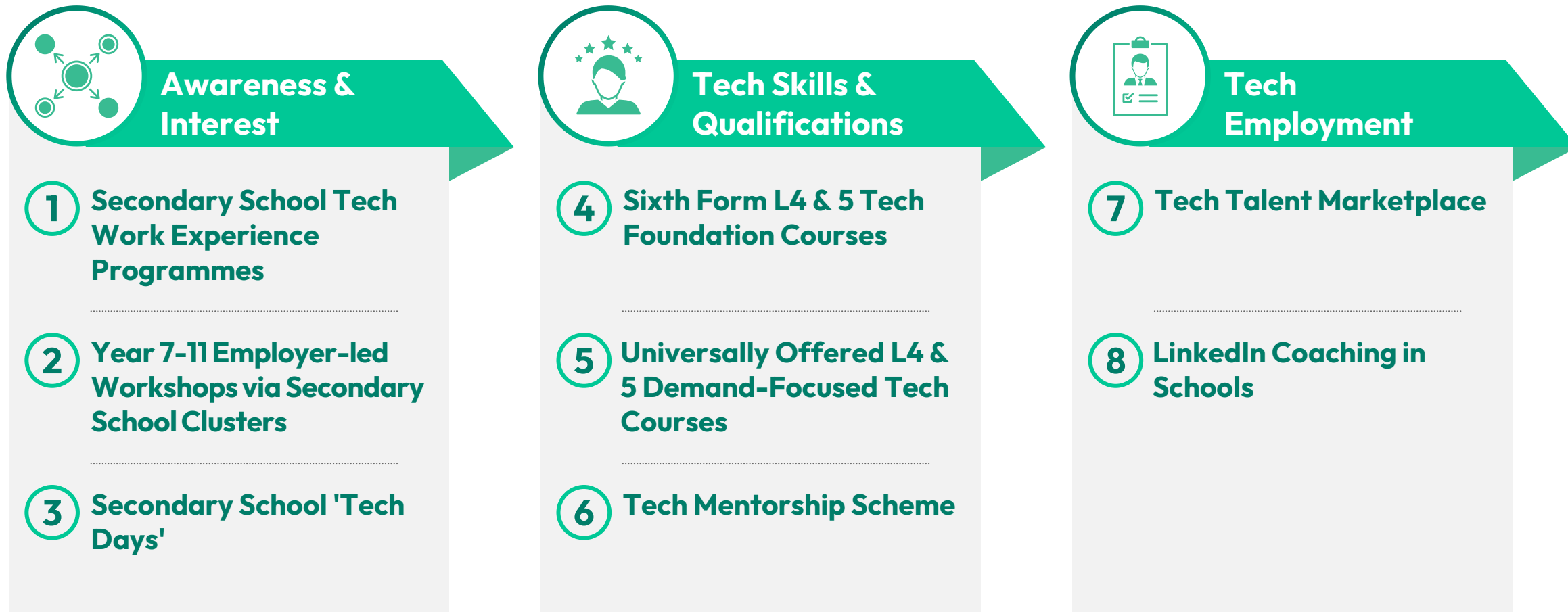
# We envisioned journeys into tech in the form of a funnel



# ...with 3 steps identified as key barriers for the South West



# The report recommended 8 initiatives across these 3 key areas of the tech talent supply funnel



# ...with 2 initiatives singled out as having the most potential in terms of impact and ease of implementation



## Awareness & Interest

- 1 Secondary School Tech Work Experience Programmes
- 2 Year 7-11 Employer-led Workshops via Secondary School Clusters
- 3 Secondary School 'Tech Days'



## Tech Skills & Qualifications

- 4 Sixth Form L4 & 5 Tech Foundation Courses
- 5 Universally Offered L4 & 5 Demand-Focused Tech Courses
- 6 Tech Mentorship Scheme



## Tech Employment

- 7 Tech Talent Marketplace
- 8 LinkedIn Coaching in Schools

# In particular, the work experience initiative proposed a centralised design to address SME prevalence in the region

## Typical Employer-Based Work Experience

Employers bring in one or more Year 10 students to their place of work

### Pros:

- Students see and experience a workplace environment

### Cons:

- Can be high workload for smaller employers
- Experiences can be not meaningful/ inspiring as employers lack time and expertise
- Low numbers of opportunities can favour students with family social connections

## Centralised Work Experience

Numerous students engage in pre-designed, immersive projects led by employers or social enterprises at a centralised location

### Pros:

- Enables well-designed programmes while being less demanding on smaller employers
- Can target students from under-resourced backgrounds, supporting social mobility

### Cons:

- Students don't experience being in a workplace environment

# The report was launched with a successful regional roundtable event to move the recommendations forward



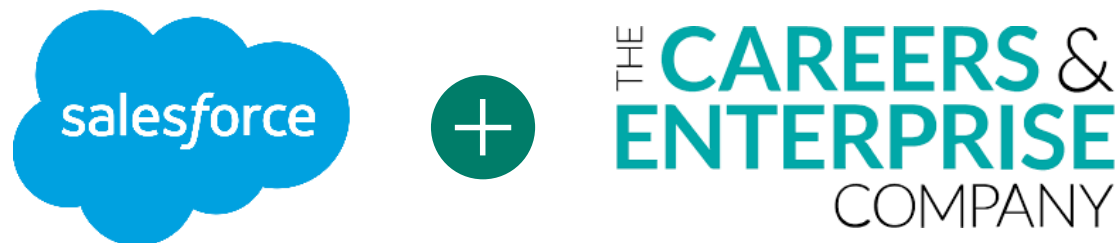
"I'm thrilled about the potential to connect the dots and **advance initiatives in a strategic manner**"

"The level of engagement in the room is amazing to see. **It's time to take action** and then evaluate our progress as we move forward"

"The prospect of providing **work experience for Year 10 students is exciting**"

# We also supported Cornwall & Devon Careers Hubs to win £125k in funding to deliver the 2 recommended initiatives

SalesForce & The Careers & Enterprise Company released a £1M fund to improve digital pathways



**Objective:** To develop innovative and systemic approaches that remove the barriers that young people face to taking up apprenticeship and technical education pathways into digital jobs, prioritising socio-economically disadvantaged young people

We supported Cornwall & Devon to be 1 of 5 (out of 50) Career Hubs to secure funding



**£125k won**

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# The Tech Frontier report has directly influenced 2 exciting programmes that will impact on thousands of young lives over the coming years

## 'IntoTech' programme



**The Hg  
Foundation**

## CEC / Salesforce pilot



**Devon, Plymouth  
& Torbay**  
CAREERS HUB

THE **CAREERS &  
ENTERPRISE**  
COMPANY



# Speakers for Schools' 'IntoTech' programme will deliver 60,000+ opportunities over 5 years

*Autumn 2024 – Summer 2029*

**Pilot Year: Trialling**

**10,000+**

*Opportunities  
for Young  
People*

**Years 2 – 5: Scaling**

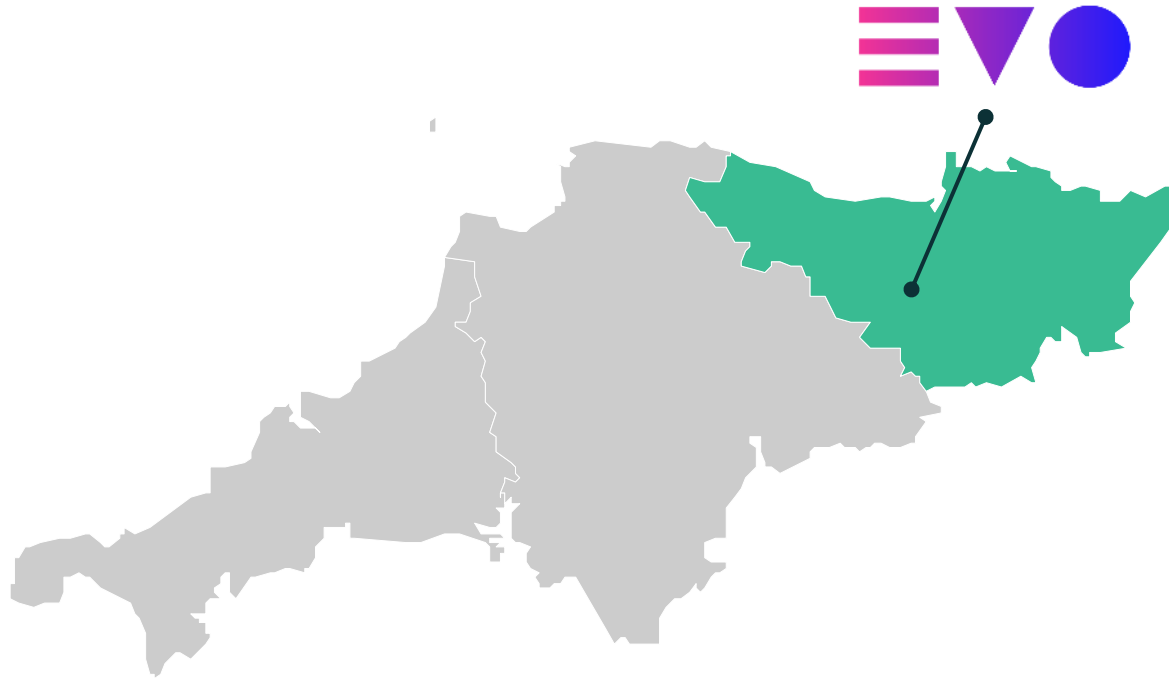
**50,000+**

*Opportunities  
for Young  
People*

- **National tech programme for 12 to 16-year-olds** with ~£2.5M delivery costs co-funded by The Hg Foundation and Speakers for Schools
- Aims to **engage and inspire under-represented students** – with a focus on girls and those from disadvantaged backgrounds
- IntoTech will **demystify the tech industry**, showcase tech careers and highlight the pathways and skills needed to enter the tech workforce
- **Blend of interventions** includes inspirational activities, work experiences and access to mentoring
- Gold-standard, multi-year **randomised-control trial evaluation** to measure effectiveness

# Centralised work experience is one of the programme strands and will be trialled in Somerset over 2025

Delivery of centralised work experience will be through a Somerset-based tech partner



- **4 work experience weeks**, each planning to impact **30 students**
- **Hg Foundation**, who funded The Tech Frontier project, are **continuing their funding** support for this work
- **Henry Jones**, who was previously at the South-West Social Mobility Commission and led the Tech Frontier project, has **moved to Speakers for Schools** to lead this project
- **Somerset** focus complements other tech programme delivery in the region

# Meanwhile, Cornwall & Devon Careers Hubs are delivering tech workshops and work experience to 1500+ students

*May 2024 – September 2026*



## **Secondary School Tech Workshops (*Years 9-11*)**

Innovative 2-hour tech workshops specifically targeted at each Year 9-11 group focused in geographic areas of rurality & disadvantage

**40+**

***Workshops Planned***



## **Tech Work Experience (*Year 10*)**

Centralised 1-week Year 10 tech work experience in Software Development & Network Engineering targeting those from under-resourced backgrounds

**7**

***Work Experiences Planned***



# Piloting of the tech workshops started in Autumn 2024 with promising initial results & more are planned for this term

**Year 9 workshop LightUp Lids** challenged students to programme LED lights to wear on baseball caps

**45% of participants** eligible for Free School Meals (FSM)

Of FSM-eligible students, post-workshop:

- **91% enjoyed the workshop**
- **14 p.p.** increase in **awareness of tech jobs**
- **29 p.p.** increase in **awareness of digital pathways**
- **23 p.p.** increase in **confidence working in a team**
- Essentially closing the gap on pre-workshop scores with non-FSM-eligible students



*Students participating in LightUp Lids*

**The South-West Social Mobility Commission** aims to drive transformational change in education and early career outcomes for children and young people from under-resourced backgrounds across the South-West peninsula. We can only achieve this vision through other organisations across the region working together to support all young people's life prospects. The ongoing impact of The Tech Frontier project is an example of how our work can act as a catalyst for action to create meaningful change.

**With thanks to...**

**The Hg  
Foundation**

And key supporters of the South-West Social Mobility Commission including:

Cobalt Trust • Cornwall Council • Devon County Council • Great South West • Persimmon Foundation • Somerset Council • University of Exeter



University  
of Exeter

# Appendix



# The Hg Foundation & Speakers for Schools

## The Hg Foundation



*The Hg Foundation's aim is to help under-represented groups to access high quality jobs in **tech** by supporting education and employment programmes in Europe and North America; it is solely funded by Hg Capital*



*Speakers For Schools is the UK's largest social **mobility charity** aiming to provide fair access to work experience and inspirational talks to level the playing field for 11-19-year-olds from state schools*

# The Careers & Enterprise Company

THE CAREERS &  
ENTERPRISE  
COMPANY

## Digital Futures Accelerator Fund

A Salesforce backed programme to boost access to digital apprenticeships in disadvantaged communities.



***The Careers and Enterprise Company are the national body for careers education in England, supporting schools and colleges to deliver modern 21st Century careers education***

# EVO Academy



## Overview

Evo Academy empowers young adults (16+) through specialised digital training programs designed to uplift and educate the local community.



## History

Founded by Evo Agency, a leading digital agency with over 15 years of experience, Evo Academy focuses on hands-on learning through real-world projects & collaborative assignments.



## Success

In the past year, Evo Academy engaged over 500 students through workshops & career events, with large ambitions to work with local colleges to support their students digital ambitions.



*"It is great to have the support of such a forward-thinking company like EVO and we are incredibly grateful to you and your colleagues for championing young people's development"*

**Emma Fielding, Principal, Richard Huish College**

# Tech Cornwall



## Overview

Tech Cornwall is a non-profit representing Cornwall's tech cluster, aiming to inspire the next generation and drive positive social change through tech.



## History

Founded 10 years ago, Tech Cornwall has grown from a small group to a major tech supporter, highlighted at London Tech Week 2024.



## Success

In 2023 alone, Tech Cornwall visited 50+ schools & has been recognised through numerous awards (e. g., Best Educational Activity at the Tech South West Awards in 2019).



*"Tech Cornwall's Mission to Mars work experience provides a fantastic experience for learners, offering practical key skills in programming and teamwork, which are invaluable for their future"*

**Naomi Johns, Truro and Penwith College**