



# NOCN Group Foundation



Grant Winner Celebration

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4th March 2026

# ORDER OF THE DAY

- 6:45 pm - Arrival drink
- 7:30 pm - Starters served
- 7:40 pm - Welcome to the Foundation Awards
- 8:00 pm - Main Course served
- 8:30 pm - Desserts and coffee served
- 8:40 pm - Awards ceremony
- 9:45 pm - Final remarks and close

Mercure St Paul's, Sheffield

# FOREWORD

Welcome to the first NOCN Group Foundation Awards Ceremony. Today marks an exciting milestone as we celebrate the inaugural cycle of the Foundation's Skills Innovation Grant Programme.

As Chief Executive of Learning and Work Institute and a Trustee of NOCN Group, I see every day the scale of the employment and skills challenges facing individuals, employers and communities. I also see the difference great learning provision and professionals make, helping people change their lives and employers to meet their skills needs. The proposals we reviewed this year reflect those realities clearly, especially the need to support people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), to build essential green skills, and to help learners adapt to rapid technological change.

This first grant cycle saw an impressive response, and we are delighted to award nine grants to projects that demonstrate real ambition, creativity and a commitment to delivering measurable impact for learners and communities. The quality of applications has set a high benchmark and made this first year truly inspiring.

Importantly, the NOCN Foundation Grants are intended to become a long-term, legacy-building initiative. We will continue to develop and strengthen the programme in future years, expanding its reach and deepening its impact.

Although I'm unable to join you in person today, I hope you enjoy the celebration and feel energised by the work of our grant recipients as they begin their projects. On behalf of the Foundation Committee, thank you to all applicants for their and vision, and warm congratulations to this year's awardees.

*Stephen Evans,  
Chair of the NOCN Group Foundation Committee*



# GRANT OBJECTIVES AND THEMES

Applicants must align their proposals to one or more of the following themes:

- Reaching and engaging hard-to-reach NEETs (16-24 year olds Not in Education, Employment or Training)
- Innovative and impactful approaches to Green Skills retraining
- Innovative use of technology in engagement, learning or assessment

Projects should demonstrate the use of innovative approaches, potential for scale, and the potential for measurable impact.





# COMMITTEE MEMBERS



Stephen Evans (Chair)  
Chief Executive of Learning & Work Institute  
Trustee of NOCN Group



Hannah Horne  
Head of Policy for Civil Service  
Transformation in the Cabinet Office  
Trustee of NOCN Group



Mike Blakeley  
Executive Director of Apprenticeships and  
Future Skills at Exeter College  
Charitable Member of NOCN Group



Martin Flynn  
Chief Executive Officer at OCNNI  
Charitable Member of NOCN Group



Natalie King  
Managing Director and Principal at AccXel  
Charitable Member of NOCN Group



Martyn Price MBE  
Chairman of Constructure  
Charitable Member of NOCN Group





# SKILLS INNOVATION FUND 2026 GRANTEES

## **City of Liverpool College: English Literacy Innovation**

The City of Liverpool College will pilot a personalised AI Literacy Assistant to support over 2,200 GCSE English resit learners. The tool provides adaptive diagnostics and targeted skills remediation to improve sentence structure, paragraphing and evidence-use—core competencies that limit exam performance. By shifting foundational literacy practice outside the classroom, teachers can focus on exam-specific coaching. The project aims to raise skills proficiency, increase confidence, and ultimately improve GCSE outcomes while creating an evidence-based model scalable across FE providers.

## **Bedford College: VR for Green Skills**

Bedford College proposes an immersive VR-based training model focused on renewable energy installation and sustainable construction methods. Using virtual reality simulations, learners—including NEETs, adults and 16–18 cohorts—will practise tasks such as heat pump fitting, solar panel installation, and eco-construction techniques in a safe, resource-efficient environment. The aim is to reduce barriers to participation, increase technical confidence, and align training with emerging labour market demand for green technologies. Via employer co-design and data-driven assessment, the programme intends to improve job-readiness, expand access to green careers, and establish Bedford College as a leader in technology-enhanced vocational education.

## **Chameleon School of Construction: Green Skills**

The Chameleon School of Construction aims to create a dedicated green skills and retrofit training hub across its four Midlands centres. The project will install mobile retrofit demonstration units that provide practical, hands-on experience in insulation, ventilation, and modern energy-efficiency systems. Alongside this, a train-the-trainer programme and recruitment of specialist staff will embed sustainable construction skills across delivery. The proposal addresses the national shortage of retrofit professionals by equipping learners, tradespeople, and staff with essential skills aligned with Net Zero targets. It aims to boost regional workforce capacity, strengthen employer collaboration, and ensure long-term sustainability through reusable equipment and integrated curriculum development.

## **Handcrafted: A Hope and A Future**

Handcrafted is a charity providing housing, support, training and opportunities to connect with excluded people in society. They proposed a two-year personalised training and employment pathway for care-experienced 16–24-year-olds who are NEET. The project adapts existing NOCN courses into flexible modules tailored to individual needs, supported by digital learner logs, one-to-one coaching and trauma-informed practice. Learners complete Entry Level 3 and Level 1 certificates alongside volunteering and paid work placements within Handcrafted's community café. The aim is to remove barriers caused by instability, mental-health challenges and irregular attendance, building confidence, employability and long-term progression into education, training or work.

## **Volunteer It Yourself: Pickle Factory Retrofit**

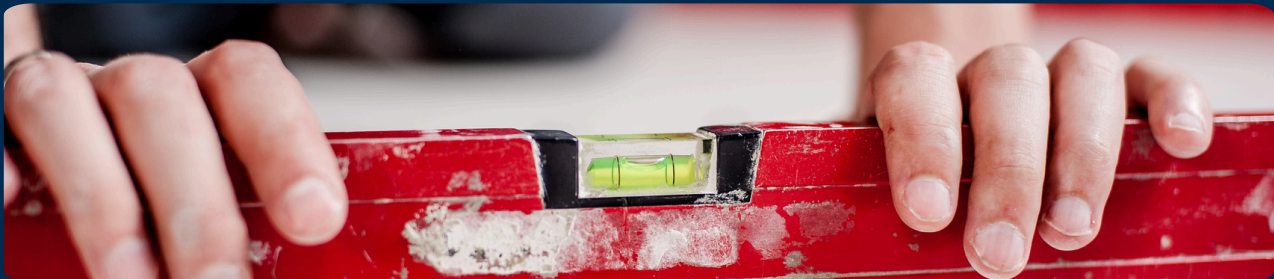
Volunteer It Yourself encourages young people to take part as volunteers in local regeneration and community projects. They will retrofit and improve the energy efficiency of the Pickle Factory community venue while engaging 15 disadvantaged young people who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET. Participants work alongside professional trades mentors carrying out insulation, reconfiguring spaces, cladding and other green improvements. The project aims to develop vocational construction and green skills, build confidence, and support progression into employment or training. Simultaneously, it enhances a valued community asset, reducing running costs and enabling expanded services for the local area.

## The Sheffield College: Eco House

The Sheffield College proposes the Eco House, an interactive teaching tool that demonstrates clean-energy systems—solar PV, heat pumps, insulation, and ventilation—within a realistic home environment. The project aims to improve understanding of green technologies among young learners, NEETs and adults, helping them connect complex low-carbon concepts to real jobs and career pathways. A complementary Green Skills Advocate Programme will train staff and partners to promote green careers region-wide. By providing hands-on insight and regional labour-market knowledge, the project strengthens South Yorkshire’s capacity to meet Net Zero goals and supports long-term green-skills awareness and progression.

## HETA: Virtual IAG Mentors

HETA (Humberside Engineering Training Association) aims to develop AI-generated Virtual Information, Advice and Guidance Mentors to support learners across the full apprenticeship lifecycle. These digital mentors—modelled on real staff roles—will deliver consistent, scenario-based guidance on workplace expectations, wellbeing, progression and assessment preparation. Accessible via mobile scanning of interactive artwork or online platforms, the project seeks to address gaps in careers guidance, improve retention, strengthen employer alignment, and create a scalable model for sector-wide implementation.



## **O'Halloran & O'Brien: Foundations to Futures**

O'Halloran & O'Brien provides complex, multi-disciplinary project delivery across the infrastructure and construction sectors. Foundations to Futures provides a structured pathway helping NEET young people and unemployed adults into construction careers. The programme combines a two-week pre-employment bootcamp—including CSCS preparation, NOCN-accredited training and employability skills—with real on-site work experience and guaranteed interviews. The aim is to tackle industry skills shortages, increase workforce diversity and link learners directly to live vacancies. Employer-led curriculum design ensures training is aligned to current sector needs and improves the likelihood of sustained employment.

## **Frameworks Training: Modern Methods of Construction**

Frameworks Training proposes a programme for NEET young people in Salford, combining workshop-based modules and site-based learning centred on modern construction methods such as brick-slip installation, spray plastering, spray painting and fire stopping. Developed with a major local contractor, the programme addresses gaps not met by existing apprenticeships and aims to create real employment opportunities in high-growth specialist areas. It seeks to reduce NEET levels locally while meeting supply-chain workforce needs.





# CONTACT



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