



## EVENT BRIEFING

# Rising Together

*Opportunity, Skills and the Route into Work in Thurrock*

*A community event hosted by IQUK College, bringing higher education, employers, local government and community organisations together with the people of Thurrock – to open real routes into work and let those closest to the journey tell it in their own words.*

**Friday 10 July 2026 · 3:00pm to 5:00pm**

*Networking and refreshments to follow from 5:00pm*

**IQUK College, Queensgate Centre, Orsett Road, Grays, Thurrock, RM17 5DF**

Prepared by IQUK College for our guest speakers and panellists · July 2026

---

## Event at a Glance

---

<b>Event title</b>	Rising Together – Opportunity, Skills and the Road into Work in Thurrock
<b>Host</b>	IQUK College, in partnership with Buckinghamshire New University
<b>Date and time</b>	Friday 10 July 2026, 3:00pm to 5:00pm
<b>Reception</b>	Networking and refreshments from 5:00pm
<b>Venue</b>	IQUK College, Queensgate Centre, Orsett Road, Grays, Thurrock, RM17 5DF
<b>Format</b>	Student and community voices, a professionally moderated panel discussion, and dedicated moments for the audience to contribute, closing with a look at an idea IQUK is developing for the borough
<b>Principal speakers</b>	Jen Craft MP (Thurrock) and Professor Sarah Williams, Pro Vice-Chancellor (External Collaborations), Buckinghamshire New University
<b>Panellists</b>	Senior representatives from Thurrock Council, DP World, Thames Freeport, One Community Development and Thurrock CVS
<b>Audience</b>	Residents seeking a route into work, adult learners, mature returners and refugees, young people, employers, community organisations, and IQUK students and staff
<b>Indicative size</b>	80–120 attendees

---

## Welcome

---

Thank you for agreeing to join us for Rising Together. This briefing sets out what the event is about, why we've brought this particular group of people together, and how the afternoon will flow.

It's worth saying plainly at the outset: this isn't simply an event about IQUK. It's about bringing together the right people, organisations and ideas to help our community move forward together. By building stronger partnerships and opening up new opportunities, we believe we can collectively help more people overcome barriers, realise their potential, and build a more prosperous future for Thurrock – and that belief runs through everything that follows.

---

## Why This Event, and Why Now

---

IQUK College is a higher education provider based in Grays, delivering Buckinghamshire New University degree programmes under a franchise partnership, alongside a growing portfolio of skills, certification and employability provision. Our students are predominantly mature learners, refugees and people accessing public funds – people for whom education is not a first step but a second chance, a fresh start, or a route back to independence.

Thurrock faces a real and immediate challenge. Too many residents – young people, parents and carers, people returning to work after time away – are out of work or detached from the labour market altogether. At the same time, Thurrock is one of the most significant growth locations in the country. The Thames Freeport, DP World London Gateway, the Port of Tilbury and major regeneration schemes are creating thousands of new jobs on the borough's own doorstep. The opportunity is extraordinary, but it is not automatic – residents can only benefit if they have the skills, confidence and connections to step into those roles.

The jobs are coming. The question Rising Together exists to ask is whether local people will be ready to take them.

## At the Heart of This Event: Tackling NEET in Thurrock

If there is one issue Rising Together exists to address, it is this: too many people in our community fall into the NEET category – Not in Education, Employment or Training – and too many of them stay there for far longer than they should. This is not a footnote to today’s conversation. It is the reason the conversation is happening at all.

### Understanding the Challenge

Behind the acronym sit real people – young people who left school without a clear next step, adults who lost work and never quite found their way back, parents and carers whose responsibilities closed doors that never reopened, refugees whose qualifications and experience were never recognised in a new country, and people whose health or confidence took a hit they never fully recovered from.

Being NEET is rarely the result of a single event. It is usually several barriers stacking up at once: the cost of learning or training, a lack of confidence after time away from education or work, caring responsibilities that leave no room for a course or a commute, language and cultural barriers for new arrivals, and – just as often – the simple absence of a pathway that ever felt like it was built for them. Thurrock, in common with many areas undergoing rapid economic change, carries a higher share of residents in this position than the wider region. That gap matters more, not less, given the scale of employment growth now arriving through the Freeport, London Gateway and Tilbury. Left unaddressed, it risks becoming a missed opportunity on both sides: good jobs going unfilled while local people remain locked out of them.

### How IQUK Is Responding

This is precisely where IQUK sees its role, and it shapes everything we do. Rather than waiting for people to arrive at a traditional academic starting point, we have built our provision around removing the barriers that keep people NEET in the first place:

- Accessible entry points into education that don’t require a traditional academic background or a conventional route in.
- Certified, modular pathways – through our BNU degree programmes and our LRN and CMI qualifications – that let people build skills and confidence in manageable steps rather than one large leap.
- Wraparound, flexible support that recognises the practical realities of adult life – caring responsibilities, financial pressure, and starting again after a gap.
- Direct connections to the employers creating jobs on our doorstep, so that a qualification leads somewhere real rather than sitting on a shelf.
- Active support for entrepreneurship and self-employment, for residents whose route back in looks less like a job application and more like building something of their own.

It is also why we are developing the Incubation Hub concept discussed later in this briefing, and why we have built today’s event around this particular group of people. Genuine progress on NEET requires education providers, employers, local government and community organisations working from the same page, not in isolation – which is exactly what we’re asking of everyone in the room this afternoon. We don’t see this as a gap in the market we’ve stumbled upon. It is our mission, and every strand of today’s conversation – from student stories to the panel discussion to the Incubation Hub – comes back to it.

*Rising Together is, at its core, an event about moving people out of the NEET category and into education, skills, employment or enterprise – and about the shared responsibility of everyone in this room to help make that happen.*

## The Theme

---

For many people in Thurrock, the door to work and opportunity has been closed – by a lack of experience or qualifications, by cost, by caring responsibilities, by health, by a loss of confidence, or by a labour market that never quite offered a way in. Rising Together is about how that door opens again, and about what a community can achieve when education, employers, local government and residents rise together, at the very moment the local economy is creating new reasons to walk through it.

Rather than framing the conversation around deprivation or deficit, the emphasis throughout is on resilience, aspiration and practical outcomes. The discussion explores this through three connected strands, each of which speaks directly to the NEET challenge above.

- Education and certification as a route into work – how accessible learning, professional certification and higher education open genuine doors into employment for people who have been out of work or previously excluded.
- The local picture – the barriers facing Thurrock residents, set against the opportunities created by the Freeport, London Gateway, Tilbury and local regeneration, and how that opportunity can be channelled into real jobs for local people.
- Skills, enterprise and what happens next – digital skills, employability, confidence-building, self-employment, and the practical local support that turns intent into a job or a business.

*The discussion keeps returning to one practical question: what real routes into work and opportunity exist for local people, and how do they access them.*

## A Partnership With Real Purpose

---

At its heart, this event is about helping people rise – not just IQUK as an institution, but our community as a whole. We genuinely believe that when education providers, employers, community organisations and public bodies come together with a shared purpose, they create opportunities that no single organisation could achieve alone. A rising community lays the foundation for a stronger, more prosperous future, and that is the message we hope everyone in the room leaves with.

Each organisation joining us brings a distinct and complementary perspective:

- Buckinghamshire New University – higher education, widening participation and progression routes for adult learners.
- Thurrock Council – local priorities, regeneration and supporting residents into education and employment.
- DP World – careers in logistics and global trade, and the future employer perspective on skills.
- Thames Freeport – regional investment, economic growth and the jobs of tomorrow.
- One Community Development – community resilience and removing barriers to opportunity.
- Thurrock CVS – the voluntary sector's role in supporting vulnerable people and strengthening local networks.

Bringing this range of expertise into one conversation is deliberate: our aim is to open doors, spark new ideas, and identify practical opportunities for our students and the wider community that none of us could unlock working alone.

---

## A Conversation for Everyone

---

We want everyone in the room this afternoon – whoever they are and whatever brought them here – to feel there is something relevant for them. Whether someone's interest lies in education, politics, careers, entrepreneurship, community development or skills, the conversation is designed to connect all of these threads together rather than treat them as separate conversations happening to sit in the same room.

That is deliberate. Creating opportunity for people who have faced barriers is not a job for any one sector – it takes educators, employers, policymakers, community organisations and local businesses pulling in the same direction. Today's panel reflects that on purpose, and we hope the discussion demonstrates, in practice, what shared responsibility for opportunity actually looks like.

---

## Our Speakers and Panellists

---

### **Jen Craft MP – Member of Parliament for Thurrock**

Jen Craft brings the local and policy lens: the lived realities of Thurrock residents, the local labour market, employment rights, SEND provision, and the channelling of government investment into community benefit. She grew up in Grays, and is the carer of a child with Down syndrome – she is not a distant political figure to our students, but a neighbour who has navigated many of the same systems. She sits on the Health and Social Care Committee and has been a consistent voice for adult skills investment, SEND reform and support for families facing barriers to work.

### **Professor Sarah Williams – Pro Vice-Chancellor (External Collaborations), Buckinghamshire New University**

Professor Williams brings the higher education and academic lens: widening participation, lifelong learning, and the strategic role of partnership in transforming communities. Her remit at BNU is precisely to build and sustain franchise partnerships like the one IQUK represents, and her published research explores the lived experiences of women and marginalised practitioners in professional life – a perspective that speaks directly to many of our students' own journeys.

### **Thurrock Council**

A senior representative will bring the local government perspective – regeneration, community investment, and the council's priorities for helping residents into education and employment as Thurrock's economy grows.

### **DP World**

A senior representative from DP World London Gateway will bring the employer perspective from the heart of the Freeport – the scale of opportunity in logistics and global trade, and what the workforce of the future will need to look like.

### **Thames Freeport**

A senior representative will speak to the wider growth story – the investment, infrastructure and green industries driving job creation across the region, and the skills that will be needed to deliver it.

---

## One Community Development

A senior representative will bring the community development perspective – building resilience, removing barriers to opportunity, and what genuine partnership working looks like on the ground.

### Thurrock CVS

A senior representative will speak for the borough's voluntary and community sector – the role of volunteering, community collaboration, and supporting the residents who need it most.

---

## Your Voice in the Room

Rising Together is deliberately not a speaker-led afternoon. Alongside the panel, we've built in dedicated moments for the audience itself to become part of the conversation – because the people best placed to speak to the reality of barriers into education and employment are often sitting in the room, not on the stage.

### Student Voices

Two to three IQUK students open the substantive part of the afternoon by sharing their own stories in their own words – real accounts, no slides, no polish for its own sake. Their experiences of returning to education, rebuilding confidence and finding a way back into work sit at the centre of everything the panel goes on to discuss.

### Community Voices

Later in the programme, we open the floor specifically to members of the audience – local residents, learners, and family members – who wish to briefly share their own experience: a barrier they've faced getting into education or work, or a moment where IQUK or a partner organisation made a real difference. These are not scripted testimonials; they are genuine reflections from the community the event exists to serve, and they tend to be the moments that stay with people longest.

---

## The Commitment Moment

Ahead of the closing remarks, each guest speaker is invited to write – by hand, on a card – one personal commitment to a student in the room. The commitment is read aloud and handed directly to that student. It's a small piece of theatre, deliberately so: a public, personal, witnessed commitment to a person rather than an institution.

---

## An Idea We Are Developing: The IQUK Incubation Hub

Rising Together is not only a conversation. It is also a chance to share an idea IQUK College is developing: an Incubation Hub in Thurrock, designed to help local people get into work and start something of their own. The thinking is simple – a single, accessible local front door bringing education, certification, employability support and enterprise help together in one place, connecting people directly to the employers and jobs being created across the borough.

This isn't a finished plan – it's an open invitation. We are sharing it early and openly because we want to build it with the partners in this room, so that it reflects what Thurrock genuinely needs.

---

## Discussion Questions for Each Speaker and Panellist

---

These questions are shared in advance so you have time to think them through – the session is a guided conversation rather than a script, and the moderator will draw on these naturally rather than working through them as a checklist. Feel free to challenge, build on, or push back against one another; a lively exchange is far more useful to everyone in the room than polite agreement.

### Principal Speakers & Panellists

#### Jen Craft MP

*Member of Parliament for Thurrock*

Social mobility, government priorities on education and skills, reducing barriers to employment, local investment and the future of work in Thurrock.

- What does social mobility actually look like for a Thurrock resident today, and how far do you think we still are from making it a reality for everyone who wants it?
- Where do you see the biggest gap between government priorities on skills and education, and what residents in Thurrock are actually experiencing day to day?
- With so much investment arriving through the Freeport and regeneration, how do we make sure the benefit reaches people who are currently NEET, rather than passing them by?
- What more could apprenticeships and vocational routes do for adults who left education years ago, rather than only school leavers?
- What has to change – in policy or in practice – to genuinely reduce the barriers facing disadvantaged communities in Thurrock?
- How should public bodies, private employers and education providers work together differently to create meaningful opportunity, rather than each pursuing their own agenda?
- If you could describe your vision for Thurrock in ten years' time, what would have to be true for you to call it a success?

#### Professor Sarah Williams

*Pro Vice-Chancellor (External Collaborations), Buckinghamshire New University*

Widening participation, lifelong learning, adult education, employability, university partnerships and innovation in higher education.

- What does “widening participation” actually look like in practice for an adult learner who left school with nothing to show for it – and what still gets in the way?
- Higher education has traditionally been built around 18-year-olds moving from school to campus. How does that model need to change to genuinely serve mature learners and returners?
- What is BNU learning from partnerships like the one with IQUK that it couldn't learn from its main campus alone?
- How should universities think differently about lifelong learning, rather than treating a degree as a single, one-off event in someone's twenties?
- As the labour market shifts, what should “progression” and “employability” mean for someone who isn't aiming for a traditional degree pathway?
- What role can innovation in higher education – new formats, modular study, flexible delivery – play in reaching people who have previously been excluded?
- What would you want employers and policymakers in this room to understand better about what it actually takes to prepare learners for a fast-evolving job market?

### Panellists

#### Thurrock Council

---

*Senior Representative*

Local priorities, regeneration, community engagement and tackling inequality.

- With so much investment arriving through the Freeport and regeneration schemes, what is the Council doing to make sure local residents – not just local jobs – benefit first?
- What does the Council see as the biggest barrier standing between a resident who is NEET and a genuine route into work?
- How does the Council want to work with organisations like IQUK, and what would make that partnership more effective?
- What would success look like for Thurrock's residents in five years' time, and what has to happen between now and then to get there?

## DP World

*Senior Representative*

Careers in logistics and global trade, future workforce needs, automation, skills shortages and employer expectations.

- As automation changes what a logistics career looks like, what skills should a young person or career-changer in Thurrock actually be building right now?
- What does DP World look for in a candidate that traditional qualifications alone don't capture – and how should education providers respond to that?
- Where are the current skills shortages within the business, and what would it take for local training providers to help close them?
- What would make it easier for DP World to recruit directly from communities like the ones IQUK serves?

## Thames Freeport

*Senior Representative*

Regional investment, economic growth, infrastructure, green industries, innovation and future workforce skills.

- How many jobs, realistically, is the Freeport expecting to create in Thurrock over the next five years, and what kinds of roles will they be?
- As green industries and innovation become a bigger part of the Freeport's story, what new skills will the local workforce need that don't exist in Thurrock today?
- What role should local colleges and training providers play in the Freeport's growth, rather than being an afterthought to it?
- What is the single biggest risk to local people missing out on the opportunities the Freeport is creating?

## One Community Development

*Senior Representative*

Community resilience, supporting disadvantaged groups, removing barriers to opportunity and partnership working.

- What does "removing barriers to opportunity" mean in practical terms for someone who feels the system was never built for them?
- What have you learned about what genuinely builds community resilience, versus what just looks good on paper?
- Where has partnership working between community organisations, education and employers gone right – and where has it gone wrong – in Thurrock?
- What would you want employers and institutions in this room to understand better about the communities you work with?

## Thurrock CVS

*Senior Representative*

The role of the voluntary sector, community collaboration, volunteering and supporting vulnerable people.

- What is the voluntary sector seeing on the ground in Thurrock that doesn't always show up in official statistics?

- How can volunteering itself act as a route back into confidence, skills and eventually paid work for someone who has been out of the labour market for a long time?
- What would stronger collaboration between the voluntary sector, education providers and employers actually look like in practice?
- What support do the most vulnerable residents need that currently falls through the gaps between organisations?

## Outline Programme

The event will run from 3:00pm to 5:00pm, beginning with guest arrival, welcome remarks and opening reflections from our keynote speakers. Attendees will then hear from learners before moving into a moderated panel discussion, followed by a moderated Q&A, closing reflections, photography and a networking reception with refreshments.

Time	Item
3:00-3:15pm	<b>Guest Arrival</b> – Arrival of guests, informal introductions and refreshments.
3:15-3:30pm	<b>Welcome and Opening Remarks</b> – Welcome from IQUK College, setting the scene for <i>Rising Together</i> and introducing the purpose and vision behind the event.
3:30-3:40pm	<b>Student &amp; Community Voices</b> – Learners share their personal journeys, the challenges they've overcome and how education has helped them access new opportunities.
3:40-4:20pm	<b>Moderated Panel Discussion</b> - The moderator poses a series of carefully selected questions to the panellists, reflecting the themes and issues most relevant to learners, employers and the local community, with a focus on practical solutions and future opportunities.
4:20-4:50pm	<b>Moderated Q&amp;A</b> – The moderator poses a series of carefully selected questions to the panellists, drawing out practical insights, future opportunities and ideas for strengthening pathways into education and employment.
4:57-5:00pm	<b>Closing Reflections</b> – Final thoughts from the panel, followed by closing remarks from IQUK College.
5:00pm onwards	<b>Networking Reception</b> – Refreshments and an opportunity for guests to continue conversations and build new connections.

## Looking Ahead

However the conversation on the day unfolds, we hope one message comes through clearly: this is not an event about any single organisation. It is about what becomes possible when education providers, employers, policymakers, community organisations and local businesses decide that creating opportunity is a shared responsibility – and act like it. A rising community lays the foundation for a stronger, more prosperous Thurrock, and we're glad you're part of building it with us.

## Getting in Touch

If you have any questions ahead of the event, or need to confirm arrival arrangements, please contact Haseeb Ahmed at [haseeb.ahmed@iquk.ac.uk](mailto:haseeb.ahmed@iquk.ac.uk).

*IQUK College is proud to host Rising Together, and we're genuinely grateful you're part of it. We look forward to welcoming you.*