

## What next for skills?

The chancellor delivered his budget speech on 27 October 2021 and released the three-year comprehensive spending review. An inexperienced listener may have concluded that we are looking at a golden new age for further education and skills with the following announcements:

- £1.6bn to roll out new T-levels for 16 to 19-year-olds over the next 3 years
- £550m for adult skills in England
- £830m to continue a five-year-scheme to revamp and modernise colleges
- £170m for apprenticeships and training

UNISON members in further education and sixth form colleges will no doubt see things very differently. Having been on the end of savage cuts since 2010 which has seen funding in colleges reduced to just two thirds of what it was ten years ago and adult education funding more than halved, they know that this extra money, whilst welcome, does not even come close to reversing this lost decade.

Recently skills shortages have been brought into sharp relief as shelves and petrol pumps have stood empty. Colleges are at the forefront of delivering skills and we are now seeing how cuts to this sector are impacting on the whole economy.

This year UNISON members are campaigning to increase funding for adult education. The £550m announced is to fund short courses and so-called "skills boot camps" for adults who have no qualifications beyond GCSE level. But colleges need to be well staffed to deliver these courses and for this the government needs to put funding into colleges that will give staff a decent income, a decent work-life balance, and a reason to stay in the sector. The spending review remains deathly quiet on this.

According to the Learning and Work Institute another £750 million is needed on top of the announcements made just to return funding to 2010 levels – hardly a 'skills revolution'.

All things considered – it's a start. The government has finally woken up to the problem of skills shortages but has not yet woken up to the need to pay the staff who deliver the skills fairly. Until they do colleges will be understaffed – there is only so much that staff in the sector can take.