



AoC HR and Employment Law Conference and Exhibition 2026

Thursday 8 October, 9.30am - 4.30pm
Holiday Inn Bloomsbury, Coram St
London WC1N 1HT



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AoC HR and Employment Law Conference & Exhibition 2026

Programme

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09:00 Registration opens, refreshments served with exhibitors

Location: Booker and Turner Foyer

10:00 Chair's introduction and welcome

Neil Coker, Principal, Barnet and Southgate College

Location: Booker and Turner Suite

10:10 What's next for colleges: The changing policy landscape

David Hughes CBE, Chief Executive, Association of Colleges

10:30 Questions

10:35 Preparing for the new era of employment rights

Joanne Moseley, Legal Director and Lead Practice Development Lawyer (Employment), Irwin Mitchell

The ERA 2025 is reshaping the employment law landscape, with the most significant reforms due to take effect over the next 6-18 months. This session will focus on third-party harassment, the six-month qualifying period for unfair dismissal, increased trade union rights and changes to how employers will have to manage staff on zero and low-hours contracts.

Alongside these reforms, colleges are seeing a rise in AI-generated grievances, while proposed changes to the Acas Code will put more emphasis on informal resolution. You'll leave with a clear understanding of what is already in force and the practical steps colleges should take to prepare for what's coming.

11:05 Questions

11:15 Exhibition, refreshments and networking

Location: Booker and Turner Foyer

11:50 Breakout session strand one

Delegates should select to attend one of the following sessions

1.1 Building the FE workforce of tomorrow

Panel members: Kerry Hickmott, Chief People Officer, EKC Group

Andrew Lees, Director of HR, Hugh Baird College

Sam Perkins, Head of Resourcing and Staff Development, EKC Group

Hayley Shaw, Director of People Services, City of Bristol College

How can colleges attract talented people into FE and develop them to thrive? This panel session brings together leaders from across the sector to share successful approaches to tackling workforce challenges. From graduate programmes supporting hard-to-fill curriculum areas, to helping industry professionals transition into teaching, and developing future managers through leadership academies, panellists will discuss practical strategies that are creating sustainable talent pipelines and strengthening the FE workforce for the future.

1.2 Changing industrial relations landscape

Evan Williams, Head of Industrial Relations, Association of Colleges

Kirsty Watt, Director of Strategy and External Affairs, Acas

Further speakers invited

In this interactive panel session, delegates will explore how relationships between colleges and trade unions have changed over time, examine the impact of emerging legislation, and consider the practical realities facing HR professionals today. Featuring insights from the Association of Colleges, ACAS and employment law specialists, the session will discuss how to build constructive partnerships, manage challenging situations when agreement cannot be reached, understand when external support may be needed, and prepare for the changing industrial relations environment ahead.

1.3 When AI writes the grievance: Untangling complaints and tribunal claims in the age of generative AI

Matthew Kelly, Partner, Eversheds Sutherland

Ben Wood, Partner, Eversheds Sutherland

Staff are increasingly turning to AI tools to draft grievances, complaints, and tribunal claims, producing submissions that are lengthy, densely worded, and often impossible to unpick, even for the staff member who submitted them. Colleges are left trying to identify the real issue buried beneath AI-generated text, slowing resolution, straining HR and ER resources, and adding pressure to already stretched teams.

This session explores what's driving the trend, the practical and legal challenges it creates for grievance-handling and tribunal defence, and how colleges can adapt policies, procedures, and staff training to respond effectively, without losing sight of genuine concerns raised by employees.

12:50 Lunch and networking

Location: The Junction Restaurant

13:40 Chairs welcome back

Neil Coker, Principal, Barnet and Southgate College

Location: Booker and Turner Suite

13:45 AI in FE Recruitment: To Automate, or Not to Automate? That Is the Question

Matthew Walker, Education Consultant, Talos360

AI promises faster hiring, less admin and smarter decisions, but how much should we really hand over to technology? In a sector already struggling to attract hard-to-find talent, the answer isn't to automate people out of recruitment. It's to use AI where it adds value, while keeping human judgement firmly in control. This session explores where AI can genuinely save time, improve consistency and reveal better recruitment insights, and where HR leaders should draw the line.

13:55 Staying well when the work's never done

Faye McGuinness, Director of Programmes, Education Support

This keynote will provide an opportunity for delegates to pause, reflect and think about staying well at work. Education Support will share some practical tools for delegates to use when considering their own personal wellbeing, whilst also recognising the importance of paying attention to wellbeing at an organisational and system level.

14:20 Harnessing the power of neurodiversity

Dr. Louise Karwowski, Founder and Lead Neuro-Inclusion Strategist, Bright Brain Consultancy

What if one of the greatest strengths in our colleges is hiding in plain sight? As workforce pressures intensify and the profile of learners continues to evolve, the colleges that thrive will be those that know how to attract, develop and retain diverse talent. This keynote explores why neuro-inclusion is an environmental issue, why neurodiverse colleagues represent one of the sector's greatest untapped assets, and how creating workplaces where different minds can thrive can unlock innovation, strengthen culture and tackle recruitment and retention challenges. Because the future won't belong to organisations that expect everyone to fit in. It will belong to those that understand how to harness the power of different minds.

14:45 Questions for the afternoon speakers

14:55 Refreshment break

Location: Booker and Turner Foyer

15:15 Breakout session strand two

Delegates should select to attend one of the following sessions

2.1 From 'falling into it' to flourishing: Developing FE's future managers

Dr. Kerrie Howard, Director of Student Placements Associate Professor, Department of Human Resource Management and Organization Studies, Royal Holloway, University of London

Gerard Garvey, Executive Principal (People and Culture), NCG Group

Too many middle managers find themselves navigating the move into management with limited induction, inconsistent development and no clear career pathway. Drawing on emerging research into career progression in FE, Dr Kerrie Howard will explore what helps—or hinders—people to develop and thrive as managers, including the crucial role of line managers, mentors and workplace relationships. Gerard Garvey will bring the research to life by sharing NCG Group's approach to developing and supporting its future managers.

2.2 Reward and recognition – Transforming an employee value proposition

Jan Hutt, Deputy Principal - People and Culture, Northampton College

Suzanne Daley, Reward Consultant, ECC Ltd

How Northampton College invested in the current and future staff community by developing a sustainable, equitable and competitive pay structure, as part of a broader employee engagement strategy, to enhance the College's ability to successfully recruit and retain staff committed to an ethos of excellence and the continued provision of innovative Professional Services and high-quality teaching, learning and support for students; thus improving the College's ability to respond to the year-on-year increases in our community members seeking access the College's curriculum offering, and providing greater life opportunities for thousands more people in our local communities.

2.3 Can they say that? Real-life freedom of speech dilemmas for colleges

Joanne Moseley, Legal Director and Lead Practice Development Lawyer (Employment), Irwin Mitchell

Alexandra Addington, Practice Development Lawyer (Employment), Irwin Mitchell

Colleges are operating in an increasingly polarised environment, where disagreements about politics, identity, religion, international conflicts and social issues can quickly spill into the workplace, the classroom and online spaces. For HR leaders, navigating these issues requires carefully balancing freedom of expression, complying with legal obligations and maintaining a respectful and inclusive environment. Striking that balance is challenging.

This session will examine practical dilemmas involving staff networks, student and staff activism, social media activity and third-party harassment. Through a series of real-life scenarios, we'll explore how colleges can respond when competing rights, opposing viewpoints and workplace tensions collide.

16:15 [Conference close](#)