



**Provider
Networks
Community
of Practice**
*Championing Collaboration
Across Provider Networks*



**Department
for Work &
Pensions**

DWP Roundtable – Apprenticeship Quality & Successful Outcomes

In September we held a virtual roundtable for DWP policy colleagues, to discuss and explore apprenticeship quality and successful outcomes. We convened a group of employers, training providers and key stakeholders from across our regions (Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and Devon & Cornwall) to share their experiences, key challenges and areas of greater focus for DWP.

Findings from the breakout rooms below:



Breakout Room Summary

The overwhelming finding from the roundtable discussions is that successful apprenticeships begin long before the apprentice starts employment. Strong careers education, realistic expectations, pre-apprenticeship preparation, employer support, effective line management and sustained mentoring were consistently identified as the most significant contributors to apprentice retention and achievement.

Participants also highlighted a growing concern that many young people are entering apprenticeship recruitment processes without being fully prepared for the expectations of work, particularly in relation to communication, confidence, resilience and workplace behaviours. Employers, especially SMEs, often lack the capacity to provide the intensive support that some young people require.

The consensus was that greater investment in pre-apprenticeship programmes, mentoring and employer support could significantly improve starts, retention and achievement rates.

Key Findings



1. Poor Awareness and Careers Information Remains a Major Barrier

Many participants reported that young people struggle to understand:

- What apprenticeships are
- Where to find opportunities
- The range of careers available
- What employers actually expect

Schools were repeatedly identified as providing inconsistent and often outdated apprenticeship advice, leading to misconceptions and poor career decisions.



Implications

- Better CEIAG is required.
- Employers need stronger engagement with schools.
- Apprenticeship promotion needs to focus on realistic career pathways and opportunities.



2. Young People Need More Pre-Apprenticeship Support

Perhaps the strongest theme across all documents was the need for structured pre-apprenticeship programmes. Participants consistently highlighted that young people increasingly require support before they are ready to enter employment.

Common areas of need included:

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| • Communication skills | • Resilience |
| • Confidence | • Work readiness |
| • Professional behaviours | • Interview skills |
| • Time management | • Understanding workplace expectations |

Several examples of effective pre-apprenticeship programmes were cited, including SWAP programmes and construction readiness programmes, which achieved high progression rates into employment and apprenticeships.



Implications

- Expansion of pre-apprenticeship and employability provision.
- Greater access to funding for independent training providers.
- Development of structured pathways into apprenticeships.

Key Findings



3. Unrealistic Expectations Cause Early Withdrawal

Many employers and apprentices enter programmes with unrealistic expectations about:

- The job role.
- Apprenticeship requirements.
- Off-the-job training.
- Study commitments.
- Workplace behaviours.

Participants felt that vacancy advertisements and recruitment processes often fail to present the reality of apprenticeship roles. Several contributors proposed "day in the life" content and scenario-based recruitment activities to provide greater realism.



Implications

- Better management of expectations before enrolment.
- More realistic recruitment and onboarding processes.
- Improved apprentice understanding of programme requirements.



4. Line Managers Have the Greatest Influence on Retention

Across all discussions, line managers emerged as one of the single biggest factors influencing apprentice success.

Effective line managers were described as those who:

- Hold regular meetings.
- Provide encouragement and support.
- Understand apprenticeships.
- Protect learning time.
- Create a sense of belonging.

Concerns were raised that many line managers receive little preparation or guidance regarding their apprenticeship responsibilities.



Implications

- Nationally recognised line manager training.
- Consistent resources for employers.
- Greater support for SME managers.

Key Findings



5. Mentoring and Wraparound Support Drive Success

Participants repeatedly referred to the benefits of:

- Mentors
- Buddies
- Coaches
- Skills coaches
- Peer support networks

The findings suggest apprentices thrive when they have trusted individuals available to provide practical and emotional support. This was particularly important during the first few months of employment.



Implications

- Mentor development programmes.
- Potential use of levy funding for mentor support.
- Additional funding for onboarding and pastoral support.



6. Strong Employer-Provider Partnerships Improve Outcomes

The quality of the relationship between provider and employer was consistently described as more important than the transactional delivery of training.

Effective partnerships included:

- Joint recruitment.
- Shared monitoring.
- Early intervention.
- Regular communication.
- Collaborative reviews.

Participants stressed that providers should be viewed as strategic partners rather than simply training delivery organisations.



Implications

- Greater collaboration during recruitment.
- Shared responsibility for retention.
- Improved communication systems.

Key Findings



7. SMEs Face Significant Capacity Challenges

Many challenges were amplified for small and medium-sized employers. Participants reported that SMEs often struggle with:

- Recruitment processes.
- Mentoring.
- Supporting apprentices.
- Understanding compliance requirements.
- Providing structured development opportunities.

Employers reported that the level of support required by some apprentices can be difficult to manage alongside business demands.



Implications

- Additional employer support models.
- Shared mentoring approaches.
- Enhanced provider involvement with SMEs.



8. Administrative and Compliance Burdens Need Streamlining

A common frustration was the amount of paperwork and bureaucracy associated with apprenticeships. This included:

- Applications.
- Sign-up processes.
- Off-the-job training records.
- Compliance documentation.

Participants felt these requirements could discourage both apprentices and employers



Implications

- Simplification of onboarding processes.
- Greater consistency across providers.
- Increased automation where possible.

Main Challenges Identified



The most difficult issues to address were:

- 1 Poor work readiness among some applicants.
- 2 Lack of employer capacity, particularly within SMEs.
- 3 Inconsistent careers advice in schools.
- 4 Limited funding for pre-apprenticeship activity and intensive support.
- 5 Complexity of apprenticeship systems and administration.



Key Opportunities for Improvement

The discussions identified five priority opportunities:

1

Develop a nationally supported pre-apprenticeship pathway

Providing employability, confidence-building and workplace readiness support before apprenticeship entry.

2

Invest in line manager development

Creating consistent training and support for workplace supervisors.

3

Expand mentoring provision

Providing every apprentice with a trained workplace mentor.

4

Improve employer-provider collaboration

Joint recruitment, onboarding and learner support models.

5

Increase funding for onboarding and early intervention

Particularly for providers supporting young people with significant employment readiness needs.

Overall Conclusion



The roundtable findings suggest that apprentice retention is less about the technical apprenticeship programme itself and more about preparation, support and relationships. Strong careers guidance, realistic recruitment, work-readiness programmes, effective line management, mentoring and employer-provider collaboration were identified as the key success factors. Conversely, poor preparation, unrealistic expectations, limited support capacity and inadequate funding remain the principal barriers to apprentice success.

The clearest message emerging from all three discussions is that investment in pre-apprenticeship preparation and ongoing workplace support would likely have the greatest impact on improving apprenticeship starts, retention, achievement and progression