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Apprenticeships: early feedback on delivery under the new contracts

This report is also available in Welsh.

Background and context

From August 2021, the Welsh Government has contracted 10 lead training providers to deliver apprenticeships across Wales. These lead providers work with many subcontractors and partners to deliver apprenticeship programmes.

Apprentices are employed and work in a wide range of jobs. Apprenticeships are available at level 2, level 3 and higher apprenticeship levels (level 4 and above).

Apprentices enter their training at different levels depending upon the job, their previous experience and the needs of employers. As well as developing their job-related skills in the workplace, apprentices work towards achieving a series of recognised qualifications.

Apprenticeships are open to anyone over the age of 16, including those with a disability, health condition or learning difficulty. There is no upper age limit. As apprentices are employed by the organisation in which they work, they must apply when vacancies are advertised like any other job. The employer who advertises the apprenticeship will state the qualifications, skills and experience they require.

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Introduction

Between September 2021 and July 2022, we visited each of the 10 lead training providers to consider the successes and challenges of their delivery of apprenticeship programmes in the first year of their contract. During each visit, inspectors met with leaders and managers from the lead provider and their subcontractors and with learners. Each visit culminated with verbal feedback to the lead provider and a published letter. These extended visits gave the opportunity to engage in dialogue with each provider and gain a clear understanding of the pressures and challenges the sector was under as we came out of COVID-19. Through the visits, we gained a valuable insight into how the sector was reacting to changing needs and emerging challenges.

The letters for each of the lead providers can be found on our website, on a webpage which explains more about work-based learning: [Work-based learning explained | Estyn \(gov.wales\)](#).

This report provides an overview of how apprenticeship providers have developed their practice to deliver training following the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The report captures the strengths and on-going challenges that providers and learners face. We have presented questions for consideration for providers at the end of each section to support further improvement and address some of the challenges.



Learning

During the visits, inspectors met learners in small groups, both face-to-face and remotely. They also undertook learning walks to meet learners in training centres and off-the-job training to discuss their learning and progress. It became evident in the early visits that many learners were pleased to return to face-to-face activity when undertaking off-the-job activities at college or training centres. As we continued our visits during the year, inspectors saw a reduction in the extent of online learning and, in the best cases, this mode of delivery is undertaken after consultation with learners. In a few cases, online learning is timetabled, but learners do not consider it the most effective means of delivery. In these cases, attendance of learners is low. Of those who do attend, the majority turn their cameras and sound off and do not engage in the session. As a result, no meaningful learning takes place and learners' progress is hindered. These activities also have a negative effect on learners, they often see these sessions as optional and lose motivation and ambition, especially to complete their apprenticeships within the allocated timeframes.

The success of online learning often depends on the learner, employers, type and level of apprenticeship programme. A 'one size' model of delivering online learning doesn't suit all learners and needs careful considering and planning. Most apprentices prefer face-to-face, but a few prefer online delivery and progress review meetings, especially if the apprentice lives far from the training centre, where they find it convenient to have online meetings at home or in workplace. Learners undertaking leadership and management programmes felt that their job roles and responsibilities suited remote delivery and assessment better. They also felt that they could undertake the programme around their work roles and home life.

Higher level apprentices responded more favourably to having online learning and progress review meetings online, whereas level 2 and level 3 apprentices in many of the more practical vocational and technical sectors preferred to go to college or training centres for their off-the-job training.

In a few cases employers were reluctant to allow learners to attend online learning sessions from home or the workplace. They did not understand the benefits of learning online and in a few instances, the learners were told to return to their workplace and not continue their online learning.

Most apprenticeship programmes contain a large practical element and the need to develop and demonstrate practical skills over time and these aspects still require workplace experience, supported by specialist practical workshops off-the-job. Many programmes, including electro-technical, construction and engineering also need learners to develop knowledge and understanding in theory, including mathematics. Although these components could be done online, learners feel face-to-face opportunities give them many benefits. These include accessing tutor support quickly, in a supportive environment and the opportunity to develop friendship groups and peer support. They also feel that in online sessions they do not feel confident enough to seek the support of their tutors. In most cases, they felt that the support is not individualised and tailored enough to give effective personal support. During the early visits, learners stated that online learning is less pressure for them, and they

had the opportunity to complete work in their own time, they also said it is too easy to not attend online meetings and easy to cancel. In the visits undertaken later in the year, the amount of online learning decreased significantly, and most learners had returned to face-to-face activity.

New entrants joining apprenticeship programmes often had literacy and numeracy skills below the levels of those learners who joined pre-pandemic. This was mainly due to lost learning from school or college. In a minority of cases, learners lacked confidence and resilience, but they mentioned that the personal support from their assessors and employers helped to improve their confidence and resilience. Overall, many learners strengthened their digital skills because of the need to access remote learning and use a range of computer packages to support their learning, which was a positive development.

A highly important resource in apprenticeship programmes is learners' individual learning plans (ILPs), or more importantly the content and detail stated in the documents. Too often these plans are 'generic' documents that contain basic targets for learners to complete practical assessments and written tasks. Timeframes for activities are not tailored to the learner, their employers and the assessment opportunities open to them. As a result, the plans often contain the same dates and targets for a group or cohort of learners. Providers need to place a greater focus on the 'individual' component of the plan and agree targets that support each learner's needs and their pace of learning. These plans need to be a live document with flexibility to move targets when circumstances require, however, the targets should always be robust and challenging. This point is underpinned by the fact that too many learners, especially those who were on-programme or who started their training during the pandemic, did not clearly understand their progress and what assessments they needed to do to complete their programme.

Learners who remained in the workplace during the pandemic developed practical skills at rates similar to those which would have been seen pre-pandemic. These learners completed theory tasks and examinations together with any essential off-the-job practical assessments as soon as they could when off-the-job centres re-opened. The exception to this was in the health and care sector where learners worked in particularly challenging environments with several factors affecting their opportunities to complete assessments. Although they remained in the workplace and in the most challenging environment due to restrictions, their assessors were not allowed to visit. This meant that these learners were unable to complete their assessments in a timely manner in order to achieve their apprenticeships. The awarding body made mitigations during this time to enable workplace managers to undertake witness testimony for learners to complete assessments. However, workplace managers were also under extreme pressure and, as a result, they did not have the time to undertake this form of assessment. In addition, there has been a high drop-out rate for learners in this sector. In a majority of cases, learners who left their programmes early secured employment in alternative sectors such as retail where they often had higher rates of pay and a better work-life balance.

In the workplace, learners benefitted from a wide range of training and assessment opportunities. In the best cases, learners' accessed support from experienced members of the employer's staff. In most cases, learners developed their practical skills in the workplace well. In the best cases, these skills are supported by theory

knowledge gained both on and off-the-job. Apprentices become valued members of their employer's staff and most employers recognise the contribution they make to their business. Most learners developed the skills and knowledge that will allow them to progress to the next level of training or progress in their chosen industry either with their existing employers or with another.

Self-reflection questions to support providers to improve learning

- What is your rationale for your delivery model? Consider the benefits and drawbacks of online learning, a blended approach, or solely in-person learning
- Ask learners their views about their preferred delivery model and incorporate this in your evaluations when planning training
- Are there robust and challenging targets for the completion of practical and theory assessments in learners' individual learning plans (ILPs)?
- How can you ensure that you challenge learners to reach their full potential in all aspects of their programmes?



Teaching and provision

Since the start of the visits, providers had a focus on returning learners to face-to-face activity in college or training centres. As the visits progressed, more learners had returned to these off-the-job activities. In most cases, learners access specialist practical workshop areas and resources to undertake a wide range of practical tasks.

During the first contract year, the number of learner starts has increased with the result that the 10 commissioned contract holders and their subcontractors are generally meeting their learner recruitment targets. However, a few sectors have been significantly hit by the pandemic and they are taking longer to recover fully. Health and social care, the sector under the most pressure during the pandemic, remains a challenging environment for learners and assessors. Although assessors had started visiting learners' workplaces to undertake assessments, care homes and settings remained under severe pressure during the visits and it remained a balancing act for assessors to not overburden settings with an excessive number of assessor visits.

Assessors worked to put the learners' best interests at the forefront; however, many health and social care learners made slower progress than expected. This was often because care homes and other settings prevented assessors undertaking visits and, although mitigations allowed managers to undertake witness testimony assessment, they did not have the time to do so. Learners also left their apprenticeships and the sector to take jobs, often in the retail sector. Hospitality and catering remains a sector where learner recruitment is particularly low. Many employers are struggling to recruit experienced staff and, as a result, training is currently a low priority for many employers. During the year, we saw differences and changes in recruitment patterns across the country. This situation became more settled as the visits progressed with providers generally meeting their learner recruitment targets across their contracts.

To support learners who were on programme during the pandemic and more recently who are beyond their scheduled completion date, the Welsh Government put in place a financial support package for providers. This extension funding was used by providers to support learners to remain on-programme and progress to completing their apprenticeships. Learners' completion dates were re-assessed by providers and the additional funding was available to support extensions up to a maximum of 12 months. Such a process requires assessors to carefully review what learners need to do to complete their programmes and the assessment opportunities they have. It also requires individual learning plans to be robust and challenging and have personalised assessment targets. However, where the individual learning plans were not detailed and tailored, learners remained on-programme for longer than they needed to be. In these cases, although providers will continue to draw down Welsh Government funding, the slow learner completion rates may prevent new entrants joining apprenticeship programmes.

Providers raised concerns that early in the recovery phase learners' lack of resilience and lost learning of key workplace skills, such as communication and working with others, would hamper their progress on their apprenticeships. As the visits

progressed, providers have indicated that there have been improvements in developing skills, although concerns remain regarding the resilience of learners. During the pandemic, awarding bodies put in place mitigations to support learners to achieve their qualifications and apprenticeships. Although these mitigations were introduced with the best intentions, they reduced the content and assessment requirements in programmes. As a result, while learners may complete their qualifications and apprenticeships, they may still have skills deficiencies in areas that prevent them from being fully effective in the workplace.

Overall, too many learners remain on-programme after their scheduled completion dates. In addressing this, providers have placed a high priority on ensuring that learners can return to face-to-face assessments as soon as possible. In a few learning areas, such as health and care, these numbers returning to complete assessments are lower than expected.

Providers have been in regular contact with awarding bodies and Qualifications Wales to discuss the difficulties in course delivery and assessment for the new made-for-Wales qualifications in health and social care and construction. Provider staff need to make sure that during the introduction and learning phase for these new qualifications learners are not disadvantaged in their learning, assessment and progress opportunities.

As providers and employers know, most learning happens on-the-job with classroom theory sessions supporting and underpinning learners' practical skills. Apprenticeship programmes are structured with clear principles of delivery and assessment principles set with an apprenticeship brand. The structured nature of the on and off-the-job activities provides a supportive and secure environment where learners can develop, practise and demonstrate their skills. Therefore, it is important to make sure learners' individual learning plans are carefully matched and tailored to the learners and the assessment opportunities they access in their workplaces. These plans are an essential component of monitoring the progress of learners, identifying support and making sure that learners complete their apprenticeships in the given timeframe. Employers play a key role in developing and supporting learners' practical skills and theory knowledge in the workplace. However, the level of support that learners receive is often dependent on the mentors' experience and knowledge and their interest and ability to engage with and support learners effectively.



Self-reflection questions to support providers to improve teaching and provision

- How can you engage with a wider range of employers? Do you have an over-reliance using the same employers?
- How do you take into consideration the delivery and assessment models used across learning areas to ensure that learners complete their apprenticeships in the given timeframe?
- How can you strengthen the coaching offered by employers and the level of feedback they give during learner progress reviews?
- How are you evaluating the delivery and quality of the qualifications in health and social care and construction and feeding back learning to awarding organisations?



Leadership and management

With the introduction of the apprenticeship contract, it meant that in a few cases providers who held commissioned contracts under the previous commission were not successful in the latest tendering round. These providers were signposted by the Welsh Government to a successful lead provider to operate under subcontractor arrangements. In these cases, former commissioned contract holders ceased to operate, and their displaced learners were again signposted by the Welsh Government to one of the new lead providers. This is the first time the Welsh Government has decided where displaced learners should go to complete their training and the process has worked well. Leaders and staff are supporting these learners well to make progress in completing their apprenticeship programmes. In a very few cases, subcontractors are on run-down contracts and will not be offered new apprenticeship starts by the lead provider.

Before working with subcontractors, lead providers undertake due diligence checks, including financial probity. In the best cases, partnership arrangements are fully discussed in an open and transparent way.

In an increasing number of cases, subcontractors are seen as partners and lead providers recognise the contribution they make, their expertise and experience in delivering the contract. This also reflects the increasing maturity of partnership working across the sector and the network of apprenticeship delivery providers. In the best cases, lead providers recognise the expertise and good practice in their subcontractors and engage these partners to lead on aspects of their work.

All lead providers charge subcontractors a management fee for their apprenticeship delivery contract. This fee has a large variation across the ten commissioned contractors. In the majority of cases, the fee is risk assessed and subcontractors pay

fees from a sliding scale that is dependent upon the level of support they need and their past performance delivering apprenticeship programmes. The level of support and resources accessed by subcontractors varies considerably and most often is based around learner data input and funding, access to remote learner portfolios and progress tracking resources, quality assurance support and access to professional learning activities. In a few cases, subcontractors state the management fee gives added value through support mechanisms, networking and the sharing of key information. Most subcontractors state that they have access to professional learning activities through the lead provider. However, in most cases both the lead provider and subcontractors are not clear regarding what training is mandatory and what is optional. There is also a lack of clarity around the numbers attending training events and how the information from training events is shared more widely to support improvement.

The quality assurance arrangements for the delivery of the apprenticeship contract have been bedding down during the time of the link inspector visits. Across the contract, the lead provider allocates the number of new learner starts to subcontractors. This is normally based upon employer and learner demand and previous performance. The contract size is closely monitored by the lead provider and contract growth is carefully considered before agreement. In a few cases, subcontractors' starts are limited to enable the lead provider to reach their contract numbers. Although lead providers and their subcontractors use detailed quality assurance processes, they do not always focus clearly enough on the quality of teaching, training and assessment and the standards that learners achieve.

From the start of the visits in September 2021, the priority for most leaders was to continue the recovery phase from the pandemic and make sure as many learners accessed face-to-face activity as possible. Throughout the visits leaders continue to place a high priority on the well-being of learners and staff. During the pandemic leaders focused strongly on and strengthened their communication with subcontractors and staff at all levels. This communication was wide-ranging and varied and included remote meetings, emails, and vlogs to provide updates and information on key developments such as employer demand, learner performance, and updates from the Welsh Government and awarding bodies. This was particularly beneficial to key partners and staff, who appreciated the support they were being given. This has been an aspect that continued as the visits progressed.

In most cases, lead providers are mindful and considered regarding the number of subcontractors they will work with in the future. In the best cases, they do not want to duplicate existing provision in a different geographical region. These providers have a clear focus on niche subcontractors who offer different and specialist provision where training is required by business and industry. These providers are also keen to make sure that provision meets local, regional and national needs. Moving forward, several providers raised concerns that securing new business will be a challenge. However, too many providers place a high focus on using the same employers for repeat recruitment of apprentices. This means that a large number of employers are not engaged in apprenticeship training. If the Welsh Government target to increase apprentice numbers is to be achieved, it may be an opportunity to engage those employers who do not currently have apprentices.



Self-reflection questions to support providers to improve leadership and management

- How do you use the experience and knowledge of partner providers effectively to support quality improvement and appropriately match delivery to quality?
- Do you share information in a transparent way, including learner performance data and information?
- Are your procedures clear and robust to identify and rapidly respond to any identified performance issues?
- How can you ensure that you not only offer professional development opportunities across the partnership, but identify those activities that require compulsory attendance?
- How can you ensure that the management fee paid gives value for money and adds value to the learner experience?

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