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FE WEEK

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MEET THE TEAM



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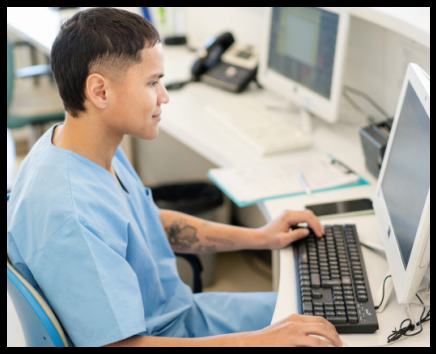
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News

Team leader and chartered manager among axed apprenticeships

SHANE CHOWEN
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Sixteen apprenticeships, including popular management standards with tens of thousands of annual starts, will be defunded as ministers attempt to divert training funds towards young people.

Work and pensions secretary Pat McFadden used a speech at Waltham Forest College on Monday to announce the "biggest transformation of apprenticeships in a decade" alongside a £2.5 billion expansion of the youth guarantee and growth and skills levy.

McFadden will also confirm the first wave of seven apprenticeship units (see page 7), a £2,000 apprenticeship incentive for small businesses (see page 10) and the introduction of foundation apprenticeships in retail and hospitality.

To resolve the decade-long decline in the number of young people taking apprenticeships, McFadden took aim at standards the government believes are better suited to other forms of workplace training.

Among those to be defunded are the level 3 team leader, level 5 operations manager, level 4 lead practitioner in adult care, level 5 coaching professional and level 6 chartered manager (see table).

It comes two months after funding was



removed from over-21s taking level 7 apprenticeships.

McFadden said: "We are focusing funding where it's needed most and giving employers the flexibility and support they've asked for.

"These reforms will give young people a vital first step on the career ladder and help business leaders recruit the talent that will grow their companies."

Asked if further rounds of defunding were in the pipeline, the DWP said it would continue to review available apprenticeships with employers and Skills England to achieve its goal of a simpler and more flexible offer.

Stream if you want to go faster

The announcement ends months of sector speculation and concern from employer groups over a "streamlining" exercise designed to divert finite apprenticeship funding towards younger learners, first signalled by the chancellor in last year's budget.

Ministers are concerned about spiralling numbers of expensive higher-level apprenticeships being taken up by older workers, while starts at lower levels and among young people have crashed.

Apprenticeships in leadership and management quickly emerged as likely targets. Skills minister Jacqui Smith previously told *FE Week* those programmes were "not only not what people would traditionally think of as apprenticeships" but were areas employers should fund themselves.

FE Week found 619 independent training providers, colleges and universities that currently deliver the apprenticeships would be affected.

The DWP used its contractual powers to place recruitment caps on those providers, effective from Tuesday, to prevent a rush on starts before funding is removed, in most cases, by the end of this year.

Team leader is the most popular apprenticeship to lose funding. Approved for delivery in 2016, it clocked 12,670 starts in the last full academic year (2024-25) across 450 training providers.

Another popular apprenticeship, operations manager, was also introduced a decade ago. It had 12,530 starts last year across 398 training providers.

Ben Rowland, chief executive of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, said: "Short-term subsidies and incentives, while welcome as an emergency measure, are not the basis for a sustainable and effective system.

"The government is dismantling the current system with the defunding of a number of cherished employer-led programmes, such as the team leader and management apprenticeships, but has not yet shown what their vision for the replacement system is."

Will somebody please think of the children

Announcing the defunding to parliament

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Apprenticeships identified for defunding

Standard	Level	Funding band	Starts 24-25	Starts 25-26 Q1	Number of providers
Team leader	3	£5,000	12,670	3,680	450
Operations manager	5	£9,000	12,530	4,060	398
Coaching professional	5	£5,000	3,580	1,080	102
Chartered manager	6	£22,000	2,930	1,460	67
Lead practitioner in adult care	4	£7,000	2,240	700	119
Improvement practitioner	4	£6,000	950	280	48
Security first line manager	3	£5,000	410	90	9
Facilities management supervisor	3	£5,000	390	120	21
Learning and skills mentor	4	£5,000	380	80	54
Cleaning hygiene operative	2	£5,000	200	60	10
Learning and skills assessor	3	£5,000	130	60	29
Custody and detention professional	3	£4,500	110	30	4
Professional security operative	2	£6,000	80	30	4
Improvement leader	6	£15,000	70	30	13
Public sector compliance investgator and officer	3	£4,000	70	40	1
Outdoor learning specialist	5	£13,000	40	20	5

Source: DWP, Skills England

News

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CONTINUED

this week, McFadden said the government was "no longer funding leadership and management apprenticeships that are largely used by employers for older, established staff as continuing professional development".

Standards that "do not sufficiently support young people or our industrial strategy ambitions" will also face the chop to "create the headroom for investment into new opportunities for young people and employers alike".

Nationally, 23 per cent of apprenticeship starts go to under-19s, and 49 per cent to the over-25s. For the defunded standards in 2024-25, those figures are 2 per cent and 84 per cent, respectively.

McFadden's claim that those apprenticeships were being used for "established" staff is also backed up by the data.

Across all standards, 42 per cent of employees had been with their employer for at least 12 months when they started their apprenticeships. For the defunded standards, that figure was 81 per cent.

Analysts at the Institute for Fiscal Studies calculated that public funding had now been removed from around one in five apprenticeships started in 2024-25.

Affected providers

Specialist leadership and management independent training providers are especially exposed financially as a result of this week's defunding decision.

Organisations such as Raise the Bar, Fuel Learning and Instep UK are particularly impacted as almost all of their apprenticeship programmes were flagged for defunding. Fuel Learning also offered hundreds of level 7 apprenticeships.

Corndel had the highest volumes of learners on defunded standards. In the last full year (2024-25) and first quarter of this one (2025-26), it recorded nearly 5,000 starts, mostly on the operations manager and team leader standards.

BPP Professional Education was the largest provider of the coaching professional standard, and offered the team leader and operations manager programmes.

Several universities and colleges are also affected.

Manchester Metropolitan University was the largest provider of the chartered manager apprenticeship, followed by Corndel.

Meanwhile, Capital City College was the main provider of the custody and detention professional apprenticeship and the third largest provider of the facilities management supervisor apprenticeship.

None of the affected providers contacted by *FE Week* wished to comment on the record.

Hospitable foundations

The first seven foundation apprenticeships, which are level 2 apprenticeships aimed at young people lasting eight months, were launched in August in the construction sector, digital, engineering and manufacturing, and health and social care.

However, official data covering the first few months of starts on foundation apprenticeships showed there were just 36. Two programmes, finishing trades and software and data, didn't recruit at all.

Ministers previously came under fire for excluding high-demand industries from the offer.

McFadden confirmed foundation apprenticeships in hospitality and retail will launch this April.

Small and medium-sized employers will have access to an apprenticeship incentive grant worth £2,000 for each new employee aged 16 to 24.

Defunded apprenticeships starts by age

Standard	Level	Starts 24-25	Starts aged under 19	Starts aged under 24	Starts aged 25 and over
Chartered manager	6	2926	11.20%	32.40%	67.60%
Cleaning hygiene operative	2	196	3.60%	11.70%	88.30%
Coaching professional	5	3579	0.00%	1.30%	98.70%
Custody and detention professional	3	111	0.00%	9.00%	91.00%
Facilities management supervisor	3	389	2.30%	17.50%	82.50%
Improvement leader	6	72	0.00%	1.40%	98.60%
Improvement practitioner	4	949	0.30%	8.40%	91.60%
Lead practitioner in adult care	4	2241	0.20%	9.20%	90.80%
Learning and skills assessor	3	132	0.80%	8.30%	91.70%
Learning and skills mentor	4	380	0.80%	7.10%	92.90%
Operations manager	5	12528	0.20%	4.10%	95.90%
Outdoor learning specialist	5	40	0.00%	55.00%	45.00%
Professional security operative	2	77	1.30%	23.40%	76.60%
Public sector compliance investgator and officer	3	74	2.70%	24.30%	75.70%
Security first line manager	3	410	2.20%	23.70%	76.30%
Team leader	3	12671	0.60%	11.80%	88.20%

Source: DWP, Skills England

Training providers with large volumes on defunded standards

Provider	Starts on defunded standards 2024-25	Total starts 2024-25	% affected starts
Corndel	4960	11810	42%
Lifetime Training Group	1650	16220	10%
BPP Professional Education	1640	11650	14%
Instep UK	1190	1340	89%
Fuel Learning	1170	1530	76%
Raise the Bar	1130	1130	100%
Paragon Education & Skills	1000	9660	10%
Best Practice Network	870	5190	17%
Marr Corporation	840	5490	15%
HIT Training	750	6330	12%

Source: DWP, DfE

News

£3.3bn for apprenticeships despite savings scramble

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EXCLUSIVE

England's apprenticeship budget will grow to £3.3 billion in 2026-27, *FE Week* has learned.

The figure represents a 5.8 per cent rise on the current £3.118 billion allocation, a sum already boosted mid-year by £43 million to meet higher-than-expected demand.

The latest settlement adds a further £180 million, but comes amid ongoing financial strain and controversial funding reforms.

It follows the first-ever overspend of the apprenticeship budget in 2024-25, which forced the government to inject £345 million and pushed total spending beyond £3 billion in 2025-26.

Despite the uplift, ministers are under pressure to rein in costs. Apprenticeship starts have remained largely flat over the past four years, while spending has surged due to the growth of higher-level apprenticeships – predominantly taken by older learners – which are more expensive to deliver.

Meanwhile, participation among young people has fallen sharply. Starts for under-25s dropped by 40 per cent over the past decade, while almost one million young people are now not in education, employment or training – an increase of 248,000 between 2021 and 2024.

In response, ministers are attempting to redirect funding towards younger learners while implementing savings measures.

Popular management apprenticeships are among 16 standards that will be defunded later this year, with caps introduced to prevent a repeat of the recruitment surge seen before level 7 funding was withdrawn for over-21s in January.

It is estimated the move, announced on Monday, could save up to £300 million annually, while savings from level 7 apprenticeships should reach around £200 million.

The changes form part of a wider reform of the apprenticeship levy into a broader "growth and skills levy". This will expand the scope of funded provision, including the rollout of short courses – dubbed "apprenticeship units" – and new foundation apprenticeships in sectors such as hospitality and retail from April.

New incentives of £2,000 for small and medium-sized businesses hiring 16 to 24-year-old apprentices will also come into force from October, which can be stacked on top of existing incentives of £2,000 for hiring a foundation apprentice.

Treasury top-slice continues

While the apprenticeship budget is increasing, the issue of a Treasury top-slice persists.

Employer levy contributions are forecast to generate £4.5 billion in 2026-27. Of this, around £500 million will be allocated to the devolved nations. Combined with the £3.3 billion apprenticeship budget, this leaves an estimated £700 million not returned to the system.

Stopping starts to avoid rush for defunded courses

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EXCLUSIVE

Training providers delivering apprenticeships earmarked for defunding will face limits on new starts to prevent a last-minute recruitment surge.

Work and pensions secretary Pat McFadden announced on Monday that the government would remove funding from 16 apprenticeship standards – including popular management courses – that do not support young people or the government's industrial strategy ambitions.

The Department for Work and Pensions said the "baseline" plan was for defunding to take effect from September 1, although notice periods could be "extended by exception" where providers faced a significant impact.

However, letters sent to multiple training providers and seen by *FE Week* show that defunding will kick in immediately for providers that do not currently deliver the standards being axed.

"Providers who did not deliver the standard in 2024-25 or have not reported starts in 2025-26 will not be permitted to begin new delivery," the DWP wrote.

For providers that are already delivering the affected apprenticeships, funding will cease on December 17, the letters added.

Until then, new starts will be capped. Each letter seen by *FE Week* so far shows the limit will be set at 75 per cent of the volume each provider delivered in 2024-25 for every standard being withdrawn.

It is unclear whether the DWP will introduce different transition arrangements – such as alternative defunding dates or cap levels – for individual providers.

The department said the caps were intended to ensure removing the standards "deliver the savings needed to invest in new opportunities elsewhere in the programme, whilst still allowing a reasonable level of delivery so that providers can manage the transition and make orderly arrangements".

It added that start limits would be set in a proportionate way to a provider's recent delivery on each of the standards being withdrawn to ensure a "fair and consistent approach across all providers and prevent the surge in recruitment that has occurred previously when standards were announced for withdrawal without controls".

The move follows a surge in level 7 apprenticeship starts in the months before funding was withdrawn for those aged 22 and over, which added pressure to England's already stretched apprenticeships budget.

Jill Whittaker, co-founder of HIT Training that forms part of The Opportunity Provider, said it was "refreshing to see" the government had recognised and learned from the "mistakes" of level 7 by applying a cap to the apprenticeships earmarked for defunding.

"I think it makes sense. It means a few challenging conversations with clients that have 12-month plans, but nothing we can't work through," she added.

The DWP stressed the restrictions apply only to new starts, with no change for existing apprentices.

"All learners already on programme must continue to be supported through to completion, and funding will remain available for this," the department added.

The DWP confirmed that this means if a provider has a 75 per cent starts cap on a standard, they start at zero from today and can take on 75 per cent of their total starts from 2024-25 up until funding is switched off.

Units funding model is 'stacked against providers'

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EXCLUSIVE

Training providers have warned the apprenticeship units funding model is "not a winning formula" and could choke off delivery before it begins.

Draft funding rules for the new short courses set to be paid for through the reformed growth and skills levy from next month show funding will be heavily end-loaded and paid on two milestones to providers.

The first 30 per cent of the funding band will be paid once the learner has completed 30 per cent of the planned delivery hours. The second milestone payment will come once the learner has completed all hours and passed their skills test.

It means a provider that delivers 90 per cent of planned hours when a learner drops out risks receiving just 30 per cent of the funding.

On top of this, the Department for Work and Pensions said it would keep the "affordability" of apprenticeship units "under review" and could withdraw a unit with just four weeks' notice.

Providers fear the model leaves them exposed and could dampen their appetite for involvement.

Simon Ashworth, deputy CEO and director of policy of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, said: "As it stands, the methodology places significantly more risk on providers, with funding heavily end-loaded so providers absorb the upfront costs of delivery. This will create real cashflow pressures."

He added that despite skills minister Jacqui Smith telling *FE Week* there was no cap on the amount of levy funding employers could spend on new apprenticeship units, the "reference in the small print to DWP being able to withdraw funding with just four weeks' notice effectively acts as a backstop".

"Taken together, this is not a winning formula," he warned.



High risk, low reward

The government confirmed this week that from next month, apprenticeship units would be available for delivery in seven areas: AI leadership, electric vehicle charging point installation and maintenance, electrical fitting and assembly, mechanical fitting and assembly, permanent modular building assembly, solar PV installation, and maintenance and welding.

The content for apprenticeship units comes from the knowledge and skills from existing apprenticeship occupational standards "needed to address specific critical skills gaps".

Units will be restricted to employed learners aged 19 or older and involve 30 to 140 hours of training, delivered over one to 16 weeks. Learners will need to pass a "skills test" at the end of their course, delivered by their training provider and validated by their employer, with independent assessment being an option.

Initial delivery will be restricted to a "targeted group" of existing apprenticeship providers that already show "strong performance" in the occupational standards linked to the units.

Funding bands and delivery hours for individual units are still being tested with "critical stakeholders", but should be confirmed from April 1.

Robert Halfon, former skills minister and now executive director of external affairs at manufacturing giant Make UK, welcomed the "strong focus on critical engineering and manufacturing skills" such as welding, fitting and assembly in the newly announced apprenticeship units.

However, he added that the approach to funding their delivery "must be sustainable for training providers, otherwise employers will find themselves once again unable to access training they want to invest in".

"Too often, the problem that employers encounter with the skills system is a lack of local provider capacity to deliver the training they need," Halfon told *FE Week*.

"A funding model that makes it too risky for providers to deliver apprenticeship units only deepens this problem if it means there is little appetite to offer the courses. Providers need to be backed with the right funding from this new flexibility in the growth and skills levy to ensure that they can offer the right training in the right places."

Ashworth warned that without a meaningful level of funding to incentivise delivery, it is "hard to see strong take-up".

"It is now for government to demonstrate whether these new products have real substance or risk being superficial," he added.

A DWP spokesperson said: "These apprenticeship units will offer employers more flexibility to upskill their staff while addressing the nation's skills shortage.

"As part of their introduction, consultations will be held with employers and providers."

News

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Civil servants raced to beat their own level 7 deadline

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EXCLUSIVE

Ministers have been accused of hypocrisy after government departments rushed to enrol civil servants onto level 7 apprenticeships just before public funding was switched off.

Analysis by *FE Week* shows dozens of level 7 apprenticeship contracts were secured for close to 200 civil servants in the months before January's funding deadline for learners aged 22 and over. Most were for the controversial senior leader standard.

The cuts were introduced to ease pressure on England's strained apprenticeships budget and to redirect funding towards younger learners. But the data reveals that departments across government – including those responsible for the policy – made significant use of the subsidy.

The Department for Work and Pensions, which oversees apprenticeships policy, enrolled around 20 staff onto the level 7 senior leadership apprenticeship in November.

And in an apparent case of departmental confusion, it awarded a five-year £2.1 million contract for level 3 team leader and level 5 operations manager apprenticeships – two of 16 standards earmarked for defunding this week – with teaching starting in December. Internal decisions to scale back management apprenticeships were being signalled at the time.

The DWP declined to explain the rationale for the contract awards, or provide the ages of the level 7 apprentices it enrolled shortly before funding was withdrawn.

A government spokesperson said: "Level 7 standards were available to all employers until the point they were defunded for learners aged 22 and over. Government departments are subject to the same rules."

Sector leaders questioned the "contradictory" move from the government as it proved ministers and officials deemed the defunded apprenticeships as valuable and appropriate.



Pat McFadden

Rush hour

The rush to secure level 7 apprenticeships followed the Department for Education's announcement in May that public funding would be withdrawn for learners aged 22 and over from January.

Starts on level 7 apprenticeships spiked nationally last year as employers raced to beat the deadline. It heaped further pressure on England's apprenticeship budget. Maximum funding available for the two most popular level 7 standards, senior leader and accountancy professional, was £14,000 and £21,000, respectively.

To avoid another cost spike, officials have capped starts for providers offering the 16 standards earmarked for defunding this week.

FE Week analysis indicates at least nine government departments were part of the level 7 spike. Between the initial announcement and the funding cut-off, around two-thirds of level 7 contracts were commissioned in the final quarter of 2025.

The most significant late activity came from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which secured nearly two-thirds of its 16 contracts – covering at least 87 learners – during the last quarter of 2025.

The Department for Education had consistently commissioned level 7 apprenticeships since 2021. Last year, it issued eight procurement notices spanning areas such as AI, systems thinking and senior leadership, with five programmes launching in the final two months before the funding deadline.

Meanwhile, the Department for Work and Pensions, which assumed responsibility for apprenticeships in September, enrolled around 20 employees onto the level 7 senior leadership standard in November.

Caught in a contradiction trap

Apprenticeship leaders said this behaviour from government departments was "entirely predictable".

"Whenever a funding cliff edge is introduced, you're likely to see both public and private-sector employers act in a fairly rational way to secure access to that type of provision through government funding," said Mandy Crawford-Lee, chief executive of University Vocational Awards Council.

"I'm a bit cross if I'm honest. This is just a stupid policy and history will not be kind."

Ben Rowland, CEO of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, said the defunding policy was being driven by artificial financial pressure, not a lack of demand or value.

"Employers, including Whitehall itself, are clearly signalling that these apprenticeships deliver real impact," he said.

"This leaves the system caught in its own contradictions, with government restricting funding while continuing to rely on these programmes for its own workforce."

Crawford-Lee added: "If they are deemed valuable enough for central government to utilise, there is a legitimate question now to be asked why they should no longer attract public investment more broadly."

The Chartered Management Institute has found nearly half (49 per cent) of management apprentices work in the public sector, including health, defence and education.

Petra Wilton, policy director at the CMI, told *FE Week* that the large take-up of management and leadership level 7 standards by public sector employers gave civil servants a career path into professional management.

She added: "The loss of levy funding for these courses will have an impact on not only the quality of leadership in our public services, but ultimately on the services they provide to taxpayers."

News

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Over-25s blocked from level 2 administration standard

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EXCLUSIVE

A long-awaited level 2 administration assistant apprenticeship will only be available to learners aged under 25.

Work and pensions secretary Pat McFadden has now signed off the new standard, with starts expected from August and a funding band set at £4,000.

The approval forms part of a wider government drive to refocus apprenticeships on young people and those out of work. Ministers this week confirmed controversial plans to withdraw funding from multiple popular management standards, mostly taken by existing workers aged 25 and older.

The new administration assistant apprenticeship follows six years of lobbying from large employers, including the NHS and local authorities. They argued the programme would help tackle rising numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).

However, ministers agreed to the standard with an age restriction so only learners aged 16 to 24 would be eligible to take it with public funding.

It is the first time an apprenticeship has been given an age limit, aside from the government's decision to withdraw funding for level 7 apprenticeships for people aged over 21, which came into force in January.

The Department for Work and Pensions told *FE Week* there were "currently" no plans to apply age restrictions to other apprenticeships.

Level 2 business administration was one of the most widely used apprenticeships under the previous framework system, recording around 30,000 starts each year. About 83 per cent of those starts were by under-19s.

The framework was closed to new starts in 2020, and several attempts to introduce a replacement standard were rejected until now.

A source close to the trailblazer group that developed the new standard said the age restriction was a "shame" but understandable given pressure on the apprenticeship budget.

"While we understand the plans to pivot apprenticeships back to young people, the level 2 business administration framework was utilised very well across a wide range of employers and sectors offering in-work progression especially for those who had not achieved maths and English at school or ESOL learners," the source said.

"It is a shame they will not have the same opportunities with this standard but we know there will be huge appetite and demand and therefore even more pressure on the levy."

England's apprenticeship budget overspent for the first time last year. *FE Week* learned this week that the budget for 2026-27 will rise to £3.3 billion.

Ministers have become increasingly concerned about the rising cost of higher-level apprenticeships taken up by older workers, while starts at lower levels and among young people have fallen sharply.

The government is now attempting to "streamline" the system to control costs. Sixteen apprenticeships – mostly popular management programmes – were confirmed for defunding on Monday.

A level 3 business administrator standard has been live since 2017 and remains consistently among the five most popular apprenticeships, with around 12,000 starts each year.

The introduction of a level 2 administration assistant apprenticeship is also expected to be popular – and potentially expensive – even with a relatively modest £4,000 funding band.

WCG free of intervention following clawback deal

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Warwickshire College Group has exited government intervention after making "tough decisions" to secure its finances.

After finalising an apprenticeship-claim funding audit that left it with a £5.4 million clawback bill from the Department for Education, WCG's financial notice to improve was lifted.

The group, which has colleges in the West Midlands, had been subject to government intervention since 2024 and almost entered insolvency last year before a last-minute government bailout.

It now has government loans totalling £3.9 million and has put its Evesham campus up for sale.

Principal Sara-Jane Watkins, who joined in September 2024, said: "Moving out of intervention is a pivotal moment for WCG. It demonstrates the Department for Education's confidence in our recovery and our strategic direction.

"This progress is the result of an incredible collective effort from our new executive team and staff across all our campuses.

"We have moved at a rapid pace to address inherited financial issues, making tough decisions to ensure we have a sustainable foundation."

Changes at WCG since Watkins joined include introducing a new leadership team and appointing a campus principal to each site to "drive excellence" while maintaining group-wide stability, the group said.

The closure of its Evesham campus last year drew criticism from local politicians and followed the sale of its Malvern Hills campus.

Both were part of South Worcester College, which merged with WCG in 2016. Proceeds from the sales will cover the government funding clawbacks.

With intervention restrictions lifted, the group can once again access targeted government funding and development opportunities.

Officials including the FE Commissioner's team will observe WCG via a post intervention monitoring and support plan.

FE Week also understands the government is expected to publish a formal investigation outcome report which should detail what funding breaches led to the £5.4 million clawback.

WCG has more than 11,000 students at five campuses across Warwickshire and Worcestershire.

Gill Clipson, chair of the corporation, said: "I am delighted that the college has moved out of intervention and supervised status.

"This milestone is a testament to the leadership of our new executive team, whose drive and tenacity enabled us to make such rapid progress in very challenging circumstances.

"By swiftly assessing our financial position, rebuilding our finance and data functions, and redesigning our quality cycle, we have ensured the organisation is both effective and efficient.

"We now have a strong board and an even greater opportunity to shape and sustain a thriving, successful college for the region."

Paying employers to hire youth 'risks huge waste'

JOSH MELLOR
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Employer incentives for hiring young people could be a multi-million pound waste of taxpayers' cash, experts have warned.

Later this year, the government will roll out two financial bonuses of up to £3,000 for businesses that hire young unemployed people or apprentices.

The incentives are part of a £1 billion package over three years, which includes the 'jobs guarantee' subsidised work programme.

But experts said evaluations of past incentive schemes show that while there was a good case for supporting young people in the earlier stages of unemployment, the latest plans risked "deadweight" spending on grants for hires that would have happened anyway.

Work and pensions secretary Pat McFadden announced the measures this week, arguing the government needed to help NEETs who are out of work long-term avoid "lifelong scarring effects" on their health and wealth.

The number of NEET young people (not in education, employment or training) has risen to almost one million since a pre-pandemic low of about 800,000.

New incentives

From June, a 'youth jobs grant' of £3,000 will be available to employers who hire anyone aged 18 to 24 who has been on universal credit for six months. Around 60,000 people are forecast to be taken on over three years.

Then in October, the government will also pay an 'apprenticeship incentive' of £2,000 to small and medium-sized businesses that hire 16 to 24-year-old apprentices.

A £2,000 employer incentive is also available for every young foundation apprentice start, although figures covering August to October last year reveal there were only 36 starts.

Each new grant can be "stacked", so an SME hiring a foundation apprentice aged 18 to 24 who has been unemployed at least six months could claim grants totalling £7,000, officials have confirmed.

The incentives come alongside a youth guarantee jobs programme for people in receipt of universal credit for 18 months or more, currently launching in six UK regions



and due to expand nationally in October.

McFadden has widened the scheme's scope from 18 to 21-year-olds up to 24-year-olds, more than doubling the eligible group from 30,000 to 72,000.

Deadweight risk

Business groups welcomed the new incentives, but experts warned the policies were likely to benefit only a "small percentage" of the almost one million NEETs.

Xiaowei Xu, senior research economist at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, said there was a "good case" for supporting young people before their skills and confidence were "eroded" by long spells out of work.

And she explained wage subsidies should boost long-term youth employment levels by encouraging hires that would not have otherwise taken place – a concept economists call "additionality".

But offering £3,000 to all employers without checking for additionality could result in "substantial dead weight" spending, Xu warned.

And while a £3,000 grant would reduce the cost of hiring a young person by between 27 and 35 per cent over six months, the benefit of the grant to employers would be "negligible" when spread over the long term, she added.

Xu said it "remains to be seen" how much the government policies would increase long-term employment as they will only benefit a "small share" of the nearly one million NEET young people.

The IfS estimated the 60,000 job grants apply to 420,000 NEET young people, including 100,000 looking for work on universal credit for six to 18 months, and 320,000 on the benefit regime for six months or more for health reasons.

An old tool

Cash incentives for businesses that hire young people and apprentices are an established government policy for boosting uptake.

The government already offers long-running incentives for hiring younger apprentices, including £1,000 for a 16 to 18-year-old's employment-related costs, and relief on employer national insurance contributions for under-25s that is expected to cost the Treasury £570 million this financial year.

From 2012 to 2014, the government offered a 'youth contract' wage incentive of £2,275 for employers hiring 18 to 24-year-olds on the government's 'work programme'.

Between 2012 and 2017, the government also offered a £1,500 'Apprenticeship Grant for Employers' to businesses that were new to apprenticeships, had fewer than 50 employees, and recruited an apprentice aged 16 to 24.

Evaluations of both programmes estimated that deadweight accounted for about 22 per cent of apprenticeship grants and 75 per cent of youth contract grants.

However, both studies suggested the schemes were successful at encouraging recruitment of young people and that benefits "substantially surpass the costs".

Stephen Evans, CEO of the Learning and Work Institute, told *FE Week* that conclusions about whether incentives were successful were "mixed at best".

And he said the government risked getting "quite a high level" of deadweight if it was not careful about who it targeted with incentive payments.

An 'apprenticeship incentive payments' scheme that ran between 2020 and 2021 paid grants of up £3,000 to 162,000 employers. Only 20 per cent of employers responding to a DfE survey said this caused them to recruit more.

An independent review of spending during the pandemic later found about £4.7 million was lost to fraud and error through such apprentice and trainee hiring incentives.

The Department for Work and Pensions' director of work-based skills Kate Ridley-Pepper told *FE Week* the new apprenticeship incentives would be paid to training providers then forwarded to employers in an attempt to avoid fraud.

Opinion

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PRAFUL NARGUND
Skills adviser, Department for Work and Pensions

Apprenticeships have strayed from a focus on young people

The system was intended to give young people their first step into skilled work, and right now they need help more than ever, says Praful Nargund

Apprenticeships offer a chance to change someone's life.

With an apprenticeship you get a wage coming in, skills developed and a career taking shape. That is why getting more young people into them matters so much.

As it stands, the apprenticeships system has strayed from its intended purpose of lifting young people up.

Apprenticeship starts have fallen across the board, with uptake for under-25s dropping 40 per cent in the last decade. Fewer than half of new apprenticeships are currently taken up by young people, and when you dig into why, the same frustrations come up again and again.

The system is hard to navigate. The options aren't clear. Some apprenticeships being offered don't match where the economy is heading.

This comes at a time when nearly a million young people aged 16 to 24 aren't in education, employment or training. That figure has been growing since 2022, and at precisely the moment young people have needed opportunity more than ever, they have found the drawbridge being pulled up. We are unapologetic about changing this.

Young people want to work, and they want to have opportunities to earn, learn and start building their future. And that's why we're tilting the growth and skills levy towards youth, taking the difficult decisions about what standards to streamline, moving away from management and other lower-priority standards.

There is nothing wrong with management training, it is of benefit to the economy. But it can't come at the expense of a young person's first opportunity in life, especially when there are so many other routes to getting that training.

The public rightly expect apprenticeships to provide young people with a genuine route into skilled work and provide value for money.

Addressing this historic failure requires ambition to meet the scale of the challenge. That's why we're backing employers that are stepping up to the plate with a new suite of hiring incentives, including for SMEs.

> "Young people want to work and have opportunities"

This is alongside the new foundation apprenticeships in hospitality and retail that will open up entry level routes for young people looking to get their foot in the door.

Altogether, that means up to £8,000 of support available to an employer, depending on the circumstances of the young apprentice. It is a straightforward recognition that bringing someone into the workforce for the first time takes investment, and we want to make that easier.

But beyond opening more doors, we need those doors to lead somewhere worth going. We should reject the false choice that more opportunities for our young people must come at the expense of growth for our economy.

That's why in taking advantage of the flexibility on offer with a reformed levy, Skills England has led the development of new short courses, called apprenticeship units, which meet needs as varied as AI, solar panel installation and welding.

This comes off the back of our announcement last month to 'fast track' approval of new standards that open up opportunities for young people and address skills gaps for critical infrastructure and major investment projects.

Early unemployment is not just an inconvenience. It can shape a person's confidence and prospects for years.

A job is good, but an apprenticeship offers the better route to progression. Young people deserve chances to gain skills, carve out a career and succeed in their chosen field.

Giving young people a genuine, navigable route into good work is one of the most important things we can do – for them, for the country and for the economy.

And we can build a skills system that not only meets the needs of young people but can adapt at pace to new innovations and developments such as AI.

We are committed to making that happen. And the country stands to win if we succeed.



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Akeeb, one of the young people being helped at Blackburn College's NEET hub, Launchpad

Comeback kids

JESSICA HILL
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Jessica Hill visits a former branch of Debenhams, where Blackburn College has created the Launchpad hub to re-engage the town's NEET population with a tailored re-introduction to education and work

"Right now, you're probably standing where the perfumes and aftershaves were," says Blackburn College's executive director of student support and experience, Matt Robinson.

He leads me to a classroom for young people who, until recently, were not in education, employment or training. "There is some good in this world, and it's worth fighting for", one learner has scribbled on a display board. It feels like a fitting motto for this new 'Launchpad' hub, housed in a former Debenhams in Blackburn town centre.

The provision is part of a college and community partnership that Blackburn College credits with bucking the trend by slashing local NEET numbers at a time when national NEET rates have continued to climb.

Blackburn with Darwen Council credits the programme's "positive impact" for the area's 16-17 NEET rate dropping from 4.6 per cent last year to 3.3 per cent this quarter.

A standout feature of this centre is its flexible roll-on-roll-off provision, which enables more fragile 16 to 19-year-old NEETs to ease into college life gradually. The college has also teamed up with community partners to support adult NEETs at the site too.

Robinson is "incredibly passionate" about working with partners in "the heart of the community," on provision that is "small and nurturing compared to the hustle and bustle of college".

Launched in September, Blackburn College's chief executive, Fazal Dad, sees the centre as a "new way of thinking about place-based leadership in FE".

From talking to doing

Dad sits on several local and national boards, including Skills England, and says the issue of tackling growing numbers of NEETs has cropped up regularly. Although "there's a lot of talking" and "hypotheses", "nothing actually gets done" about it.

But Dad is no dawdler. Two years ago, he took proactive action in his community.

He had noticed more young people were arriving at college "not ready to learn".

> "Often these students felt daunted by the busy college environment"

"The schools didn't give us the real picture," he says. Often these students had very poor school attendance and felt daunted by the busy college environment; within the first six weeks of term, many were dropping out.

To cater for this rising cohort, the college sunk £1 million into renovating the former Debenhams and JobCentre building which is a five-minute walk from Blackburn's main

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campus. The local authority stumped up a further £50,000.

The original plan was to take on 120 young NEETs. The centre opened in September with 260, reflecting the scale of demand.

Focus on flexibility

The 'Future Focus' programme at Launchpad can take on 16 to 19-year-olds "at any point in the year when they're ready to re-engage with education", rather than only when the academic calendar allows, says Dad. He believes this flexibility is "fundamental to genuine inclusion".

In many areas of the country, colleges partner with the King's Trust to support NEETs through its personal development programmes. But Robinson points out that these typically 12-week programmes have three fixed entry and exit points a year.

> "I'd rather be at home and know mum was safe, than be at school"

Future Focus's provision generally starts "as small as possible", explains head of inclusion Farooq Imran, with the first term spent on non-accredited qualifications to build up resilience, confidence and teamwork.

The curriculum is based partly on the needs of local employers, with a "clear progression road map" put in place for learners to focus on their next steps.

When they complete these initial courses and feel ready to move on, students continue being taught by their Future Focus teachers but on a skills pathway that prepares them for a full course starting at the main campus the following September.

Imran says the provision has not worked for a "handful of people" who have been referred back to the local authority.

But by December, 55 of the initial 260 had graduated onto a mainstream college course and around another 10 were in employment, while Robinson says the others had "purposeful individual interviews" to set them onto alternative pathways.

A party was held in the social hub with games and a DJ to celebrate the learners' achievements.

One learner benefiting from this flexible transition approach is 18-year-old Akeeb Ahmed.

At 13, he took on the bulk of the housework and caring responsibilities for his three younger brothers, as his mother struggled with epilepsy.

He rarely attended school, fearing one of her seizures might cause her to "fall down the stairs and bang her head". "I'd rather be at home and know mum was safe than be at school," he says.

After his mother died in 2024, he moved in with his Nana, who passed away during his first year at Blackburn College, where he was studying a level 2 bricklaying course. His attendance dropped to 36 per cent.

Since joining Launchpad in September, staff have supported Ahmed to secure an ADHD diagnosis. He now values being able to access "a lot more one-to-one support if I need it".

"It's a lot quieter here, I feel I can focus better," he says. "I feel like this place has given me a second chance."

Ahmed, who is on a construction pathway, took a level two employability course as well as GCSE maths and English, and by January felt ready to return to the main campus. He is now attending taster sessions there in joinery, before potentially starting a joinery course in September.


Kasey, a hairdressing student

He is also feeling more confident he will pass his GCSE maths and English this year, as he will be able to take them in a small room to reduce his anxiety.

Similarly, Kasey, 17, was initially so nervous about starting a hairdressing course at the main campus after completing her Future Focus employability course that staff had to walk her down to the salon. She now spends Thursdays in maths and English GCSE classes at Launchpad, and Wednesdays in hairdressing sessions on campus.

"The Future Focus staff help me get to where I want to be – they're willing to put extra work in for me to prepare for my resits in June," she says.

Small but powerful

In the past, the college would not normally find out which learners had been persistently absent from school until they had already arrived at college.

But now there are better data sharing systems with schools and the local authority to gauge those at greatest risk of becoming NEET, and to transition them

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into Launchpad from the outset since "prevention is better than a cure", says Dad.

Future Focus's curriculum manager Katie Tormay says they also work with schools to find out what a young person's areas of interest are, so they know "what lessons we can give them to get them interested in a college course for next year".

Robinson believes there is a "misconception" in the FE sector that NEETs are predominantly "low level" learners, when "that isn't actually the case at all". "We have some students that have just had lots of things going on at home, poverty, social, emotional, mental health issues," he says.

Around 30 young people on Future Focus are currently on level 3 provision. Some have applied to universities.

Tormay says many of Future Focus's learners have not attended school since year 7, having been classed by the system as 'electively home educated' "but not really homeschooled".

These young people often display low confidence and anxiety.

"Traditional college environments, however strong, can feel overwhelming, overly formal or inaccessible for this cohort," says Dad. "Launchpad responds directly to that gap."

Typical FE college classes accommodate between 15 and 25 learners. Launchpad has between eight and 10.

When Launchpad opens at 8.30am, breakfast is provided for all learners, and at lunchtime those entitled to free meals get vouchers to spend at nearby Blackburn market.

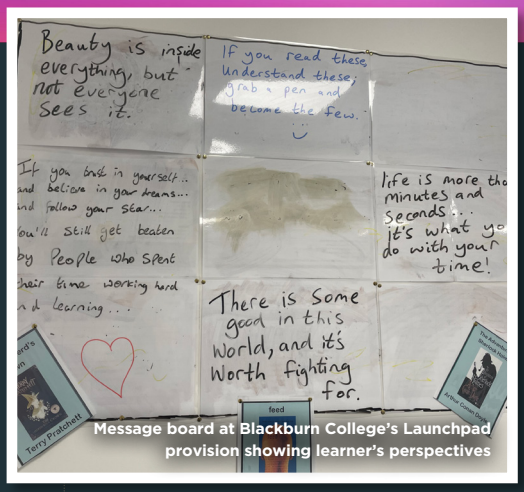
"The independent act of going down there makes them feel more part of the community," says Tormay.

"I feel like this place has given me a second chance"

As well as a specialist support team, the centre hosts pastoral and attendance staff who all share a "connect before you correct" approach to working with learners, she adds.

Imran says teachers often have to come into the students' social hub before classes start to escort anxious learners into the classroom.

For some, Tormay says, "the hardest part is getting them through the door". She recounts how her team spent the first eight weeks meeting one learner at the entrance, coaxing him in.



Message board at Blackburn College's Launchpad provision showing learner's perspectives

Supporting adults too

Launchpad was built on the principle that anyone from the wider community as well as 16-19 year olds can come through its doors and be offered "quality information, advice and guidance on next steps and what they need to get there".

Tormay says the open doors approach is paying off, with some unemployed parents of Future Focus participants coming forward to seek retraining support themselves.

Launchpad also acts as an educational base for Newground Together, the charitable arm of housing association group Together Housing, which provides education engagement programmes for around 300 adults a week in a designated training room there.

Their provision, funded under the Department for Work and Pensions' Restart programme, reflects for Dad just how much housing associations have become "community anchor institutions like colleges serving their community".

The centre is also used by local organisations such as We are Noise, a creative arts and music charity, and Blackburn Foodbank.

And some rooms are occupied by the

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Future Focus's curriculum manager Katie Tormay, head of inclusion Farooq Imran and Blackburn College CEO Dr Fazal Dad and executive director of student support and experience Matt Robinson

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Launchpad's head of inclusion Farooq Imran and learner Akeeb

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college's Skills for Work team and the local authority for short-term re-engagement projects for adults, and on Sector-based Work Academy Programmes (SWAPs) funded via the DWP.

One such programme, Gateway to Blackburn College, offers guaranteed interviews to join Blackburn College as a member of staff.

DWP officials who visited were "very impressed" with the centre, says Robinson.

Another recent college programme was aimed at addressing the shortfall in school classroom assistants by training up 16 people on a week-long level one programme, followed by four-week work placements in schools.

Dad says that though four of those trainees were subsequently offered jobs, at least four others are still volunteering at the schools where they were placed, which underlines the financial challenges schools face.

Duty to serve

Dad describes Future Focus's wraparound support and flexible approach as being of "high quality". But quality comes at a price.

He tells me I've "hit the nail on the head" when I suggest colleges, funded per learner, are financially incentivised to recruit higher-level students rather than those needing more support, who cost more to teach.

Dad acknowledges that Launchpad "has to pay for the bills" but brings in little financial return, though he declines to discuss the figures. As a result, he admits there are "certain other things" he would like to do at the college that are not affordable.

The fact most learners are only entitled to a free college education until they are 19 is also an issue the college is "trying to navigate". But he argues the centre is reaping rewards through "system change at a local level" that "redefines what inclusion looks like". "Colleges as anchor institutions must take this responsibility seriously," he adds.

Other areas innovating

Dad claims Blackburn is the only centre in Lancashire with such provision, and he is "inundated with requests to see it".

Elsewhere, FE colleges' off-site town centre provision has tended to cater for adult cohorts rather than young people. Bedford College Group operates adult entry-level to level 2 provision in town centres in Bedford, Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough.

But in Nottingham, a youth guarantee trailblazer project that launched in October is, like in Blackburn, supporting younger NEETs through partnership work involving the local college.

> "Colleges as anchor institutions must take this responsibility seriously"

The Thrive Partnership helps 18-21 year old NEETs from workless families through a collaboration between Nottingham College and East Midlands Combined County Authority, Nottingham City Council, the DWP and community organisations.

Rachel Wadsworth, Nottingham College's vice principal and the project's senior lead, says it has involved the college venturing out into community centres in deprived areas of the city to engage young people and their families, in an effort to persuade them to join its employability programmes.

The project started with tea, coffee and cake mornings to meet families, as a "safe introduction to Nottingham College to build trust". Careers events were also held to "broaden their horizons".

The project ends later this month and so far of the 60 young people who initially signed up to the programmes, seven have progressed onto a college course and one is going on to university. Wadsworth considers this "very successful" given how challenging it can be to break intergenerational cycles of unemployment.

Back in Blackburn, the Launchpad provision is growing in size as local partners are "starting to understand the provision better and giving more referrals", says Tormay.

The college is now seeking to launch a supported internship programme at the centre for those whose next step is employment, where young people are provided with work placements, "with a view to that being somewhere they move onto".

They are also opening a scaled-down version of the Launchpad model for young people in nearby Darwen town centre next month, also in partnership with the local authority.

"Historically, people from Darwen struggle to engage with activity in Blackburn", says Robinson. "So we're doing what's right for the community there as well."

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Here at South Thames Colleges Group, we are recruiting a new Deputy Chief Executive Officer (DCEO) to support the ongoing delivery of the Group's ambitious strategic plan to become an exceptional FE provider. The successful candidate will function as the Group's Chief Financial Officer and deputise for the Chief Executive as occasion requires. As Chief Financial Officer the incoming postholder should either hold a business or accountancy qualification or have a track record of providing strategic leadership in finance as well as substantial knowledge of HR, estates, operational systems and risk management in a complex multi-site organisation as the DCEO has Group responsibilities for Audit and Finance, Human Resources, Digital and IT Services, Management Information and Planning and Facilities and Estates.

Following the retirement of our longstanding DCEO the incoming postholder will take over from a long period of sustained excellence in the delivery of the Group's Corporate Services, its compliance and financial performance. We will appoint an individual with a track record of proven leadership in the FE or another sector, backed by strong evidence of ongoing high performance in key Corporate metrics. This role requires a wide range of insight and experience across different aspects of resource management as well as a profound commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct in public service. The incoming postholder will need to be able to demonstrate experience of working in a complex organisation with challenging funding regimes and the ability to learn and adapt quickly. The postholder will maintain the controls required by the Corporation to ensure accountability for managing the use of public funds.

The role will be part of the wider Group Leadership Team taking an executive lead in all aspects of financial, human resources and estates management across the successful South Thames Colleges Group, formed in 2017 through merger. South Thames Colleges Group brings together four Colleges across South West London and this role will be a cornerstone for the next phase of its growth and development.

The recruitment process will consist of the following stages:

- 13 March - Advertisements published
- 31 March 2026 - Recruitment closes
- 2 April 2026 - Longlisting complete; all candidates notified of decision
- 16 April 2026 - Longlisted candidates attend an assessment day; shortlisting at end of day and candidates informed of outcomes
- 17 April 2026 - Shortlisted candidates interviewed; appointment made subject to Corporation approval and satisfactory pre-employment checks

South Thames Colleges Group very much encourages applications from candidates whose backgrounds are as diverse as the learners who attend the Group's Colleges.

When clicking on 'Apply', you will be taken to the STCG Recruitment platform where you can download some supporting documents including a welcome from the Chair of Governors, the job description and person specification, South Thames Colleges Group's inspection report from May 2024, South Thames Colleges Group's financial statements from 2024-25, South Thames Colleges Group's School and Business Partnerships Impact Report 2024-25 and the Group's strategic plan.

For an informal conversation about the role, please contact the Group Principal/Chief Executive, Peter Mayhew-Smith, peter.mayhew-smith@stcg.ac.uk

Click here for more information



THE STAFF ROOM

Dispatches from the frontline of FE



RICHARD HARRIS

Learning technology manager, Plumpton College

It pays to be playful when launching new technology

Digital CPD too often overwhelms staff with instructions and tools they barely understand. So let them try to break the software instead, says Richard Harris

You're standing in front of a class ready to try an exciting new piece of tech, and it doesn't work. Blank faces stare back at you.

This is the moment we all dread when experimenting with something new. You were promised time saving and higher engagement, but instead are left with an awkward silence as you move onto the next part of your lesson.

Technological fragility or the fear of breaking the system is a key barrier in digital CPD. With a wealth of tools at our fingertips, and new revolutionary systems being shouted about in every corner of the internet, we have never been so equipped to tackle this new digital revolution.

However, due to the time constraints teaching staff face it's difficult to provide them with confidence and security as they explore new tools. So new technologies are more often than not seen as more tight ropes to walk and boxes to tick.

I'm sure you've been presented with a tool in a digital CPD and told to click here, there and up there to save yourself 10 minutes of admin time, only to not truly understand what the tool is, how it works, or the plethora of features it has to offer. Leaving you scratching your head about how to implement this into an effective workflow.

Maslow's foundation

During our training we probably all learnt of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the need for a sense of safety to comfortably attain and innovate.

If a teacher feels threatened by a new system, whether from a fear of the unknown or of breaking something and looking silly, they cannot reach the self-actualisation level required for creative teaching and understanding the technology.

When a teacher is in survival mode, they cannot innovate. Their confidence must be established before we can expect curiosity.

Gabor Maté talks about play being a biological necessity for learning and how this must come from a threat-free environment. He defines play as "activity with no consequence".

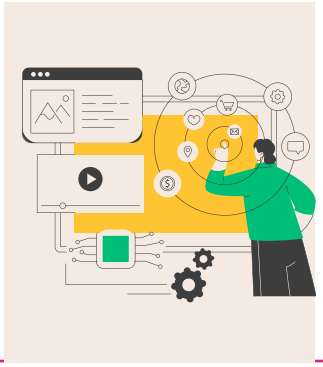
The same is true for learning new technologies. We must create an environment where staff can play with a system free from fear, angst or worry.

Digital CPD sessions must facilitate a sandbox environment where teachers feel safe to fail, where they can click all the buttons and find out how a system works.

> "Transformation happens one confidence boost at a time"

We don't need more 'how to' guides, we need more 'what if' spaces. How can we truly facilitate the space and time for play and how does this change the approach to a digital CPD session?

I propose a no-stakes session, where staff are given a tool and the time to play, understand and make links directly to their curriculums.



In practice, this means flipping the CPD script. Instead of a 'click-along' webinar, we should be creating 'break-it' sessions. In these spaces, the goal isn't to produce a resource by the end of the hour, but to explore the boundaries of the software.

When we give staff permission to explore without a looming deadline or a required 'output,' we're building their digital resilience. They learn how to troubleshoot, adapt, and crucially they learn that the 'undo' button is their best friend.

Investing in resilience

It's clear that the biggest barrier will always be time. But from a management perspective we need to be patient and provide the time, space and confidence for practitioners to be curious.

Transformation will happen one confidence boost at a time. When we provide a structure for play we move from a culture of caution to one of innovation.

Time to play is not lost time but rather an investment in resilience, something we all need more of in this digital era. I challenge you, at your next CPD day, don't just provide instructions on a million tools. Provide the space, safety and time to cultivate the one thing that actually matters: a confident practitioner.

Got views from the frontline? Write to commissioning editor Jessica Hill on **jessica.hill@feweek.co.uk**

Get in touch!

Opinion

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DR MANDY CRAWFORD-LEE
Chief executive, University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC)

The blitz on leadership training is daft policy that drains growth

Axing leadership and management apprenticeships stifles inclusivity and blunts the UK's competitive edge, says Dr Mandy Crawford-Lee

In May last year I described as 'daft' the decision by the education secretary to only fund level 7 apprenticeships for apprentices aged 16-21.

The move to defund leadership and management apprenticeships – which should be a cornerstone of England's vocational education and training offer – represents another short-sighted policy that will undermine both opportunity for young people and the nation's long-term productivity. The term 'double daft' seems appropriate here.

The government's determination to withdraw public funding from a range of management apprenticeships caused alarm amongst apprenticeship stakeholders, including employers in the run up to the announcement made on Monday.

Skills minister Jacqui Smith had already signalled that apprenticeships which 'resemble continuing professional development rather than discrete occupations' may no longer be regarded as *appropriate* for public funding.

The now-confirmed decision removes programmes that have become vital progression routes into management roles for learners of all ages, including ambitious school and college leavers.

Her position and the government's rationale appear to be one of financial reprioritisation – targeting more money at front-door apprenticeships for young people at the lowest levels and reducing investment in higher-level programmes.

> "They're part of the solution to productivity goals"

This creates a false dichotomy: you cannot meaningfully increase social mobility and opportunities for young learners while stripping away the very programmes that develop them into our future leaders across all sectors and professions.

Consider the wider workforce context. Census data for England and Wales categorises roles by occupation and age, showing a stark under-representation of young people in managerial positions.

For too long, the narrative around management apprenticeships has been dominated by myths that they are executive perks for older employees. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Apprenticeships like the chartered manager degree apprenticeship (CMDA), the most popular at level 6, are engines of inclusion.

Employers and training providers report that around 30 per cent of roles generated through the CMDA pathway go to those aged 24 or under.

They provide a vital bridge into management for young people, many of whom would not otherwise access or be given the opportunity for formal leadership training or qualifications. They act as a recognised bridge to higher-paid careers and a route to the professions that was first mooted by the last Labour government.

Pipeline matters. As funding is removed from these apprenticeship standards, thousands of talented young people will be stopped from progressing into positions as they invariably age and fall out of funding favour.

Management apprenticeships have demonstrable impact. Business-facing apprenticeship starts have been climbing at higher levels as demand grows, highlighting employer appetite for leadership and management development.

Yet, future successes will be removed amid policy shifts. When senior leadership and management routes are diminished, so too are the pipelines into strategic roles that underpin business growth.

Defunding now compounds a systemic challenge. Youth unemployment and economic inactivity remain, rightly, substantial concerns in our UK labour market. Removing investment in leadership training for those early in their careers will not tackle these issues; it will compound them.



Culturally, we must reframe leadership training as part of the solution to the UK's social mobility and productivity goals – not as expendable in policy terms.

This is the aim of both the Chartered Management Institute and Institute of Leadership & Management petitions to government.

In a global economy where nations are competing on innovation and productivity, reducing our investment in leadership skills undermines our competitive edge. Countries with strong vocational and leadership development systems see a correlation between management capability and organisational performance. Skills England's own early research as well as the history of labour market analysis draws the same conclusions!

The Westminster government should be positioning the nation alongside them – not retreating.

In the month in which we've showcased and celebrated the very best of apprenticeship and skills training at this year's apprenticeships and training conference (ATC), let's hope for a public policy U-turn at some future point.

Until then, I'll remain less bewitched and more bothered and bewildered.

Opinion

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JO SWINDELLS
Executive director of development and delivery, Education Training Foundation (ETF)

Teachers need work experience if new pathways are to succeed

Regular, structured opportunities for teachers to refresh and develop their subject knowledge is vital, says Jo Swindells

Our post-16 education landscape has long needed simplification to ensure meaningful options for all learners, so the government's aims in introducing new pathways at level 3 and below are welcome.

With routes including V Levels being developed, we have an opportunity to shape qualifications that could make a real difference to learners' lives and their progression, while also supporting the government's industrial strategy ambitions.

We know vocational pathways are most effective when they are coherent, credible, rooted in real labour market demand and inclusive of the needs of all learners. So these should be guiding principles during their development and implementation.

However, the success of these pathways will depend not only on their design but on ensuring the FE and skills workforce is equipped to deliver them with confidence and expertise.

Meeting skills needs

The government's planned V Level subjects reveal an intent to cover a range of study areas that align with priority sectors in its industrial strategy (including manufacturing, digital and finance), while encompassing the creative and service industries that make significant contributions to local economies (such as hospitality, retail and hairdressing).

> "Teachers and trainers must be strong dual professionals"

These subject areas represent sectors where applied technical knowledge, practical skill development and work-based learning are essential for progression into skilled employment, apprenticeships or higher technical study.

As industries rapidly evolve and skills needs change, maintaining the relevancy of content is an ongoing challenge. This means we need systems in place to review and update content.

The Department for Education should future-proof qualifications as far as possible by focusing on key economic drivers such as digitalisation, green skills and automation across subjects.

A coherent, integrated system

It is also important that V Level subjects and new T Level subjects fit coherently within the broader landscape of technical and vocational qualifications to avoid duplication and confusion for learners, parents or carers and employers.

For learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, coherent pre-level 3 pathways and qualifications provide essential scaffolding to build confidence, core skills and occupational identity. Getting these pathways right is central to widening participation and addressing longstanding skills and opportunity gaps.

System coherence is vital for providers and employers too. Evidence from ETF's delivery of the T Level professional development programme shows that where curriculum intent, qualification design, workforce capability and employer engagement are aligned, providers report greater confidence in delivery and stronger employer partnerships.



Workforce development as a priority

This points to a critical consideration: the successful delivery of V Levels and other pathways will depend on a highly skilled FE and skills workforce.

Leaders need access to strategic support and system-wide networks to facilitate the successful rollout of new pathways and qualifications across the sector.

Meanwhile, teachers and trainers must be strong dual professionals, combining high-quality teaching with current industry expertise.

Regular, structured opportunities, such as relevant industry placements, should be available to teaching staff to update their subject knowledge and industry practice.

Workforce development must also support the accessibility of qualifications, particularly for learners with SEND. We recommend that specialist continuing professional development in inclusive pedagogy, neurodiversity and adaptive vocational teaching should be routinely available for the whole workforce to support this aim.

The development of our post-16 education pathways represents a pivotal moment for our sector and for the diverse learners it serves.

Embedding workforce development, professional standards and CPD planning throughout development and implementation are key to successful integration into a coherent system.

Only by placing workforce development at the heart of qualification reform can we ensure these pathways genuinely meet learner needs and employer expectations.

Opinion

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SIMON PARKINSON
Chief executive, WEA

If the Cook Islands can commit to lifelong learning, why can't we?

Dozens of nations have a lifelong learning strategy. England does not. As adult education participation falls and funding shrinks, it's time to stop drifting and plan for the long term, says Simon Parkinson

What do the Cook Islands, Latvia, Bolivia and Malaysia all have in common? They've all published a lifelong learning strategy.

These are just some of the more recent ones. In the last 30 years, dozens of countries (including Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) have published a national plan or strategy collected by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.

England is conspicuous by its absence; it has never attempted a full lifelong learning strategy. And the government and opposition parties aren't likely to provide one any time soon.

In the meantime, adult education is left on "life support", as the principal of Redbridge Institute of Adult Education recently described it; he said he "feared for the long-term future of our sector".

So we decided to develop our own in collaboration with learners, partners, stakeholders and allies. A true People's Strategy for Lifelong Learning.

Each of those countries with a strategy has attempted to place lifelong learning in the context of the wider challenges facing them, connecting it to work, health and the need to build stronger, more cohesive communities.

Most importantly, they have stated that lifelong learning matters, and can be part of every citizen's life.

So maybe the question is not how we compare to the Cook Islands but rather what we can do to ensure a future for lifelong learning. This is where developing a long-term national strategy comes into its own.

> "Adult learning participation is far lower than 20 years ago"

We do it in other contexts. The NHS has a 10-year plan. The government has published its first long-term strategy to tackle homelessness. It even has an over-arching document, Plan for Change, mapping its most important milestones over the course of parliament without mentioning lifelong learning. If things are to get better, we need a roadmap.

None of the recent policy initiatives; the skills white paper, or recent SEND reforms, add up to a national lifelong learning strategy for learners of all ages, backgrounds and postcodes.



Meanwhile, adult learning participation rates are far lower than 20 years ago, driven by a huge drop in funding levels – with the promise of further cuts to come.

So how can we build a strategy to fix this?

First, by connecting lifelong learning to wider agendas. Learning leads to better health and wellbeing; improved productivity and employability; a better understanding of our neighbours and the wider world; the ability to cope with everyday life in an increasingly complex world, lived in digital spheres as well as in real life.

For our strategy, we'll be connecting with experts in other fields beyond education including health, community building and place making, employment rights and those tackling hate and misinformation.

A roundtable in Scotland after the May elections will consider whether lifelong learning is thriving and what the key messages for the new government might be.

We'll be collaborating with the wider adult learning sector, unions, other charities, local authorities and of course our own tutors and colleagues.

Anyone trying to do the best for adult learners who is held back by restrictive policies and inadequate funding.

Most importantly, we'll be amplifying the lived experience of lifelong learners by holding events, publishing stories, undertaking research and providing a platform for them to tell their stories of the difference that access-to-learning has made.

The emerging strategy will have grown organically from a bed of shared experiences, knowledge and connections.

It will feel like an experiment, which is why we've called it Lifelong Learning Labs.

Like any experiment we'll start with an idea – that our communities would thrive if lifelong learning were more central to all our lives. But we want to test the best ways of achieving that by sharing our collective findings and ideas.

By the end of the year we'll have a core set of recommendations to take forward to the next general election, where we want to see parties adopting the idea of a lifelong learning strategy in their manifestos. We'll have done some of the hard work for them already.

Please join us in the experiment.

Opinion

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JAMIE CATER
Senior policy manager for employment, Make UK

Britain's growth plan will fail without level 4 and 5 skills

If the industrial strategy is serious about advanced manufacturing, it must finally fix the "missing middle" in our skills system, says Jamie Cater

Only one in 10 UK adults have the higher technical skills that modern industry desperately needs. Last spring, the government's industrial strategy laid out a plan to boost eight key growth sectors, including advanced manufacturing.

It rightly recognised that expanding employers' access to investment in skills training is crucial – yet evidence shows the UK still faces a critical "missing middle" of level 4 and 5 technical skills.

The demand for higher-skilled roles will continue to grow over the next decade and beyond, making it essential that the skills system supports rapid, scalable investment in higher technical skills to maintain competitiveness and unlock growth.

Make UK's research has found that manufacturers are increasing investment in upskilling and retraining existing staff, with a growing focus on higher-level training.

Around 28 per cent report prioritising skills development at levels 4 and 5, and nearly half anticipated doing so within three to five years. While economic pressures may have tempered overall training spend, the underlying demand for higher technical skills remains strong.

This is reflected in Skills England's analysis of occupations in demand and sector skills needs for advanced manufacturing, as part of its work on the industrial strategy.

While the overall size of the advanced manufacturing workforce may not change dramatically, its composition will – shaped by an ageing workforce, the push for net zero and increasing digitalisation, all of which heighten the need for higher technical skills and the right upskilling options for workers at all levels.

The report *Responding to Higher Technical Skills Needs*, published by the Gatsby Foundation and Learning and Work Institute in November, set out the crux of the issue for employers.

There is a higher proportion of skills-shortage vacancies in manufacturing than most other sectors, and the skills system must evolve to enable investment at levels 4 and 5.

Many manufacturers hire young people on level 2 or 3 engineering and manufacturing apprenticeships, or use T Levels to build a pipeline of new entrants into critical roles. They are also hiring more graduates for professional engineering roles, reflecting growing demand in occupations such as electrical and process engineering.

> "The challenge cannot be met through youth routes alone"

But the sector's skills challenge cannot be met through youth routes alone: there is rising demand for level 4 and 5 technical skills yet employers frequently report that provision is hard to navigate and not flexible enough – especially for SMEs and their employees.

Current policy change presents an ideal opportunity to address this. The government's commitment to implementing the lifelong learning entitlement (LLE) from next year, alongside greater flexibility for the growth and skills levy to fund shorter-form training, could support progression into higher technical roles.

However, the Gatsby and L&W report highlights that the LLE may have limited impact on upskilling adults in work unless it is accompanied by sufficient, relevant career guidance.

Make UK's Industrial Strategy Skills Commission, noted in the Gatsby/L&W report, recommended that a skills covenant is drawn up between government, industry and the education sector to resolve the challenges faced by employers, providers and workers.

Beyond high-level funding and resource questions, there are key areas where a difference could be made.

Initiatives such as sector skills passports – hinted at in the industrial strategy and post-16 education and skills white paper – and existing programmes like local skills improvement plans (LSIPs) could boost employer involvement in the design of new level 4-5 provision ahead of the LLE rollout and levy flexibility.

At a critical time for skills policy, improving employers' access to higher technical skills should be a priority. Industry stands ready to collaborate with the education sector and government to ensure that employers can invest in the skills they need.



Opinion

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NUALA SMITH
Lecturer in health and social sciences , East Coast College

Diving into digital reveals a distinct lack of judgment

Inspection and funding systems reward what can be audited, but the human skills students need for safe, ethical practice are being pushed aside, warns Nuala Smith

Further education has become quicker at adopting new technology than teaching the judgment needed to responsibly use it, and our inspection and funding systems reward that imbalance.

Digital platforms, simulations and artificial intelligence are treated as signs of progress and workforce readiness because they are visible and easily quantifiable. The slower work of helping students develop judgment, empathy and professional responsibility is harder to demonstrate, and harder to defend when time is tight.

As a teacher of health and social care, including the health T Level, I see this tension reappearing in everyday lessons. It brings me back to one question: what has to remain human, no matter how advanced our tools become?

I'm not arguing against technology. The issue is what slips down the priority list when systems start valuing what can be logged and audited over what has to be noticed gradually.

This shift shows up clearly in classroom practice. Students are expected to juggle professional judgment alongside platforms, templates and assessment criteria just to progress.

Technology itself isn't the problem; the problem emerges when FE culture rewards procedural confidence and digital fluency more clearly than critical thinking or ethical reasoning.

That matters for health and social care students. Safe practice means bringing together knowledge, professional judgment and values. Evidence-based practice relies on interpretation, not uncritical adherence to guidance.

Yet in systems shaped by inspection and audit, it is far easier to meet checklist requirements than to show how students are learning to sit with uncertainty.

During a graded observation or deep-dive, folders often speak louder than longitudinal evidence, because inspections are time-limited and depend on what can be made quickly legible.

When judgment is constrained, it shows up in how students relate to uncertainty. FE staff will recognise moments when phones come out or group work slips into multitasking. These behaviours reflect a wider environment where discomfort can be avoided and attention divided.

I see the longer-term consequences of this gap from both sides. Alongside teaching in further education, I work part time as a critical care nurse.

> "AI doesn't create this imbalance, it accelerates it"

Looking back at my degree, much of the clinical learning was organised around competencies and tick-box skills. Like many nurses, I didn't really learn how to be a nurse until I qualified.

There has always been a gap between what students are assessed on and what newly qualified practitioners actually need when they are responsible for real people.

I wonder whether this gap helps explain why a significant proportion of newly qualified health and care practitioners leave the profession within the first few years.

The health T Level does a better job of preparing students for the sector than many qualifications that came before it. Reflective practice is embedded, students must demonstrate practical skills to pass, and placements give them experience in real NHS settings.

Even so, students still spend significant time learning systems and assessment demands alongside developing judgment.

Artificial intelligence doesn't introduce this imbalance; it accelerates it. Students are already using AI tools, and responsibility for managing the ethical and educational implications has largely been pushed down to individual institutions and lecturers.

AI can assist with decisions, but responsibility must still sit with people because it cannot explain uncertainty to a patient or family. If FE doesn't explicitly teach students how to question and contextualise AI outputs, some may leave college confident with systems but less prepared when guidance doesn't quite fit or emotions run high.

The problem is not a lack of evidence about what develops judgment, but that our accountability systems are least able to recognise the forms of learning that take the longest to see.

FE sits between policy ambition and what public services are expected to deliver. If education continues to be judged mainly on speed and visible innovation, the slow work of teaching judgment will keep losing ground.

Are our funding models, inspection frameworks and national guidance brave enough to protect the human capacities that public services ultimately depend on?



Bulletin

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Movers & Shakers

Your weekly guide to who's new and who's leaving



Sarah Young

Chief Learning Officer, Inspire Education Group

Start date: March 2026

Previous Job: Vice Principal - Student and Staff Experience, Inspire Education Group

Interesting fact: Having spent 14 years in the travel industry, Sarah has travelled the globe, getting engaged in Australia and married in Mexico



Josh Hill

Operations Director, PET-Xi Training

Start date: March 2026

Previous Job: Business Development Director for Adult Education, SCL Education Group

Interesting fact: Josh is a gigging musician and performs in a number of bands, playing rock and blues on bass, keys, guitar and vocals gives him a real avenue of expression outside of the working world

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