Billy Huband-Thompson
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November 2026

Staying the course

Improving apprenticeship completion for young people

About the Sutton Trust

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Acknowledgements

This report draws on data and analysis produced by Focaldata for the Sutton Trust.

This research is supported by The John Armitage Charitable Trust. The John Armitage Charitable Trust is dedicated to helping people to help themselves through its grant-making. The Trust focuses on education, early years and young people, and former offenders, and gives to a wide range of causes designed to give people the tools and opportunities to thrive.

We would like to thank the employers, training providers, charities, research organisations and others who gave up their time to be interviewed for this work.

Table of contents

Executive Summary 4

Policy recommendations 8

Introduction: earning, learning and set-up for working life 10

Background 14

Methods: understanding the apprenticeship journey 26

Results and analysis 31

Discussion and recommendations 73

Appendix 85

Executive Summary

This research maps the experience of over 300 young apprentices, including 100 who started an apprenticeship and dropped out before completion. It seeks to understand what drives apprenticeship non-completions among young people and what can be done to boost the achievement rate.

Context around apprenticeship achievement rates

- There has been an 'apprenticeship drift' away from young people since 2017. Starts for 16-24 year-olds have fallen by over a third (35.0%) since the Apprenticeship Levy's introduction while over half (51.3%) of opportunities in 2024/25 went to apprentices aged 25 or over.

- Fewer than two-thirds (65.4%) of apprentices currently complete their programmes. This is lower for those in the most deprived areas (62.0%) and slightly lower for 16-18 year-old apprentices (64.3%).

- Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to drop out of an apprenticeship. Contributing factors here include a low apprenticeship minimum wage, cost of living challenges, and cost of travel among others.

Choosing an apprenticeship

- Young people feel that apprenticeships often played second fiddle to university in careers information, advice and guidance at school. Part of this is explained by university being a more-trodden path for teachers and students, with an application process that is organised around UCAS and easier to navigate.

- Many young people struggled to find apprenticeship opportunities in their area, meaning some would accept the first offer they received rather than making a proactive choice reflecting their background and preferences.

- While some young people would carefully compare employers, qualifications and career pathways when looking at apprenticeships, others - particularly those with immediate financial needs - were far less discerning. This raises the risk of apprenticeship mismatches and non-completions.

Working with the employer

- The first weeks are crucial for apprentices. Many interviewees reported struggling with unfamiliar professional expectations, building relationships, and getting to grips with established ways of working, alongside the technical aspects of their jobs.

- Some groups of young people (such as women in male-dominated industries) voiced concerns about their sense of belonging in the workplace, affirming the importance of employers committing to building inclusive work environments.

- Young apprentices described line managers as having the greatest influence on their apprenticeship experience. Unfortunately, many reported having weak or even absent line managers, which left them struggling to manage their programme.

Working with the training provider

- Many apprentices reported spending significant amounts of time completing their training outside of normal working hours and dedicated off-the-job (OTJ) training time.

- OTJ training quality was very important to young apprentices, with key differences between experiences with further education colleges and independent training providers.

- Independent training providers offered control, flexibility, and the time and money savings associated with remote provision. However, many interviewees spoke of poor-quality online training and sporadic or even non-existent contact with their academic tutor.

- Further education colleges were more likely to offer training that apprentices deemed useful, with praise for face-to-face learning, regular contact with tutors and peers, and the quality of instruction. However, staffing was a key concern, with teacher shortages affecting learning.

The relationship between the employer and training provider

- Young apprentices wanted to feel that their work with their employer and training provider formed a coherent programme. However, some young apprentices described training as a 'box-ticking' exercise, rather than equipping them with workplace knowledge, skills and behaviours.

- Young people were often left to manage the logistics of their own apprenticeship – flagging diary clashes, explaining different components of their apprenticeship to each party and then balancing competing demands from their employer and training providers.

- Support was key. Many of those who left apprenticeships early had faced similar difficulties to those who completed. The difference was that they did not receive the necessary coordinated support from their employer and training provider to overcome these challenges.

Navigating an apprenticeship on low pay

- Many young people noted how low pay and cost of living challenges affected their work and learning but also their wellbeing, families, and relationships. Some young people took on weekend jobs on top of their apprenticeships, which could affect their work and study. Others struggled for meals and borrowed money from family and lenders.

- For apprentices from low-income backgrounds or those otherwise struggling financially, such challenges led them to question the viability of their apprenticeship and, in some cases, drop out altogether.

Apprenticeship drop-outs: an accumulation of challenges

- Apprenticeship drop-outs are often caused by multiple contributing factors, rather than a single cause. Many young apprentices we heard from had stuck with their apprenticeship in the face of challenges, hoping that their experience would improve, only leaving as a last resort.

- While contributing factors varied, some were particularly common, namely weak line management, lack of alignment between employer work and off-the-job training, workload challenges, and disjointed programme delivery, which undermined the 'earn as you learn' model. These issues were compounded by personal factors, such as financial hardship.

What did young apprentices do after dropping out?

- The perspectives of those who did not complete their apprenticeship differed greatly depending on where they went next. Many moved quickly into work or further study and felt the experience had helped them gain knowledge, skills and clarity over what their next steps should be.

- Other apprentice non-completers needed time to regroup. For this group, leaving their apprenticeship was often initially seen as a difficult experience, involving unemployment, picking up temporary work, receiving benefits or moving back to their family homes as they considered their next steps.

- Another significant group had dropped out following burnout, anxiety or other wellbeing-related struggles and did so without another option lined up afterwards. These young people would often spend weeks or months recovering and getting back to regular routines before considering their next steps.

- A smaller group found it very difficult to get back on their feet. This was often those who had dropped out in particularly difficult circumstances, such as losing their job. These young people noted scarring effects on their employment prospects and their self-confidence and sense of self-worth.

Policy recommendations

Matching young people with apprenticeship opportunities

In the Autumn Budget, the chancellor announced the growth of the Mayoral Apprenticeship Brokerage Pilots. This has the potential to significantly boost apprenticeship achievements among young people across the country. To maximise the success of local apprenticeship services, the government should:

- Give employers support that goes beyond matching and focuses on boosting apprenticeship completion, as well as starts.
- Set out plans to expand local apprenticeship services to areas not currently represented by mayors.
- Offer support to employers to improve access and success among those that may face barriers to apprenticeships, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- Work closely with alternative provision providers, local charities, community organisations, youth groups and other non-mainstream settings to meet young people where they are.
- Tailor employer support by industry, sector, size and level of experience with apprenticeships.

Wider steps to boost supply

- The government should explore targeted incentives for training providers, focusing on both apprenticeship starts and achievements.
- The government should pilot staggered incentives for employers and training providers within the 16-24 age group (such as those who are 16-18).
- Skills England should commit to extending Local Skills Improvement Plans beyond 2029, improving local coordination and boosting apprenticeship opportunities.

- The Mayoral Strategic Authorities receiving the Local Growth Fund should invest it in supporting apprentices in industries and sectors with particular skills needs.

Improving quality and consistency of provision

- Apprenticeships should have a minimum requirement for face-to-face off-the-job (OTJ) training, with greater clarity on what counts as OTJ training and tighter enforcement of training requirements.

- Skills England should consider allowing a set number of OTJ hours to be used prior to an apprentice officially starting their programme to ensure apprentices can start on the front foot.

- Skills England should introduce a fully funded, optional line management training unit for SMEs taking on young apprentices.

- The government should consult on rebalancing the timing of funding payments to large training providers so that greater weight is given to completion.

- The Department for Education should look to expand teaching bursaries for shortage subjects in Further Education Colleges.

- The Department for Work and Pensions should continue collection and analysis of the 'Apprenticeship Evaluation Learner Survey', sharing results publicly for the benefit of the sector.

Removing financial barriers to apprenticeship achievement

- The government should ensure that the social security system does not discourage disadvantaged 16-18 year-olds from starting and completing apprenticeships.

- The government should build on existing support and incentives to support apprenticeship opportunities for those from disadvantaged groups, such as care leavers and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

- National and local government should explore targeted transport bursaries and view transport infrastructure as a key lever for boosting apprenticeship access.

Introduction: earning, learning and set-up for working life

Apprenticeships are having their moment. While our major political parties are divided on curriculum reform, the development of technical pathways in secondary school, and the future of universities, they share a belief that apprenticeships hold great potential for young people and that their promise is not being realised.

This, in part, reflects the scale of the challenge facing young people in the labour market. Around one million young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET) – this is bad for young people, families, local communities, businesses, taxpayers and our economy. There is a clear appetite to ensure that young people have the knowledge, skills, experience and opportunities they need to start their careers and get on in life.

Across all major party conferences, we heard from politicians that apprenticeships should be an essential part of our response to the NEET crisis; that the 'earn as you learn' model can offer young people vital work experience and, with the support of a training provider, a structured programme of learning that sets them up in a particular industry or sector.

However, at present, we are not realising this potential. While there were some 353,500 apprenticeship starts in 2024/25, this is still below pre-pandemic levels.[1] Moreover, over the last decade, we have witnessed an 'apprenticeship drift', where, following the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017, apprenticeships have shifted away from young people towards older, more experienced workers.[2] Starts for 16-24 year-olds have fallen by over a third (35.0%)[3] since the Levy's introduction while over half (51.3%) of opportunities in 2024/25 went to apprentices

[1] Much of the recent growth has also been accounted for by the rise in Level 7 apprenticeship, which is likely in anticipation of funding changes for Level 7 apprenticeships.

Department for Work & Pensions. 'Apprenticeships: Academic year 2025/26'. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships/2025-26#dataBlock-900b4748-3f8a-4e40-96ef-2f6a33b14ad2-tables

[2] Department for Work & Pensions. 2026. 'Young people and work: Interim report'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report

[3] *ibid.*

aged 25 or over.[4] In addition, Sutton Trust research has revealed that those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who stand to gain the greatest earnings premium from apprenticeships, are less likely to access apprenticeships.[5] This is doubly concerning given young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to become NEET.[6]

The government are aware of these challenges and, through the new Growth & Skills Levy and a series of announcements at the start of 2026, have sought to shift apprenticeships back towards young people. This includes a plan to offer SMEs £2,000 and funded training for apprentices under 25, limits on Level 7 apprenticeship funding and an ambition to have 50,000 extra apprenticeship starts for young people over the next three years, among other announcements.

"However, getting young people to start apprenticeships is only half the battle – we also need to look at apprenticeship achievement."

These changes may herald a shift towards what the public generally perceives an apprenticeship to be – a young person's kick-start in the world of work. However, getting young people to start apprenticeships is only half the battle – we also need to look at **apprenticeship achievement**.

As previous Sutton Trust research has outlined, the proportion of apprentices who drop out of their course is high by international standards. (27% in France, 25% in Germany).[7] Notwithstanding recent improvements in the apprenticeship achievement rate, **fewer than two-thirds (65.4%) of apprentices currently complete their programmes**. This is even lower for those in the most deprived areas (62.0%) and for 16-18 year-old apprentices (64.3%).

This represents a missed opportunity. While apprentices may drop out of their course for a range of reasons, this can have stark implications for future earnings and career trajectories. Recent NFER research finds that apprenticeship non-completers earned over a third (34%) less than those who completed one year after withdrawing, and 30% less three years after

[4] Department for Work & Pensions. 'Apprenticeships: Academic year 2025/26'. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships/2025-26#dataBlock-900b4748-3f8a-4e40-96ef-2f6a33b14ad2-tables

[5] Field, S. 2025. 'A World of Difference'. https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/a-world-of-difference/

[6] GOV.UK Social Mobility Data. 2026. 'State of the Nation'. https://social-mobility.data.gov.uk/state-of-the-nation

[7] Field, S. 2025. 'A World of Difference'. https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/a-world-of-difference/https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/a-world-of-difference/

withdrawing.[8] They are also more likely to experience a spell of unemployment in the three years following their non-completion[9]. A low apprenticeship achievement rate also has implications for employers and the labour market, which misses out on the knowledge and skills that a qualified apprentice can offer.

In this context, the **government is aiming to reach an apprenticeship achievement rate of 70%.**[10] To meet and exceed this target and realise the potential of apprenticeships for young people, we need to better understand the experience of young apprentices and what leads them to complete their apprenticeship or to drop out.

This report looks to track every stage of young people's apprenticeship journey – from when they first heard about apprenticeships, through to when they completed or dropped out of their programme.

Through a series of conversations with young people conducted through an AI-supported interviewing tool, we have mapped the experiences of over 300 young apprentices, including 100 of those that have started an apprenticeship and since dropped out.

We asked young apprentices about their journey: how they first heard about apprenticeships, why they decided to apply, and what their early experiences were like. We also asked about their relationships with their employer and training provider, the challenges they faced, and the support they did or did not receive to help them complete their programme.

Through the work, we find that while people's pathways through apprenticeships are unique, they often share common experiences – going into an apprenticeship without the guidance they needed to make an informed decision; a disconnect between their work with their employer and their off-the-job training; weak line management; a breakdown of the 'earn as you learn' model. Many also spoke of financial challenges and other barriers that made the apprenticeship feel unmanageable and, in some cases, led them to drop out.

"Many also spoke of financial challenges and other barriers that made the apprenticeship feel unmanageable and, in some cases, led them to drop out."

[8] Bocock et al. 2026. 'Securing success from start to finish'. NFER. http://nfer.ac.uk/media/buujsvfo/securing_success_from_start_to_finish.pdf

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Camden, B. 2026. 'Apprenticeship achievement rate falls just short of 67% target'. FE Week. https://feweek.co.uk/apprenticeship-achievement-rate-falls-just-short-of-67-target/

Level 2 floorlaying is, of course, going to look different to a Level 5 data engineering apprenticeship. There is also, as we capture in the report, variation by sector, industry, geography, mode of delivery, training provider, and a plethora of other factors.

In this report, we try to balance the need for this granular insight with a desire to develop a series of general findings and principles that capture the key challenges facing young people on apprenticeships and what can be done to boost the achievement rate.

In addition, we spoke with employers, training providers, charities and others to get a range of perspectives on some of the barriers to apprenticeship achievement and how the sector is responding 'on the ground'.

The work culminates in a series of key findings and recommendations for employers, training providers, and government.

If we are to realise the promise of apprenticeships, we need to help young people to become 'work ready', grow high-quality opportunities, tackle barriers to access and achievement, and ultimately set them up for success.

Background

The apprenticeship achievement rate has not yet recovered from the shift to standards

The apprenticeship achievement rate refers to the proportion of apprenticeship starts that go on to complete their programme.

Since 2014, apprenticeship frameworks (qualification-based frameworks) have been phased out in favour of apprenticeship standards, which aim to be better aligned with the knowledge, skills and behaviours required in different occupations.[11] This shift has been accompanied by various other changes, including the introduction of an independent End Point Assessment (EPA)[12] and a requirement for apprentices to spend a fifth of their time on off-the-job training.[13] Since 1st August 2020, all new apprenticeship starts have been on standards.[14] There have also been changes to standards since their introduction, with the minimum apprenticeship duration reduced from 12 to 8 months for all starts from 1st August 2025. A detailed outline of England's apprenticeship system can be found in the Sutton Trust's *A World of Difference* report.[15]

As NFER research has documented, the decline in the achievement rate between 2013/14 and 2023/24 was largely explained by the shift from frameworks to standards, with particularly large differences for advanced and intermediate level apprenticeships.[16] There are several potential contributors to this, including the expected apprenticeship duration being

[11] Bocock et al. 2026. 'Securing success from start to finish'. NFER. http://nfer.ac.uk/media/buujsvfo/securing_success_from_start_to_finish.pdf

[12] Changes to apprenticeship assessment are being introduced between 2025 to 2026, including replacing the EPA with a new approach that will allow apprentices to be assessed at any point during their apprenticeship.

Department for Work & Pensions. 2026. 'Changes to apprenticeship assessment: 2025 to 2026'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-funding-rules-2025-to-2026/changes-to-apprenticeship-assessment-2025-to-2026

[13] Bocock et al. 2026. 'Securing success from start to finish'. NFER. http://nfer.ac.uk/media/buujsvfo/securing_success_from_start_to_finish.pdf

[14] Powell, A. 'Apprenticeships Policy in England'. House of Commons Library. https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN03052/SN03052.pdf

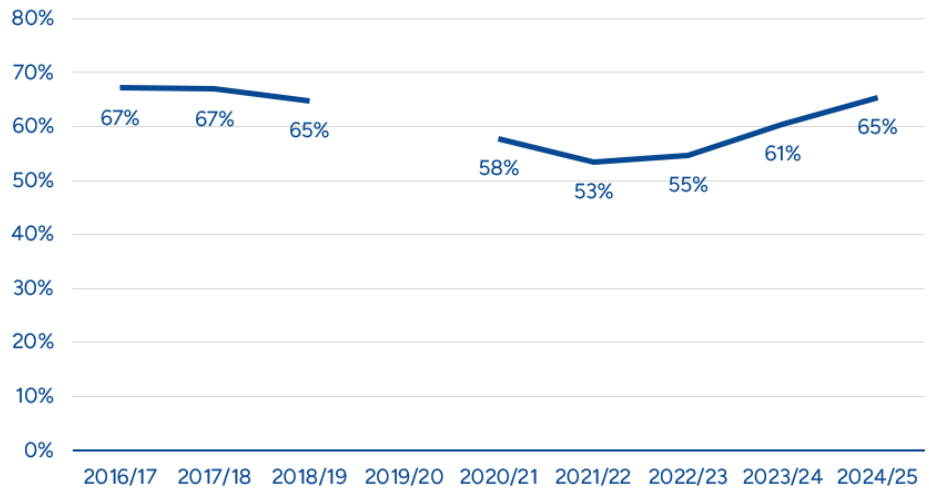
[15] Though it should be noted that there have been changes to the apprenticeship system since, such as the reduction of the minimum apprenticeship duration from 12 to 8-months.

[16] Bocock et al. 2026. 'Securing success from start to finish'. NFER. http://nfer.ac.uk/media/buujsvfo/securing_success_from_start_to_finish.pdf

longer and there being a greater difference between actual and expected apprenticeship duration.[17] In 2020, following the phasing out of apprenticeship frameworks, the apprenticeship completion rate was just 53% (see Figure 1).

The rate has since improved, reaching 65% in 2024/25 - though this is still shy of the 70% target. There are several potential explanations here, including reforms to English and Maths requirements, post-pandemic recovery, the apprenticeship standards system bedding in, and a series of interventions aimed at improving quality and achievement. While achievement rates have increased across all age groups and levels, the biggest increases have been among those aged 24 and over and those on higher level apprenticeships.[18]

Figure 1: The apprenticeship achievement rate has not fully recovered since the move to apprenticeship standards



Source: DfE/DWP – Apprenticeships data (Explore education statistics).

[17] Bocock et al. 2026. 'Securing success from start to finish'. NFER. http://nfer.ac.uk/media/buujsvfo/securing_success_from_start_to_finish.pdf

[18] Department for Work & Pensions. 'Apprenticeships: Academic year 2025/26'. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships/2025-26#dataBlock-900b4748-3f8a-4e40-96ef-2f6a33b14ad2-tables

The apprenticeship achievement rate is useful but has limitations

Throughout our conversations with employers, training providers, representative bodies and others working on apprenticeships, we heard about the strengths and limitations of the qualification achievement rate (QAR) - the percentage of apprentices that complete their programme.

While QAR is a useful headline measure, it does not capture the reasons that apprentices might have dropped out, such as being offered a job at the same organisation or the movement from one apprenticeship to another. There have been historical challenges with the data being collected through Individualised Learner Records (ILR), with the 'Other' and 'Other personal reasons' categories accounting for over 90% of withdrawal responses.[19]

Moreover, there was acknowledgement that a training provider might feel they are being penalised for a non-completion that is not their fault. For instance, where an apprentice dropped out because of an unforeseen issue with their employer (e.g. a takeover) or because of personal factors outside of their apprenticeship. One of our expert interviewees also pointed out that we might expect young apprentices to be particularly mobile in their early career.

Another concern is that the achievement rate is a blunt metric that does not capture the value that apprenticeship non-completers may have gotten out of their programme, even if they did not see it through to the end. One of our expert interviewees argued that a non-completer on some apprenticeships may go on to have decent job prospects and earnings, partly due to the skills, competencies and qualifications they have gained over the programme.

The same expert argued that some stakeholders may view a high QAR as indicative of a weak qualification. Here, they felt that apprenticeships moving to the Department for Work and Pensions should see a greater emphasis on long-term outcomes, not just qualifications.

The apprenticeship achievement rate continues to be a useful measure and one that should be of interest to employers, providers and policymakers. However, it should be viewed within this wider context.

[19] Burton, G. 2025. 'Beyond the 60%: Why apprenticeship dropout data needs deeper scrutiny'. FE Week. https://feweek.co.uk/beyond-the-60-why-apprenticeship-dropout-data-needs-deeper-scrutiny/

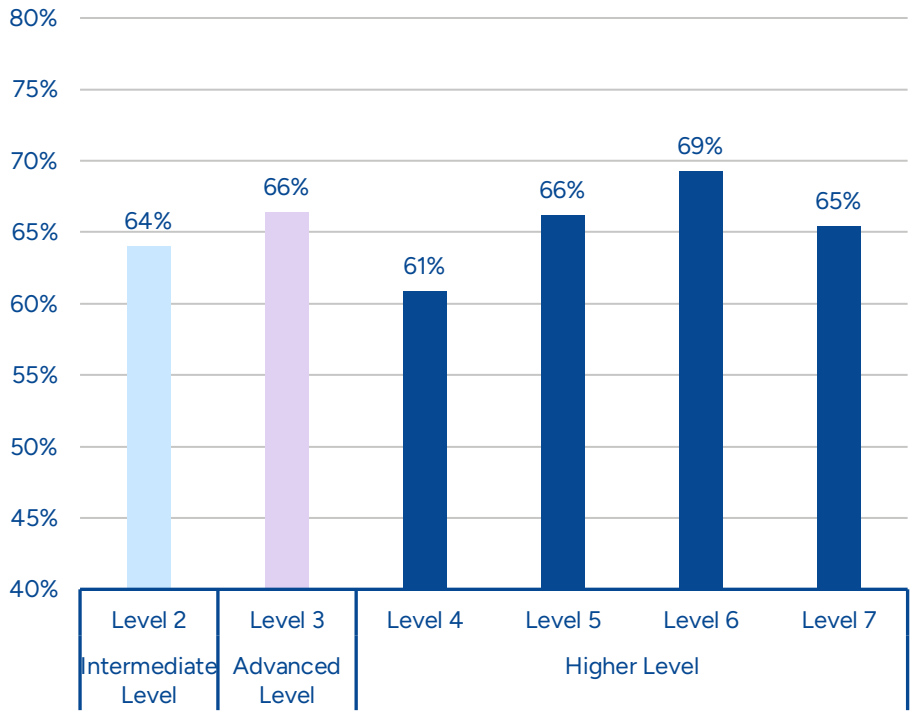
Apprenticeship achievements vary greatly by employer, training provider and sector

While overall apprenticeship achievement rates are useful in understanding the scale of the challenge, such data hides great variation by employer, training provider and sector, along with individual-level factors, such as socio-economic background. This section outlines some of these differences, referencing the most recent available data. In addition, we draw on NFER analysis of 2014/15 - 2019/20 data, which uses regression results to isolate differences between groups, controlling for other factors and characteristics.

Variation by level and sector

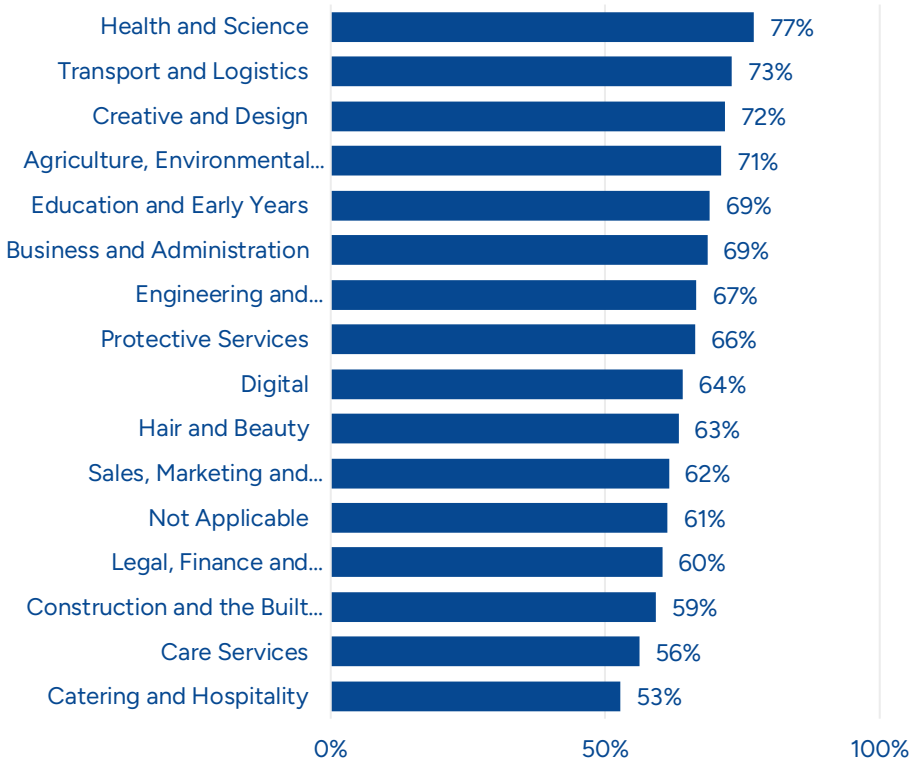
The latest apprenticeships data for 2024/25 shows that achievement rates varied by level: 64% for intermediate apprenticeships (Level 2); 66.4% for advanced apprenticeships (Level 3); and 64.9% for higher level apprenticeships (Levels 4 and above), with some significant variation within this latter category.

Figure 2: Apprenticeship achievement rates by level, 2024/25



Source: DfE/DWP – Apprenticeships data (Explore education statistics).

Figure 3: Apprenticeship achievement rates by route, 2024/25



Source: DfE/DWP – Apprenticeships data (Explore education statistics).

Achievement rates also vary by sector and occupational routes. Catering and Hospitality apprenticeships have an achievement rate of 52.8%, whereas Health and Science has a rate of 77.1%. Some of these factors may be due to industry-specific apprenticeship issues. In construction, for instance (which has a relatively low achievement rate at 59.2%), a high proportion of freelancers may mean that more apprentices drop out of their apprenticeship to become self-employed. Sector differences in achievement might also partly reflect attrition rates in the given sector more generally.[20] These differences by sector and occupational routes will also be shaped by other factors such as pay, geography and the make-up of the apprenticeship cohort.

Drawing on administrative data, the NFER have found that, holding other characteristics constant, apprentices at larger employers were less likely to withdraw, and larger apprenticeship programmes were similarly associated

[20] NatWest Mentor. 2026. 'Staff turnover rates by industry UK: 2026 benchmarks'. https://www.natwestmentor.co.uk/news/staff-turnover-rates-by-industry-uk-2026-benchmarks

with lower withdrawal rates.[21] Employers with more experience in the apprenticeship system also had lower likelihood of withdrawal, and apprentices who previously worked for their apprenticeship employer were less likely to withdraw.[22]

Training provider factors

Achievement rates also vary greatly by provider type but much of this is explained by apprenticeship, learner, provider and employer factors.[23] Independent Training Providers, which make up the largest share of apprenticeship achievements (124,720 in 2024/25) have an achievement rate of 65.7%, while General FE Colleges (36,010 achievements in 2024/25) have a slightly lower rate at 63.4%.[24] The next largest category is 'Other', which encompasses "HE, NHS Trusts, Military, Govt departments, and other public bodies" (34,100 completes in 2024/25) and has the highest achievement rate at 73.0%.

There is also significant variation in achievement rates between providers. In 2024/25, achievement rates among the largest 20 providers ranged from 81.3% to around 51.2%.[25] This is likely partly shaped by learner profile, employer characteristics, industries and other factors. However, NFER have found that, after holding all other characteristics constant, providers with 'inadequate' Ofsted ratings have higher withdrawal rates than other providers – suggesting that provider approaches and practices matter[26]. In addition, they found that providers with fewer than 10 apprentices and those with less experience with apprenticeships had higher withdrawal rates.

[21] Bocock et al. 2026. 'Securing success from start to finish'. NFER. http://nfer.ac.uk/media/buujsvfo/securing_success_from_start_to_finish.pdf

[22] *ibid.*

[23] *ibid.*

[24] The data here refers to 'Private Sector Public Funded' providers.

Department for Work & Pensions. 'Apprenticeships: Academic year 2025/26'. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships/2025-26#dataBlock-900b4748-3f8a-4e40-96ef-2f6a33b14ad2-tables

[25] Camden, B. 2026. 'Apprenticeship achievement rate falls just short of 67% target'. FE Week. https://feweek.co.uk/apprenticeship-achievement-rate-falls-just-short-of-67-target/

[26] Bocock et al. 2026. 'Securing success from start to finish'. NFER. http://nfer.ac.uk/media/buujsvfo/securing_success_from_start_to_finish.pdf

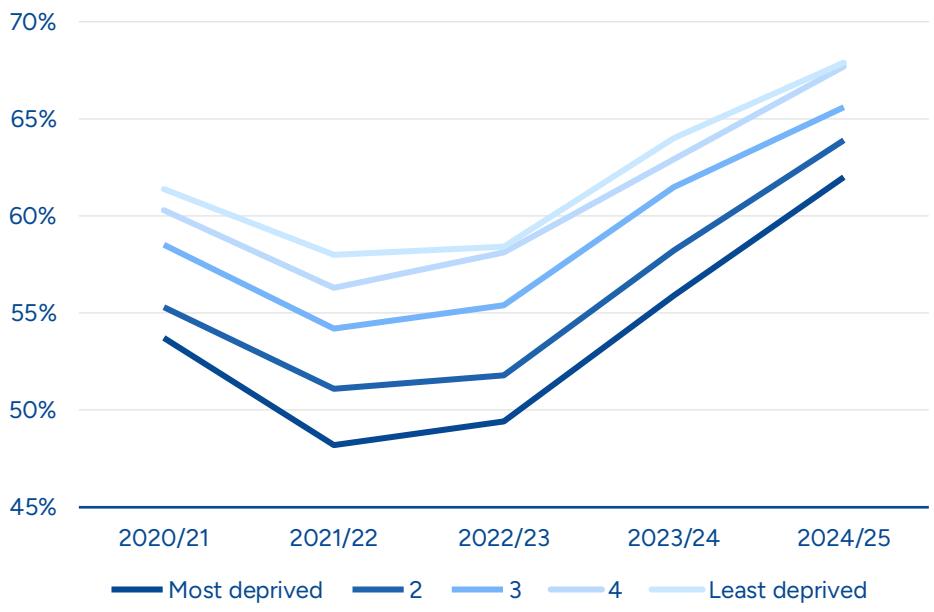
Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to complete their apprenticeship

As discussed later in this report, low pay can often make it difficult for apprentices to manage their living costs if they are unable to draw upon family support or savings. It is therefore unsurprising that there is a persistent disadvantage gap in apprenticeship achievements.

"Low pay can often make it difficult for apprentices to manage their living costs if they are unable to draw upon family support or savings."

This disadvantage gap has narrowed in recent years, largely driven by an increase in achievement rates for those from the most deprived quintiles. An apprentice from the most deprived areas in 2024/25 has a higher chance of completing than one from the most affluent areas in 2020/21. However, in 2024/25, there was still a 5.9pp achievement rate gap between those in the most and the least deprived quintiles.[27]

Figure 4: Achievement rates by IMD quintile, 2021/22 – 2024/25



Source: DfE/DWP – Apprenticeships data (Explore education statistics).

The size of this IMD gap varies across a range of other factors:[28]

[27] 8.1pp in 2023/24 and 9.0pp in 2022/23

[28] Department for Education and Department for Work and Pensions. 2026. 'Explore education statistics'. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/

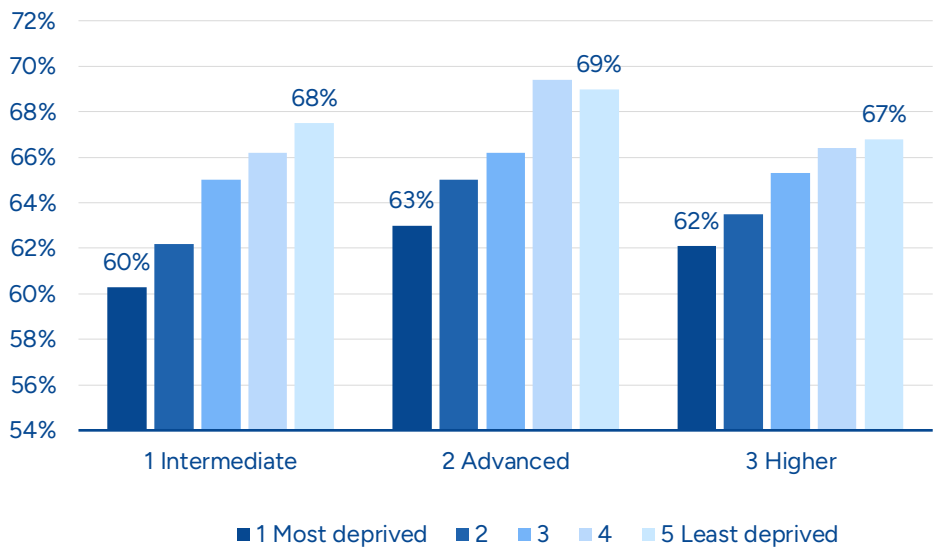
- **Level:** The greater IMD gaps were seen for lower levels of apprenticeships (7.2pp at intermediate compared to 4.7pp at higher levels).

- **Age:** Overall, 19-23 year-olds are more likely to complete (67.3%) than 16-18 year-olds (64.3%) and those 24 or over (64.9%). The IMD gap was largest for 19-23-year-olds (6.5pp), followed by 16-18-year-olds (6.1pp) and older apprentices (24+) at 5.2pp. These show a marked improvement from the 8-10pp gaps in the previous year, though illustrates there is still a long way to go in closing the gap.

- **Sector:** The IMD gap in achievement rates was 10.8pp in Leisure, travel and tourism, 10.5pp in retail and commerce and 10.1pp in Science and Maths, to -6pp in social sciences and -3.9pp in digital technology. Across many sectors, those from the most deprived quintile saw the highest improvements in achievement rates such as construction, digital technology, business and health.

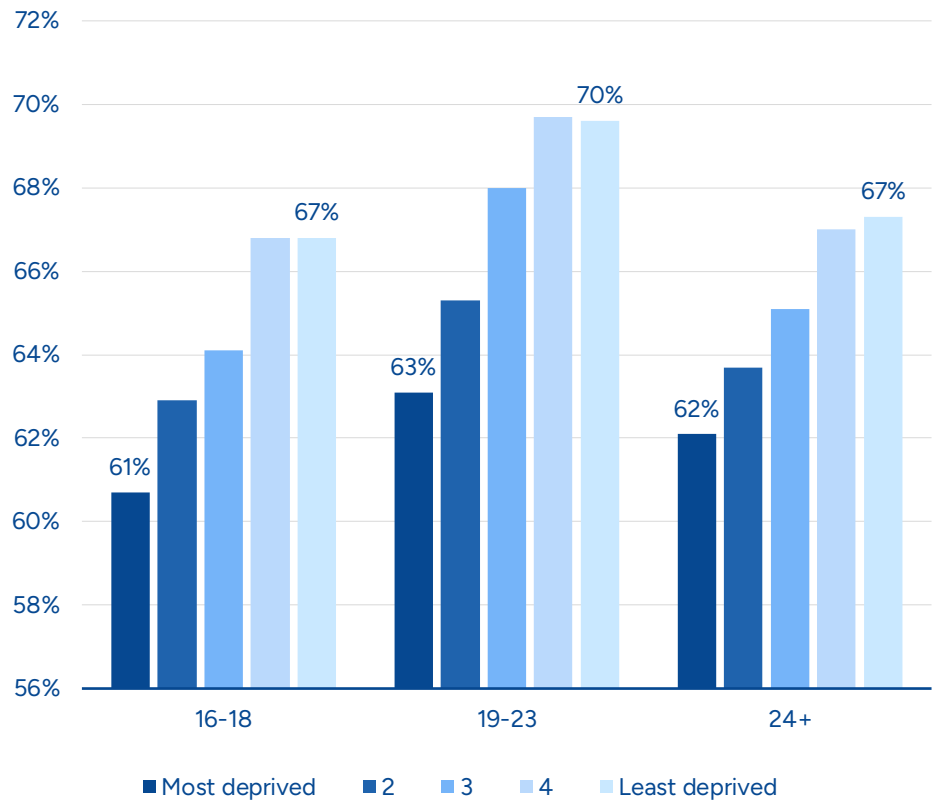
Here, we can see the importance of disaggregating apprenticeship achievement rates and viewing them in context. Strikingly, **apprentices from the most deprived areas had an achievement rate of only 55% in retail and leisure**, compared to 73% in education and social sciences.

Figure 5: Achievement rate by apprenticeship level, by IMD quintile



Source: DfE/DWP – Apprenticeships data (Explore education statistics).
Note: Intermediate (Levels 2); Advanced (Level 3); Higher (Levels 4-7).

Figure 6: Achievement rates, by IMD quintile and age group



Source: DfE/DWP – Apprenticeships data (Explore education statistics).

Apprenticeship drop-outs: multiple causes, a range of outcomes

An apprentice may drop out of their programme for numerous reasons. It might be that their apprenticeship was low-quality; that personal circumstances meant they could no longer support themselves on the apprenticeship; that they have been offered a job with their employer; or a range of these and other factors.

In our expert interviews, we heard the importance of acknowledging that 'there are drop-outs and then there are drop-outs'. A young apprentice might have gained a lot during their apprenticeship but realise it is not for them and that an alternative route might be a better match. Others may have been stuck with poor line management and an unmanageable workload, leaving their confidence damaged and with little relevant experience that they can draw on in job applications. These are both 'drop-

outs' but will clearly have different causes and consequences for young people's futures.

Public data on apprenticeship non-completion: greater visibility needed

Attempts have been made, both within and outside of government to better understand the reasons given for apprenticeship non-completion. A series of eight DfE reports between 2011-2023 shared findings from the Apprenticeship Evaluation Learner and Non-Completer Surveys. In the most recent publication, this comprised 4,919 interviews with current apprentices and completers and 506 interviews with apprenticeship non-completers.

More recently, an unpublished Department for Education report on Apprenticeship Achievements (April 2025) provides an analysis of exit survey and other apprenticeship data. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) now holds the apprenticeship exit survey and apprenticeship evaluation surveys. As we note in our recommendations, this data should be shared publicly as a matter of course - providing insights for employers, training providers, apprentices and policymakers.

The DWP needs to invest in this data infrastructure to ensure its policy development, and the practice of employers and training providers, is informed by the best available evidence.

Across the 4,617 apprentices who completed the official apprenticeship exit survey since October 2022, the top three categories of reasons for withdrawing include issues relating to personal circumstances (39%), training provider (31%) and employer (30%).[29] Within these categories, the top three reasons to leave were being offered another job (9%), provider training was of poor quality (9%) and not enjoying the apprenticeship (8%).

Outside of government, other research has sought to understand the experiences of apprenticeship drop-outs in greater depth. Notably, St Martin's Group commissioned the Learning and Work Institute to conduct a survey of 2,427 apprentices sampled through Individualised Learning Record (ILR) data.[30] They found that the most common reasons for withdrawal included lack of support from their employer (37%); poor course organisation/ change to logistics (32%); high workload (29%); lack of support from their tutor (26%); poor-quality teaching (24%); and loss of interest or motivation (27%).

[29] The Department for Education. 2025. Apprenticeship Achievements: Analytical report for the sector.

[30] St Martin's Group and Learning & Work Institute. 2022. 'Apprenticeship Outcomes and Destinations'. https://stmartinsgroup.org/report/apprenticeship-outcomes-destinations/

Drop-outs tend to be the result of multiple issues

The exit surveys also demonstrate that many factors may contribute to apprentices leaving their programme even if they are not given as the main reason for dropping out. For instance, in the 2023 exit survey, only 3% of apprentice non-completers gave "The salary was too low or you were struggling to get by financially" as the main reason for doing so but 27% cited it as a contributing factor.[31] Similarly, just 9% of respondents said they dropped out because "The apprenticeship was badly run or poorly organised" but almost half (49%) cited this as a contributing factor.

These findings show the complexity of apprenticeship non-completion and underline the importance of gaining in-depth insights concerning apprentices' experiences and how these have contributed to the overall outcome. This report aims to address this gap.

Figure 7: Reasons for apprenticeship non-completion

Reasons for not completing their apprenticeship	Main Reason	Contributing Reason
Another / better job offer	16%	36%
Did not get on with employer	11%	30%
Not enough time for learning or training	10%	43%
The apprenticeship was badly run or poorly organised	9%	49%
Training wasn't as good as you hoped	6%	46%
Did not want to work in the job role the apprenticeship was training for	4%	37%
The apprenticeship was stopped or cancelled	4%	18%
Found it too difficult or you were falling behind	4%	35%
The salary was too low or you were struggling financially	3%	27%
Physical health issues (non-COVID)	3%	7%
Felt could progress in the job role without finishing	3%	31%
Mental health issues	3%	8%

Source: DfE Apprenticeship Evaluation Survey 2023 (via DfE Apprenticeship Achievements, April 2025 report)

[31] IFF Research. 2024. 'Apprenticeship Evaluation 2023: Learner and Non-completer Surveys'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-evaluation-2023-learner-non-completer-and-employer-surveys

Young apprentices cite different reasons for dropping out

Official survey data also suggests that young people often drop out for different reasons than their older counterparts.

While 11% of apprenticeship non-completers in the DfE's 2023 survey cited not getting on with their employer as the main reason for dropping out, this was 18% for those in the under 19 and 19-24 age-groups. The 19-24 age-group were also more likely to cite receiving another/better job offer as the main reason (22% compared to 16% of respondents at large).[32] This may reflect that this younger age group are likely to be starting out in the world of work and so are more sensitive to their workplace and open to opportunities elsewhere. More broadly, these age-related differences speak to the need to understand the particular circumstances surrounding young people's experience of apprenticeships.

The importance of mapping young people's apprenticeship experiences

Previous research suggests that young apprentices may drop out of their apprenticeships early for numerous reasons. However, what is missing is an in-depth look at how these factors interact across young people's apprenticeship journey. In this report, we offer qualitative insights that get under the skin of the issues – looking at how young people's experience with employers, training providers, and other parts of the apprenticeship ecosystem shape their experiences and, ultimately, whether they complete their apprenticeship.

[32] Department for Education. 2025. 'Apprenticeship Achievements: Analytical report for the sector'.

Methods: understanding the apprenticeship journey

Mapping the apprenticeship experience

In this research, we draw on 317 qualitative interviews with English adults aged 18-30 who started an apprenticeship after 31st July 2020, including 100 participants who did not complete their apprenticeship. We chose 31st July 2020 as the cut-off date as after this date all apprentices started on apprenticeship standards, not frameworks.[33]

These interviews were conducted by Focaldata, via an AI-supported chatbot. Two rounds of pilot interviews were conducted and used to refine the topic guide and prompts, before being rolled out to the full sample. The vast majority of quotes are verbatim, with some edited to improve clarity but preserve meaning. Further methodological detail is included in the Appendix.

In our interviews, we ask about all stages of young people's apprenticeship journey – from when they first heard what an apprenticeship was, through to them completing or dropping out of their apprenticeship. We also asked completers and non-completers to look back at their experiences and consider their apprenticeship's longer-term impact on their career.

Journeys through apprenticeships are not always linear. It may be that a young person has studied, worked or even started another apprenticeship before getting to the programme in question. Our approach allows us to understand these different experiences. Moreover, through our interviews, we were also able to attend to challenges and barriers that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds face, as well as other characteristics and contexts that might affect young people's experiences.

In this research our focus is on what made apprentices choose to complete or not complete their apprenticeship. This means we do not focus on apprentices who did not complete because their apprenticeship was stopped or cancelled, for instance. According to the Apprenticeship Evaluation Survey 2023, this was the main reason for non-completion for

[33] Powell, A. 'Apprenticeships Policy in England'. House of Commons Library. https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN03052/SN03052.pdf

4% of apprenticeship non-completers and a contributing reason for 18%.[34] Such factors are very important to understand and respond to if we are to improve the apprenticeship achievement rate. However, they are beyond the scope of this research.

In addition to these qualitative interviews with young apprentices we also conducted a series of expert interviews with employers, training providers, representative bodies, charities and others, which helped provide additional insights and context, and inform our policy recommendations.

Further detail about our sample of young apprentices can be found in the Appendix.

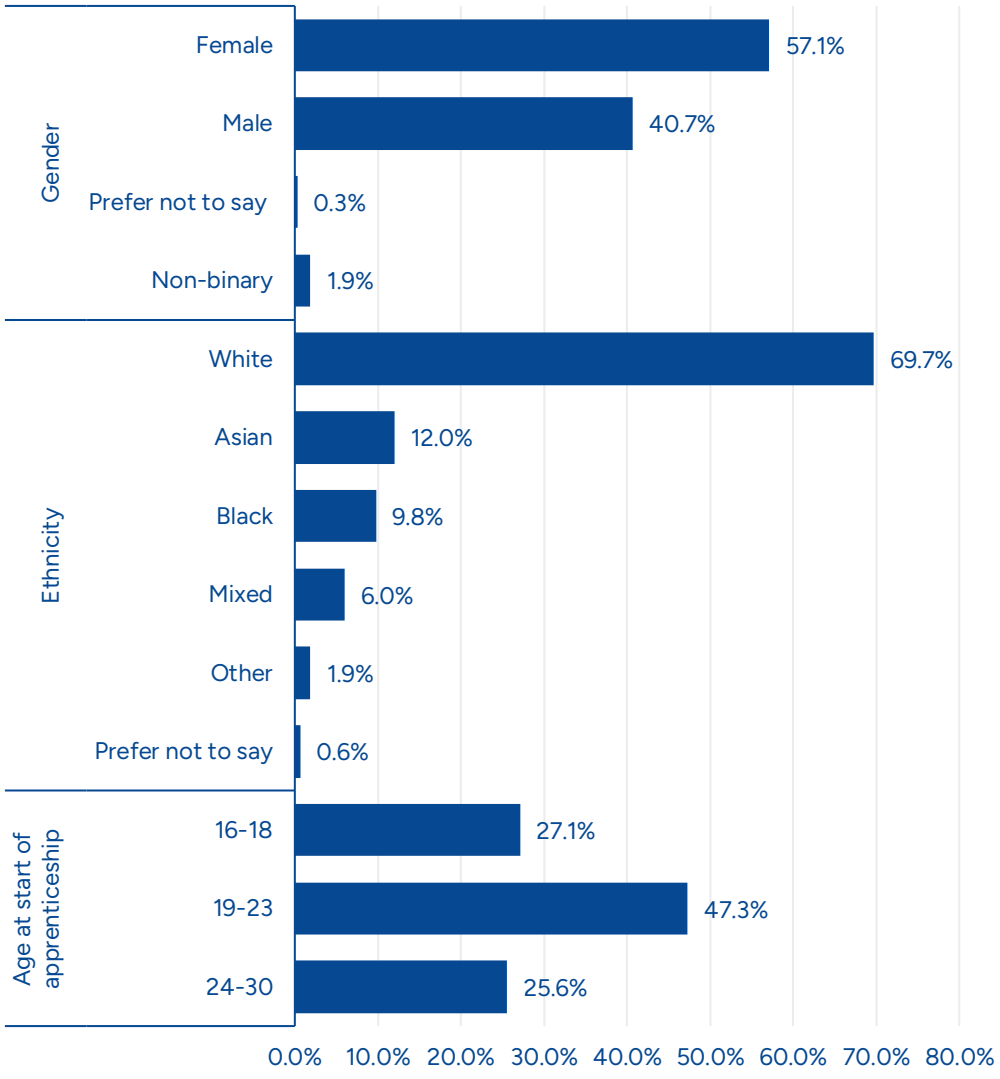
Our sample of young apprentices

All young apprentices in our sample completed a short pre-interview survey, sharing demographic information, information about their apprenticeship journey, and other relevant background.

Figure 8 summarises the gender, ethnic and age composition of our sample (where age refers to their age at the start of their apprenticeship). Here, there are some notable differences between our sample and the wider population. For instance, the proportion of young apprentices that are female is higher than the wider population at 57%.

[34] IFF Research. 2024. 'Apprenticeship Evaluation 2023: Learner and Non-completer Surveys'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-evaluation-2023-learner-non-completer-and-employer-surveys

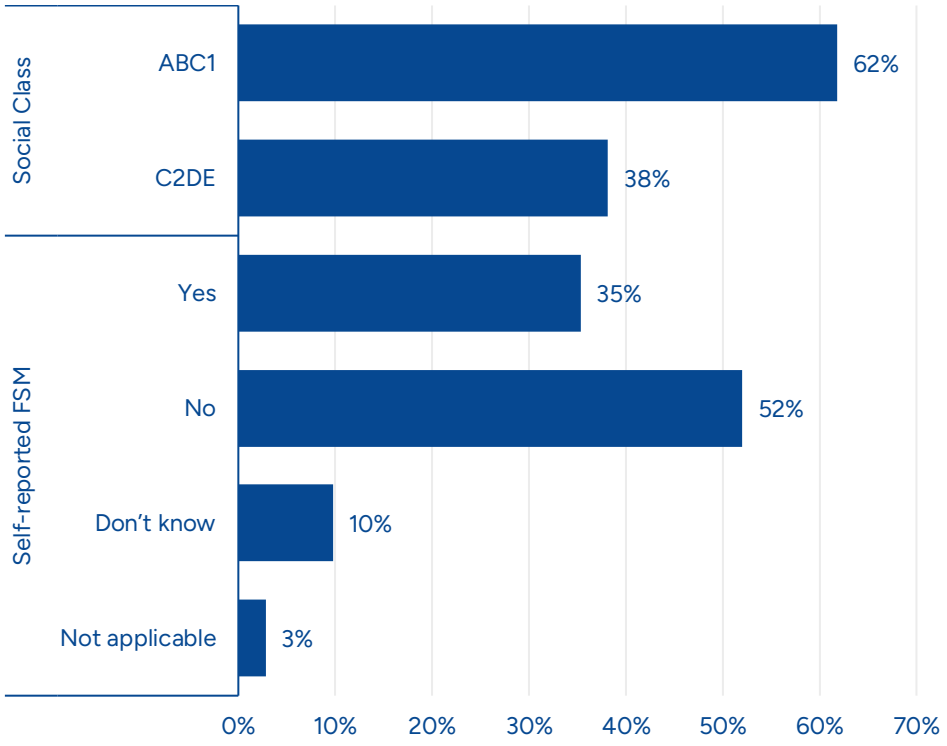
Figure 8: Gender, ethnicity and age at start of the apprenticeship



We also asked about the socio-economic background of those in our sample. 38% of young apprentices came from working class (C2DE) backgrounds and 35% reported being eligible for Free School Meals at some point during their schooling (for context, 26.5% of state funded pupils are currently eligible for free school meals).[35]

[35] Department for Education. 2026. Schools, pupils and their characteristics. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2025-26

Figure 9: Socio-economic background and Free School Meal status

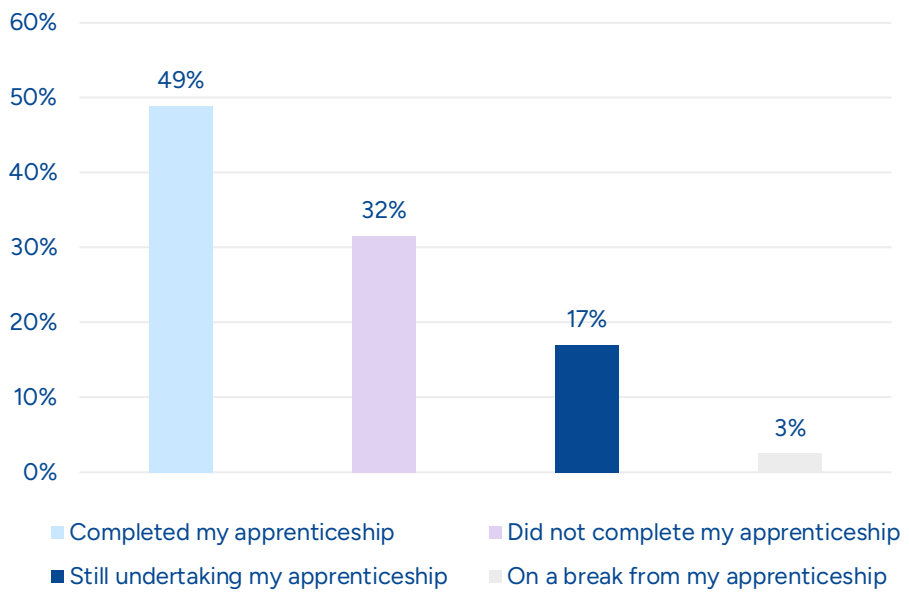


Sample size: Self-reported FSM = 317, Social Class =312

In terms of apprenticeship achievement, almost half (49%) of the sample had completed their apprenticeship, while almost a third had dropped out (32%). Once those still undertaking and those on a break are discounted, the effective achievement rate among those with a final outcome is 61%.

Across our sample, Level 3 apprenticeships were overwhelmingly the most common apprenticeship route, reflecting national trends. There was a good spread of apprentices across different industries, with 'Health and science' (16%), 'Business and administration' (15%) and 'Digital' (11%). 59% of our sample stated that their apprenticeship was with an SME, while 38% were with larger employers.

Figure 10: Distribution of apprenticeship outcomes



Information about the research sample, including a breakdown of achievement rates by apprentice and employer characteristics, is available in the Appendix.

Results and analysis

Who are the young apprentices we spoke with?

Young people's first encounters with apprenticeships may come through careers guidance but some make their decision to apply long after they have left school. Some may be at college; some may have been to university and since graduated or dropped out of their studies. Others may have started work, quit work, or even be looking for an apprenticeship through their current employer.

No two young apprentice's experience are the same. However, from our interviews, six broad young apprentice profiles were revealed:

1. School and college leavers: those participating in apprenticeships after completing their studies at 16 or 18. These young people choose this option as an alternative to further classroom study or university, motivated by the 'earn-as-you-learn' model, building independence and avoiding student debt.

2. University dropouts: those who started university and dropped out for a range of reasons including not enjoying their course or its delivery (e.g. lectures), financial constraints or wider personal issues (such as mental health). This group often spent months unemployed or in low-wage jobs. Here, apprenticeships were seen as an attractive alternative to get back on their feet, gain a qualification and enter the world of work.

3. Under-employed adults: a very common route for those working long-term in minimum-wage, insecure (e.g. zero-hour) jobs in areas such as hospitality, shelf-stocking or factory work. This group saw apprenticeships as a way of enabling career progression, acquiring specialist skills and, in some cases, accessing professional office environments.

"Before I was an apprentice ... I ended up "under-employed", scrabbling for shifts at a work from home call centre company and hating every minute of it."- Female, 25, Completed, Level 3

"Until I applied for this apprenticeship I only ever worked in retail and hospitality... I had got home from work and was scrolling Indeed because I was sick of working in a nightclub" - Male, 24, Dropped Out, Level 3

4. University graduates: a fairly common route for those who had completed undergraduate or even master's degrees but felt underemployed or locked out by a lack of practical experience. Many were caught in a catch-22 of not being able to get a graduate job because they did not have any work experience. For them, a higher or degree-level apprenticeship (Levels 4 to 7) could offer a way to kick start their careers.

"I wanted to build a real career because I realised in the job world what matters is experience. Before that and after uni I was working in minimum wage hospitality roles" - Female, 30, Still Undertaking, Level 4

5. Upskilled employees: less common in our sample of young apprentices - some were full-time employees whose employers suggested (for example in annual reviews) that they apply for level 4-7 apprenticeships. This might be driven by the employee's desire for career progression or the employer's intent to make use of their Growth and Skills Levy (formerly Apprenticeship Levy) funding.

6. Workforce re-entrants: also less common - some found apprenticeships a way to return to work after spending time out of work or in part-time roles due to caring responsibilities, most often raising young children. For this group, apprenticeships offered an opportunity to be eased back into work and to flexibly balance work and caring responsibilities.

"I was taking care of my child before he joined school and after that I wanted something to keep myself busy and start my career journey" - Female, 28, Completed, Level 2

"For me I was looking for something that I could manage alongside being a parent... organising child care was also a struggle as my child was only young"- Female, 30, Dropped Out, Level 2

These differing motivations and personal circumstances illustrate the need for policymakers to consider young people's wide range of apprenticeship journeys. This means ensuring the system is built to support those with varying levels of work experience and prior study, as well as those facing different challenges and barriers to access and achievement.

Starting out: apprenticeships, careers education and work experience

To properly understand apprenticeship non-completions and why they happen, we need to go to the start of young people's apprenticeship journey. Young people's decision to apply for an apprenticeship will be an accumulation of factors, reflecting the influence of family, friends, peers, and (for most young people) their school.[36]

With careers education forming an increasingly important part of school life, the information, advice and guidance (IAG) that young people receive from teachers and careers leads may shape their chosen pathways, and ultimately, the careers available to them in adult life. While many young people start their apprenticeships long after they leave school, compulsory education is a key influence on young people's decision-making.

"Young apprentices often felt teachers and careers leads were more comfortable informing them about university degrees than apprenticeships."

In this section, we explore how young people came to learn about apprenticeships through their educational journey – how they first heard what an apprenticeship was, what attracted them to the pathway, and how they went about applying. In learning about these early experiences, we can better understand how young people's expectations of apprenticeships matched up with the reality when they started. This is crucial because a mismatch between expectation and reality was cited as a key issue and driver of drop outs for young apprentices later down the line.

Initial encounters: a second-tier option?

As part of a recent announcement on increasing technical pathways at 14, prime minister Andy Burnham said that the country would "value the hard hat as much as the graduation cap".[37] However, young people felt that when it came to careers information, advice and guidance at school, apprenticeships often played second fiddle to university. Young apprentices often felt teachers and careers leads were more comfortable informing them about university degrees than apprenticeships. There was also an awareness of schools being celebrated for pupils' university destinations.

[36] The Sutton Trust and UCAS. 2023. 'Where next'. https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/where-next-what-influences-the-choices-of-would-be-apprentices/

[37] Gov.uk. 2026. 'PM: 'From today Britain will value the hard hat as much as the graduation cap". https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-from-today-britain-will-value-the-hard-hat-as-much-as-the-graduation-cap

"I went to a grammar school and it was assumed that we'd all go to university and work in fancy big-city jobs... I thought apprenticeships were only for practical trades." - Female, 25, Completed, Level 3

"How many students received top university placements is seen as a good indicator for success." - Female, 28, Dropped Out, Level 3

Young people felt that too often apprenticeships were presented as the poor relation – somewhere to consider when university is no longer a viable option, for academic, financial or other reasons. Many young people felt that this perspective was reinforced by their friends and family, who saw university as an expected, desirable next step. Some reported initially wanting to meet the expectations of family and others around them, which at least initially put them off pursuing an apprenticeship.

"They were advertised as 'second tier'... I felt boxed into a degree initially. I couldn't really consider anything else." - Male, 26, Dropped Out, Level 4

While these interviewees ultimately did decide to apply for an apprenticeship, they felt that the positive case was not made and that, in some cases, they 'fell into' their apprenticeship at some point down the line, rather than it being a decision that they exercised great agency over with support around them. Here, there is a danger of apprentices starting on the back foot in their decision-making – pursuing other options before returning to apprenticeships, slowing them down from more detailed considerations about which apprenticeships to apply for, or otherwise just not having the confidence to feel they are making an informed choice that is right for them.

These issues matter, not just for apprenticeship starts but apprenticeship achievement. Those who make a positive decision to actively choose an apprenticeship are more likely to stick with it. In the DfE's 2023 Apprenticeship Evaluation Survey, only 34% of non-completers said that doing an apprenticeship was their preferred choice when they first considered it compared to 47% of completers.[38]

[38] IFF Research. 2024. 'Apprenticeship Evaluation 2023: Learner and Non-completer Surveys'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-evaluation-2023-learner-non-completer-and-employer-surveys

The university pathway is more familiar

Universities are a very well-trodden path for teachers and students. Many interviewees spoke of attending university open days, writing personal statements and completing UCAS applications being a core part of their school life, regardless of their level of interest in studying at university. There was no equivalent route or pipeline for apprenticeships.

University applications are organised around UCAS and associated deadlines with clear September/October start dates. While some larger employers will offer higher or degree apprenticeships for a September start to align themselves with the school year, this is not always possible for SMEs and/or employers that might have less certainty about their future capacity and skills needs. That said, there is a case for apprenticeships being better 'built in' to the school year – with greater oversight of how young people are progressing with their apprenticeship decision-making and applications. While the nature of apprenticeships means that a university-style application cycle will not be fully attainable, there is room to make apprenticeships a stronger feature of post-16 and post-18 careers support.

Using friends, family and social media for information about apprenticeships

With a lack of careers information, advice and guidance at school, many young people turned to friends and family to inform their decisions and applications. While it is good for those close to the young person to help inform decisions, there is a danger that this advice will reinforce certain pathways rather than offer a balanced perspective, with young people who lack social capital and networks being exposed to a narrower range of opportunities.

Other young people turned to social media and online forums to learn more about the apprenticeship opportunities available to them. Again, while such content may be useful and informative, a lack of oversight means that young people may not be making decisions based on fair and balanced information.

"The only guidance or advice I really had access to was people online sharing their views and experiences... TikTok videos of people talking about their experiences doing apprenticeships" - Female, 19, Dropped Out, Level 3

"I have browsed portals like Reddit for personal accounts and feedback on apprenticeships but also heard from personal friends" - Male, 27, Still Undertaking, Level 4

These insights affirm the need to ensure that all young people, regardless of background, receive the support necessary to make informed decisions about their future pathways, with apprenticeships given due recognition. With the Apprenticeship Support and Knowledge Programme – a national programme to raise understanding of apprenticeships – cut in 2025, this need is all the more urgent.[39]

"These insights affirm the need to ensure that all young people, regardless of background, receive the support necessary to make informed decisions about their future pathways, with apprenticeships given due recognition."

Deciding to apply for an apprenticeship

An attractive alternative to university?

Some young people explained that their lack of interest in full-time education and university study saw them explore apprenticeships as an alternative.

"I did not enjoy full time education so I did not want to go to university after sixth form, but I wanted to work in construction." - Female, 23, Completed, Level 4

"I didn't think that college was a good thing for me. Traditional education never really had been... Yet when it came to working, I put all my effort [into] it and I loved it, so it seemed that going to go do an apprenticeship made the most sense" - Male, 24, Dropped Out, Level 4

With enduring cost of living challenges, high student debt and the 'university premium' under question, the 'earn as you learn' apprenticeship model was seen as an attractive alternative. Young people's choices around apprenticeships were often articulated around the immediate and longer-term financial costs of university attendance. This was particularly true for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as highlighted by the quote from the degree apprentice below.

"Why get into thousands of student debt when I can reach the same goal via apprenticeship and get more on the job experience?" - Female, 25, Completed, Level 5

[39] Mellor, J. 2025. "Short-sighted': DfE controversially cuts ASK careers scheme funding'. Schools Week. https://feweek.co.uk/short-sighted-dfe-controversially-cuts-ask-careers-programme-funding/

"That you would have a job whilst studying and would learn that way and not be in debt." - Female, 30, Completed, Level 4

"I don't come from a rich family so my parents can't help me with anything and I have to survive on my own, so I need to make a salary that allows me to live." - Female, 29, Still Undertaking, Level 6

A transition into work

While young people often described their motivations for starting an apprenticeship with reference to university degrees, another key attraction to apprenticeships was the opportunity to get on in work. Here, apprenticeships gave young people greater autonomy, independence and a sense of 'rite of passage'. Their job allowed them to earn, pay their own bills and contribute to their household, all while working towards qualifications that would set them up for the future.

"I wanted to start becoming more independent and having my own money as I was getting older." - Male, 25, Completed, Level 3

"I liked the idea of actually being in a job and earning something whilst also working towards a future qualification." - Female, 19, Completed, Level 3

For these job-motivated people, apprenticeships were seen as an attractive avenue to access entry-level positions, a long-term investment in their careers (beyond immediate income), and a way of getting more development opportunities than you might through a regular job while also getting paid.

"I had no previous job experience so this is another reason why I had to heavily consider apprenticeships over traditional jobs"- Male, 23, Dropped Out, Level 3

"I feel is one of the greatest advantages about apprenticeships - you get the actual experience rather than just a qualification at the end of it." - Female, 20, Dropped Out, Level 4

The importance of pre-apprenticeship work experience

The young people we spoke with also stressed the importance of work experience in informing their choice to take on an apprenticeship. We heard that while careers IAG was important, there was no substitute for getting into a workplace and experiencing working life first hand.

Across our interviewees, we found that those who had completed meaningful work experience through school felt better prepared to take on an apprenticeship and that the experience often helped them with this decision-making. In contrast, school leavers with little work experience often felt overwhelmed when they started their apprenticeship, highlighting the importance of strong employer induction and line management, as discussed later in this analysis.

"[Apprenticeships first felt like a genuine option] when I did a work placement in my GCSE years and experienced the workplace." - Female, 23, Completed, Level 3

It is well-documented that at present, work experience opportunities are greatly shaped by young people's personal circumstances. In a recent Education and Employers survey, 81% of schools report that all or most students are left to find work experience placements themselves.[40] This risks reproducing existing inequalities in access, as young people with low social capital, financial barriers (including high travel costs) or limited access to local employers have fewer work experience options. This can then impact their 'work readiness' and readiness for apprenticeships in certain industries or sectors.

In our interviews, young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds also explained that financial pressures and fewer professional contacts meant they lacked an 'in' to the workplace, while those from rural areas and small towns also had difficulties finding meaningful work experience, particularly where public transport options were limited.

Work experience can be a serious undertaking for employers, particularly SMEs that may have less capacity to give young people the supervision they need to gain meaningful work experience. The Employer Skills Survey reveals that while almost half (48%) of workplaces employing 100-249 people offer work experience, just 12% of workplaces with 2-4 employees do so.[41] In this context, young people expressed a desire for workplace visits, shadowing opportunities or 'day in the life' material that might help them better understand different roles and how their working life might look.

[40] Education and Employers. 2026. 'Work Experience: Past, present and future. https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/WorkEx-report_June2026_FINAL.pdf

[41] *Ibid.*

There has also been a decline in young people working Saturday jobs and the availability of part-time work. This was highlighted in Alan Milburn's recent interim report on young people and work and partly linked to the pandemic.[42] Even where such opportunities will not always be connected to sectors and industries that young people want to pursue, there is value to be found in routine and responsibilities, experience interacting with colleagues, and other features of working life. Those that had had such opportunities cited clear benefits to their work readiness –helping them start their apprenticeship on the front foot.

"I wouldn't say that I was overly prepared but I have been working weekend jobs since I was 14 so I had experience of being in a working environment and working with professionals." - Male, 22, Completed, Level 3

Choosing an apprenticeship

Young people are not aware of the options available

Encouraging young people to consider the apprenticeship pathway is only half the battle. Apprenticeships vary greatly not only by industry and sector, but also by level, mode of study, delivery model, qualifications offered and more. Moreover, every young person's decisions will be affected by their interests, qualifications, financial situation, living arrangements, location, transport options, aptitude and experience.

However, many young people found the apprenticeship landscape extremely difficult to navigate – making it harder to find an opportunity that they were likely to stick and succeed with. Faced with this complexity, young apprentices would often apply to multiple apprenticeships in their field. While some would carefully compare employers, qualifications and career pathways, others were far less discerning.

"I knew that degree apprenticeships were very competitive so I had applied for as many scientific apprenticeships that paid a good living wage and were in a good area." - Male, 20, Still Undertaking, Level 6

"I think I was just so eager to get into work that I didn't really think about it and jumped into the first one that I was offered." - Male, 21, Dropped Out, Level 3

[42] Department for Work & Pensions. 2026. 'Young people and work: Interim report'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report

Here, levels of pragmatism were closely related to young people's financial situations. Those applying for jobs while unemployed or facing other financial pressure did not have the luxury of several months researching different employers, training providers and the detail of the apprenticeship offer. Those that needed immediate income for rent, bills and other costs needed immediate results. For these young people, an apprenticeship start may provide a short-term financial reprieve. However, rushing to start an apprenticeship risks them choosing a programme they are not suited for. This could then compromise what they are able to get out of their apprenticeship, their odds of succeeding, and, in turn, their future labour market outcomes.

"It was the first one I got an interview to and I was desperate... I had financial burdens I had to worry about, so getting a job was very important." - Female, 19 Dropped Out, Level 3

Again, this affirms the need to increase the uptake of the Find an Apprenticeship service, as well as the function and coordination of area-based application portals. Otherwise, we risk entrenching inequalities in apprenticeship access and achievement, where it is only young people with the time, resource and security that sink time into applications and find the pathway best suited to them.

"While there is work to do to match young people with apprenticeships, for young people in certain parts of the country, these opportunities simply do not exist."

A lack of available opportunities

While there is work to do to match young people with apprenticeships, for young people in certain parts of the country, these opportunities simply do not exist.

Many young people we spoke with, particularly those from smaller towns, rural areas or with tourism-oriented local economies, said that there were very few apprenticeship opportunities near them and that those that did exist were concentrated in a very narrow range of sectors. Again, this led some apprentices to take on the first opportunity available to them. This was particularly true of those without the means or willingness to commute or leave home or those with family and caring responsibilities. Moreover, with a lack of supply, there is often fierce competition for existing opportunities, as we have seen with degree apprenticeships, where applications per position have quadrupled over the last three years.[43]

[43] Shearing, H. 2026. 'Competition for degree apprenticeships quadruples as university costs rise'. BBC News. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckg374p4e24o

This is a concerning situation. A lack of opportunities means weaker matching, which could lead to lower achievement rates. Therefore, policymakers looking to boost apprenticeship achievements should also look at boosting supply, targeting their work to the most underserved parts of the country.

The importance of brokerage

Unsurprisingly, given issues surrounding inconsistency in careers guidance, patchy work experience, and the complexities of apprenticeship applications, many young people found a mismatch between their expectations of their apprenticeship and the reality.

Most young apprentices reported having a good grasp of the 'earn as you learn' model and the broad structure of the apprenticeship prior to starting. However, they lacked a more granular understanding of what their typical day-to-day experience would look like.

"I learned that they are a mix of paid work and a learning opportunity. However I didn't really know what my day to day would be, or responsibilities." - Female, 29, Still Undertaking, Level 6

"I knew the idea that you study alongside work, however, my real understanding of the actual structure, my day to day life, the amount of work and the final examinations were not amazing."- Male, 20, Still Undertaking, Level 6

Like other jobs, no two apprenticeships look the same. Will apprentices be working on-site? In an office? Will there be hybrid working? Who will their line manager be? How is the team structured? Will there be other apprentices? Will their off-the-job training take place in block release or day release? What are the expectations around working hours?

While much of this information may be available online, this process often involves navigating the 'Find an apprenticeship' portal with multiple external links or wading through other websites and job boards. Moreover, for young people still developing their understanding of apprenticeships, it might be difficult to know what questions they should be asking.

There is a clear need for better coordination between young people and their local employers. Here, the expanding Mayoral Apprenticeship Brokerage Pilots offer a great opportunity – not just in boosting supply but also helping employers ensure young apprentices start on the front foot.

Proactive outreach, being transparent in applications

It is crucial that employers and training providers are proactive in sharing information with young people so that they have a strong understanding of what they are signing up for on their apprenticeship. One law professional we spoke with explained that they used their application process to be explicit about what candidates were to expect, were they to be successful in their application. In addition, they ran a programme aimed at Year 12 students – primarily those from lower socio-economic backgrounds – where they would ask lawyers and clients to come in to talk to young people about what they might expect from a career in law. Combined, these approaches can help young people – particularly those who may be less familiar with law as a career – to make an informed choice about whether a law apprenticeship is right for them.

Working with the employer

Adjusting to the workplace

For young apprentices, the first few weeks at work are crucial – whether it be making their first site visit, meeting their line manager or starting on their first project. As discussed earlier in this report, many young people are coming into apprenticeships with little to no work experience. A strong, supportive induction is therefore essential.

Alongside facing a steep learning curve as they acquire knowledge and skills relevant to their role, many interviewees reported struggling with unfamiliar professional expectations, building relationships, and getting to grips with established ways of working, alongside the technical aspects of their jobs. Where these expectations were not made explicit, apprentices often felt anxious about getting things wrong, which hindered their work.

"What made it harder for me was just the unfamiliarity, the not knowing the rules [of] the workplace, how to carry myself professionally." - Male, 22, Completed, Level 4

"I didn't know how to act in a job setting... Taking phone calls/talking to customers... I didn't want to do anything wrong and get punished for it." - Non-Binary, 21, Dropped Out, Level 3

Here, there is a need for employers to try to make this assumed knowledge more explicit. For instance, how should you conduct yourself in meetings? What is organisational etiquette with Microsoft Teams? How might you raise concerns to site managers? What should you do if someone senior, that is not your line manager, asks you to complete a demanding task on a tight deadline? What does a matrix organisational structure mean and how does this work in an apprentice's particular context?

One of our expert interviewees, who worked for a charity specialising in professional development, explained that there is often a lack of common language between education and employment settings, which makes the transition into work harder for young apprentices.

Of course, it will not be practical to anticipate every single one of these questions, but employers should look to frontload this information as far as possible and be mindful of less experienced young apprentices needing more explicit instruction on things that experienced workers take for granted.

In addition, some interviewees, particularly the youngest apprentices, women in male-dominated industries and those who reported being neurodivergent, voiced concerns about their sense of belonging in the workplace. Such sentiments were often reinforced by a lack of familiarity with workplaces or a lack of peers with similar backgrounds. This affirms the importance of employers committing to making their workplaces inclusive environments and giving all young apprentices the support they need to feel they belong and are valued in the workplace. This will not only be good for the apprentices, but also for the employers who should benefit from better-integrated, more productive workers.

"Working with many people much older than me... Coming straight from school to a professional environment also leads to a sort of imposter syndrome." - Male, 20, Still Undertaking, Level 6

"At first I was terrified; particularly as I was a female entering an apprenticeship in a male-dominated field. I was worried my skills would be undermined due to my age and gender." - Female, 25, Completed, Level 5

Pre-apprenticeship programmes – preparing young people and closing the expectations gap

Pre-apprenticeship programmes broadly refer to short training courses that equip young people with the skills and experience they need to support their entry into apprenticeships. They may be offered by FE Colleges or other training providers and can take a range of forms. These programmes can be a good way for apprentices to get lighter touch workplace exposure, gain knowledge and skills, and tackle the expectations gap between what they anticipate an apprenticeship in a given industry/sector to be like and how it looks in practice.

In our interviews, we found that the 17% of our sample who completed a pre-apprenticeship course entered their apprenticeship with greater confidence and clarity on what their future apprenticeship might look like. Growth and greater uptake of these courses could help ensure young apprentices make the best possible start to their apprenticeship and boost their probability of staying the course.

This is an area of active policy development, with reports that the second report of the Milburn Review will recommend a new national pre-apprenticeship route to close the gap between school and work.[44]

The importance of line management and mentoring

Good line management is important for all employees, regardless of industry, sector, role or seniority. However, it is particularly crucial for young apprentices, many of whom will have had little or in some cases no exposure to their line of work before starting their apprenticeship. Across our interviews, young apprentices described line managers as having the greatest influence on their apprenticeship experience.

Those who were well-supported were able to settle into their new workplace, slowly build up their workload, manage their off-the-job training, and realise the potential of the 'earn as you learn' model. Unfortunately, we heard from many apprentices who had weak or even absent line managers, which left them struggling to manage their workload and navigate the competing demands of an apprenticeship.

"Unfortunately, we heard from many apprentices who had weak or even absent line managers, which left them struggling to manage their workload and navigate the competing demands of an apprenticeship."

[44] Parrington, R. 2026. 'Create new pre-apprenticeship scheme to close youth unemployment gap, says Milburn'. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2026/oct/10/pre-apprenticeship-scheme-landmark-alan-milburn-youth-jobs-crisis-report

Apprentices were most positive about their experience when their managers checked in with them regularly, provided constructive feedback, gave them opportunities to discuss work challenges, and looked for ways to aid their development through meaningful work. This also had the effect of putting apprentices at ease, making them more likely to ask questions, which is particularly important given how many lacked strong prior work experience. Effective line management also allowed apprentices to focus not just on task completion but on their professional development, which made them feel more like valued members of the team.

Apprentice completers often described managers as playing the most significant role in helping them balance work and training. This meant proactively protecting study time, adjusting workloads where necessary, and making sure apprenticeships functioned as a programme of learning.

"I did have a good manager who engaged in what I was doing that overall made a difference to my confidence." - Male, 22, Completed, Level 4

"They gave me regular feedback on my work, and gave me areas to improve on. we had weekly meetings about my progress." - Female, 22, Completed, Level 4

"She made me feel part of the team, helped me get involved in projects that other employees were partaking in." - Female, 27, Completed, Level 6

"It wasn't like I was an inconvenience for being in training or having training time... it felt like I had a place and they wanted me there." - Female, 23, Completed, Level 3

Another aspect of the line management role was also pastoral – checking in on their wellbeing, how they were getting on, and providing assurances where needed.

"My managers in particular were brilliant. Whenever I felt too overwhelmed they were always around to take work off of me or just listen." - Female, 30, Still Undertaking, Level 7

In great contrast, we heard from some apprentices that had very difficult experiences of line management – feeling that they received little day-to-day support and very little attention to their development. This often led them to feel isolated and left to juggle the demands of their work and training on their own. For many interviewees, poor line management was a key contributor to their apprenticeship non-completion. For others who ultimately completed their apprenticeship, the experience of poor line management hindered what they were able to get out of their programme.

"My head nurse who was also my mentor for my first year gave me no support and just had a go at me for not doing enough." - Female, 29, Completed, Level 3

"I felt very overwhelmed and like I wasn't improving in anything because I had no support." - Female, 29, Dropped Out, Level 3

"I felt like it didn't matter, no one cared about how I was doing but I know if I didn't perform well I would be judged." - Female, 26, Completed, Level 4

These experiences of poor line management took several forms. Some described managers as being unavailable, dismissive or even openly hostile, which made it difficult for them to get support and raise concerns where needed. This often contributed to a sense that they were not well-suited to their apprenticeship. In other cases, they made apprentices dread or even fear going into work, leaving some to leave their apprenticeships to protect their confidence, wellbeing and mental health.

"The management would constantly take time away, would ask us to do work beyond our job role and offered no support or guidance." - Female, 24, Dropped Out, Level 3

"I think there was a fundamental lack of understanding about what an apprenticeship would require from me as the employee, so my boss thought I could just be left alone to get on with it." - Female, 27, Dropped Out, Level 5

"She was flighty, not technical, didn't listen, didn't follow through on actions, pitted the team against each other and overall wanted to be liked by people rather than manage." - Male, 27, Dropped Out, Level 4

Our expert interviewees also emphasised the importance of good line management as a fundamental part of ensuring apprenticeship achievement. Some stressed the importance of investing in line managers' own professional development to ensure they were well-equipped to support young apprentices.

Here, there was also an acknowledgement that structural challenges may make line management of young apprentices more difficult for SMEs. Larger employers may be able to offer tailored line management training and to benefit from having an established apprenticeship programme with a dedicated apprenticeship manager who can coordinate the management of multiple apprentices. They may also be able to draw on multiple potential line managers and review the management of apprentices where needed. In contrast, in SMEs and micro-employers there may be only one

suitable member of staff available to manage the sole apprentice within an organisation, with little support from elsewhere in the organisation.

"I thought we had weekly one-to-one mentoring, but the organisation is small, so my line managers did not have that capacity..." - Female, 28, Completed, Level 4

"There was an understanding, but not a lot of support was possible. It is such a small team, with just myself and a manager doing the day-to-day work." - Male, 26, Completed, Level 6

This highlights the need to offer greater line management support and training, particularly for SMEs that may have less capacity and experience in this area. In addition, as one of our expert interviewees explained, it also affirms the need for training providers to ensure they are sufficiently contributing on the pastoral and mentoring side of their role.

Backing professional development, protecting the 'earn as you learn' model

At the centre of many apprenticeship drop-outs was a feeling that learning was no longer the centre of the experience. Where apprenticeships stopped functioning as a programme of learning, young apprentices would often feel disillusioned and start to consider whether their programme was right for them.

Many young apprentices suggested that while their employer was initially interested in their professional development, this would wane over time. In more extreme cases, apprentices began to feel that their employer had cynically signed them up to an apprenticeship for cheap employment, giving them undesirable tasks with no clear sense of why they were doing them or how they might progress into other tasks over time. This bred resentment, where apprentices would compare their workload with other employees and question their pay relative to others.

"They didn't care to teach me, they just wanted me to do the tasks they didn't want to do." - Female, 26, Dropped Out, Level 3

"I was taught to do a very basic task on day one and that's basically all I did the whole time... I thought I would be given much more responsibility than I was" - Female, 19, Dropped Out, Level 3

"The people I was working with, the lack of tutoring and realising that the apprenticeship was just to get cheaper labour." - Male, 23, Dropped Out, Level 3

This highlights the importance of putting professional development at the heart of young apprentices' experience. This does not mean that young apprentices need complex, highly rewarding tasks on day one. Instead, it is about ensuring that young apprentices are given opportunities to progress through their role. Again, this affirms the importance of a line manager who can set clear objectives and goals, and ensure that the young apprentice is being given opportunities to develop.

"At the centre of many apprenticeship drop-outs was a feeling that learning was no longer the centre of the experience."

Working with the training provider

Struggling for time: accommodating off-the-job training

Apprentices need to spend part of their apprenticeship doing off-the-job training (OTJ). The aim here is for this training to help apprentices "gain and apply the knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSB) you need to be competent in your job".[45] This can take a variety of forms, depending on the level of apprenticeship, industry/sector and the training provider. A degree apprenticeship, for instance, might include lectures or classes, others might involve online courses, day release to an FE college, self-study, support from a mentor, written assignments or other activities.

With apprenticeship courses now at a minimum of 8 months, the minimum number of hours for any given apprenticeship is 187 hours (which amounts to six hours a week across 8 months).[46] In theory, OTJ training should take place within working hours, reflecting the apprenticeship 'earn as you learn' model. There were examples of this arrangement working well, with employers recognising the importance of OTJ and ensuring that this aspect of the apprenticeship was well protected.

"The employer prioritised the qualification and gave us a lot of study days and allowed us to block of time before exams." - Male, 27, Completed, Level 7

However, many young apprentices reported finding it difficult to complete their OTJ training alongside employer commitments, with some having to complete significant amounts of it outside of normal working hours and dedicated OTJ time. This was a cause of great stress for some apprentices and reflects the DfE's 2023 Apprenticeship Evaluation Survey, where 43%

[45] Apprentices – Gov.uk. 'Understand knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs)'. https://www.apprenticeships.gov.uk/apprentices/knowledge-skills-and-behaviours-ksbs

[46] Department for Work & Pensions. 2026. Apprenticeship off-the-job training guidance'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeships-off-the-job-training/apprenticeship-off-the-job-training-guidance--2

cited “Not enough time for learning or training” as a contributing reason for them not completing their apprenticeship.[47]

"I was to study in my own time, not in work. At work I was there to work. ... I felt it didn't leave me with enough time to learn." - Male, 20, Dropped Out, Level 7

"I have a full time workload to complete and then when not at work I then have to find and dedicate time to assignments” - Male, 25, Still Undertaking, Level 6

"I was pressured with time. To do my 9-5, then study heavily for the apprenticeship, it was tough." - Male, 26, Dropped Out, Level 4

"The apprenticeship expects 7 hours of new learning a week which I don’t think is realistic.” - Male, 27, Still Undertaking, Level 7

Many young apprentices felt that smaller employers struggled to protect apprentices’ OTJ training, offer feedback, and prioritise learning in general. They explained that in the context of commercial demands and staffing constraints, employers’ focus on apprentices’ learning and development often dropped off. This too often contributed to situations where apprentices were working a full-time job and then having to study in their own time.

Even well-supported apprentices often felt the pressure of a combined workload from their employer and training provider. Here, they stressed the importance of joined-up working between the training provider and employer - ensuring that the two parties were coordinating between themselves as well as with the apprentice to anticipate workload issues and offer flexibility where needed.

"It was easy to manage for the classes as they were scheduled in for me but sometimes the workload got too much to handle” - Male, 20, Still Undertaking, Level 4

“So the decision makers must understand how to balance workload at the job and learning work load" - Male, 25, Dropped Out, Level 4

[47] IFF Research. 2024. ‘Apprenticeship Evaluation 2023: Learner and Non-completer Surveys’. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-evaluation-2023-learner-non-completer-and-employer-surveys

Training providers supporting mentors and getting buy-in on training

One training provider explained that each of their apprentices had an employer mentor. They worked closely with the mentor from the outset to ensure they understand their role and what to expect from the programme. In addition, they would give employers access to a learning platform that allows mentors to check in on apprentice progress but also access mentor training to improve the support they are offering apprentices. The interviewee noted that in addition to their apprenticeship progress meetings every 12 weeks, there was a strong emphasis on creating an open dialogue between the provider, employer and apprentice from the start. Taken together, they explained that these steps helped ensure a strong team around the apprentice, supporting them to achieve on the programme.

Off-the-job training: the importance of quality

The delivery model and quality of OTJ training were also important to the experience of young apprentices. Having a strong training programme, delivered effectively was key to the realisation of the 'earn as you learn' model. This is currently a key focus area for the government, underpinned by the Apprenticeship Accountability Framework, which aims to ensure that quality is prized over growth,[48] and supported by other resources and reports.[49]

It was clear in our expert interviews that training quality was of great importance to many providers and seen as an essential part of ensuring that apprentices get the most out of their programme. That said, in our interviews, young people reported having a wide range of training experiences, which ultimately had a strong bearing on their apprenticeship outcomes.

While young apprentices' experiences varied between individual providers, there were some general differences between those that completed apprenticeships through independent providers versus those that

[48] Department for Work & Pensions. 2026. 'Apprenticeship training provider accountability framework and specification'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-training-provider-accountability-framework/apprenticeship-training-provider-accountability-framework-and-specification--2#indicators-we-use-to-review-provider-performance

[49] Department for Education. 2025. 'Powerful Pedagogy: Effective Practice'. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67d2d3da2348f8d0cc51cbb5/Powerful_Pedagogy_-_Effective_Practice_-_March_2025.pdf

completed through further education colleges. This section outlines some of these differences. Here, we acknowledge that there will also be great internal variation between FE colleges and ITPs in terms of their delivery models, local contexts, intakes, and other factors that may also shape these differences.

Independent training providers – flexible but sometimes distant

Independent training providers (ITPs) deliver training for most apprenticeships. These providers vary in size, scale, coverage and specialisation, and our interviewee accounts made it clear that no two providers were the same. That said, there were some general patterns in the experience of those studying with ITPs.

The biggest draw to completing with ITPs was the greater sense of control and flexibility over their training. This stemmed from the prominence of online learning. Some young apprentices studying remotely through ITPs explained that this helped them save both time and money – two key barriers that often disproportionately affect those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, remote training provision can open up opportunities for those who are poorly served by local colleges and those who are balancing other commitments, such as caring responsibilities.

"It gave me flexibility to go at the pace I wanted. This was something I struggled with not having at university" - Female, 25, Still Undertaking, Level 4

"Because the Zoom sessions were every 6-8 weeks and in between it was self paced it worked quite well - meant on days that I was busier with my day job I didn't have to dedicate time to the apprenticeship" - Male, 20, Dropped Out, Level 7

Many young people reported good experiences of training through ITPs, particularly where online learning was combined with regular one-to-one support. On the other hand, some apprentices were quite damning about their experience of remote learning through ITPs. They explained that a reliance on webinars, going through slide-decks and other activities left them feeling isolated and worn-out. They also felt it was difficult to maintain momentum through this sort of provision, particularly where their contact with their tutor was sporadic, scripted or even non-existent. On top of this, online platforms were often reportedly difficult to navigate.

In such cases, young people felt that the reality of independent learning was them being left entirely to their own devices. This reflects online

training issues identified in the Sutton Trust's *A World of Difference* report.[50]

"It felt almost like an independent organisation and I did not really speak to people as it was all online. So there was little support from the training provider." - Female, 19, Completed, Level 4

"I think having more support from my tutor and potentially a more well structured learning plan would have made it feel better." - Male, 23, Completed, Level 3

These findings illustrate the need to recognise the flexibility and cost-benefits that remote provision can provide, while also acknowledging that too much online training is low-quality and that a fully online learning model risks young apprentices feeling unmotivated and isolated.

While there is a clear case for some remote OTJ training, we need to ensure that 'self-directed' is not code for young apprentices being left to work things out for themselves. Instead, it is important that remote provision builds on principles of good teaching practice and instruction and attends to the science of learning. This means building on some of the great existing practice across the sector, using training provider networks to ensure that all apprentices get the most out of their training.

In addition, with remote learning a common feature of ITP-led training, regular one-to-one support from a personal tutor and small group contact could allow young apprentices to work independently and fit their study around their work and other life commitments but also get the tailored support that they need.

College provision: good instruction, cohort effects, staffing concerns

Many apprentices had chosen apprenticeships at least in part because they felt that full-time education had not suited them and they wanted to feel a distinction between their schooling and their apprenticeship.

That said, those whose apprenticeship was delivered in partnership with FE colleges were more likely than those working with ITPs to describe their training as useful, with praise for face-to-face learning, regular contact with tutors and peers, among other aspects. In addition, apprentices in FE

[50] Field, S. 2025. 'A World of Difference'. The Sutton Trust. https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/a-world-of-difference/

colleges also noted that receiving training in workshops, laboratories and salons helped them connect theory with practice.

College tutors were often praised for their instruction, feedback and the additional sessions some offered to support apprentices' learning. Here, just as it was important for apprentices to have effective employer line management, having a good, consistent relationship with their college tutor helped them with their OTJ training and to manage the apprenticeship workload as a whole.

Another key benefit of college delivery was studying with other learners. The routine of going into college and meeting others gave them regular contact with those sharing similar experiences. This was also true of those on degree apprenticeships, who were able to feel part of a university cohort. This connectedness could have particular benefits for apprentices employed by SMEs, who are sometimes the sole apprentice. Peer support through a college cohort can provide opportunities to share experiences, reflections and tips on how to get the most out of their apprenticeship.

The key challenge that young apprentices faced with FE colleges was staffing. This is a well-documented and enduring issue, with the sector facing a significant teacher recruitment shortfall and high vacancy rates in key subjects.[51] The young apprentices in our research described turnover and staff shortages as having a significant impact on learning, including delays to the teaching of whole units. Staffing issues also sometimes prevented tutors from providing the supporting, bridging and pastoral roles that apprentices find so helpful.

"I had 3 tutors and they all left at the start of my second year and one of my blocks had to be delayed as they didn't actually have any staff to teach us" - Female, 26, Completed Level 3

From a policy perspective, these challenges highlight the need to invest heavily in the FE workforce, to ensure that colleges can offer consistent provision and to avoid disruption to pupil learning. From the college and employer perspective, it is crucial that relationships between the apprentice, employer and training provider are not dependent on an

[51] Scott, M. et al. 2026. 'The Further Education Teacher Workforce'. NFER. https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/the-further-education-teacher-workforce-in-england-annual-report-2026/

individual tutor but instead systematised so that relationships are maintained even during tutor absences.

Working together: the relationship between employer and training provider

It was clear that young apprentices encounter a range of challenges with their employers and training providers. However, many young apprentices spoke about a fractured relationship between their employer and training provider, and a wider incoherence in their apprenticeship programme, which they were often left to manage themselves.

Design issues: incoherence between work and off-the-job training

"Young people said that apprenticeships worked best when there was a clear coherence between the work they were doing with their employer and their OTJ training."

Young people said that apprenticeships worked best when there was a clear coherence between the work they were doing with their employer and their OTJ training.

Some interviewees were very positive about the coherence of their programme – they liked being able to make the connections between theory and practice, putting what they learnt in their OTJ training to use at work. This helped them recognise the value of studying as part of their course – realising the promise of the 'earn-as-you-learn' model.

"The training helped me understand why I was doing things at work so the two [complemented] each other." - Male, 29, Completed, Level 4

"It fit perfectly with everything linked straight to my daily task so I just applied what I learned to right at work." - Male, 20, Still Undertaking, Level 3

Concerningly, however, many young apprentices felt that there was a mismatch between work and OTJ training. At worst, some described training as a 'box-ticking' exercise, completed for compliance purposes rather than to any tangible end in terms of their workplace knowledge, skills and behaviours. Others suggested that the training they received was too generic and did not match their everyday working lives.

"Because it's logging for the sake of it, just to hit an arbitrary number quota... Constantly worrying about hitting six hours a week and watching the expected time going up... It destroyed it!" - Female, 26, Still Undertaking, Level 3

"To be honest, the workload was a major factor in dropping it. I was spending 9 hours a day on something not relevant" - Male, 26, Dropped Out, Level 4

"It was largely irrelevant and had no correlation to my job responsibilities... doing paralegal work yet learning about HR" - Female, 24, Dropped Out, Level 3

Training providers working with employers to build a coherent plan for the apprentice

One apprenticeship provider explained that they conducted an initial assessment to identify any special educational needs and disabilities, wellbeing challenges, barriers and other factors that might affect the support a young apprentice will need during their apprenticeship. In addition, they worked with individual line managers on a plan for every apprentice – making explicit links between the standard and their planned work. This helped the apprenticeship feel like a coherent programme rather than two disjoined workstreams with the employer and training provider.

Elsewhere, some apprentices explained that a disconnect between the work with their employer and their training meant that when they were completing portfolios or coursework, they had to make spurious connections and draw in material that was not directly relevant. Others felt they were not gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to complete their EPA.

This partly speaks to an inherent tension in apprenticeships, whereby they are simultaneously a job that is in service of an employer (and their particular skills needs) but also an apprenticeship standard, which aims to equip young people with a set of knowledge and skills that will set them up for working life in their given sector or beyond. However, where this disconnect is significant, it can cause issues for young apprentices and their progression.

“We had to do project write-ups for the apprenticeship where we talk about how the projects we were working on were relevant ... and I would really struggle because the work I was doing wasn't relevant" - Non-Binary, 23, Dropped Out, Level 3

There are several implications for employers and training providers here. One is the design of the course itself and the need to ensure a through-line between the OTJ training and what the apprentice is going to be working on with their employer. However, some of these challenges suggest an issue with some apprenticeship standards themselves, and the

need for a better balance between core material and opportunities for wider skills development.

In addition, in certain sectors, the unpredictability of project-based work can make it more challenging to marry OTJ training with the day job. For instance, someone studying for an apprenticeship in building and construction may spend a long period working on a project that requires them to make use of a particular set of technical skills, which they are being supported to use by their employer. In the meantime, they may be using their OTJ time to study a completely different skillset that has no bearing on what they are doing day-to-day.

While it may be that this speaks to some wider misalignment between the employer and training-led work, it could also be that these parties (perhaps through the apprentice's line manager and tutor) need to better explain the importance of the OTJ training and where it might fit in in their future work, even if it will not so explicitly be used during their apprenticeship period.

Co-designing with colleges and universities, respecting expertise

One interviewee from a large employer explained that their apprenticeships were co-designed with colleges and universities to ensure that they were making the most of parties' strengths. The interviewee stressed the importance of employers respecting the expertise of the college or university – knowing where the employer can take on responsibilities but also recognising where they need to defer to their training provider partners.

Pressures of administering your own apprenticeship

Where apprenticeships worked well, interviewees described a clear, coordinated programme of work and learning – with apprentice, employer and training provider all working together. In these cases, employers and training providers played clear roles in coordinating the different elements of the programme and supporting its day-to-day running.

"Having them work together means that the company knows what the uni is teaching the apprentices, and they can work together." - Male, 26, Completed, Level 6

"There needs to be solid communication between provider, student and employer throughout" - Female, 29, Completed, Level 6

"They [training provider] rarely communicated with the company, meaning I had to bring up any clashes between my studies and work" - Female, 21, Completed, Level PNS

In contrast, apprenticeships fell down where young people were having to coordinate the different elements of a disjointed programme themselves. We heard from young apprentices who were having to flag diary clashes, explain different components of their apprenticeship to each party and then balance the competing demands of their employers and training providers. This lack of coordination created further workload for the apprentice.

This need not be the case. One of our expert interviewees explained that they helped facilitate regular monthly meetings between employers and training providers, allowing both parties to talk about the programme, what apprentices will be learning, and anticipate any challenges. This included discussions about how they were going to support young people to complete their endpoint assessment and plan out their next steps after the apprenticeship. Another interviewee, who helped coordinate degree apprenticeships at a law firm, explained that they deliberately lessened apprentice workload ahead of exams, which was testament to a join-up between the employer and the training provider.

"We heard from young apprentices who were having to flag diary clashes, explain different components of their apprenticeship to each party and then balance the competing demands of their employers and training providers."

The government requires all training providers to undertake regular progress reviews with employers and apprentices at least every three calendar months, with helpful guidance to support these conversations.[52] These should be combined by regular, open, three-way lines of communication that ensure the programme is functioning effectively and that the apprentice is getting the support they need.

Responding jointly to challenges

Even where apprenticeships are well-designed and different components of the programme function effectively, challenges may arise during apprenticeships.

[52] Department for Work and Pensions. 'Apprenticeship funding rules: 2026 to 2027'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-funding-rules-and-assessment-plan-guidance-2026-to-2027

This might relate to workload, difficulties completing OTJ training, nerves about the EPA, a difficult line management relationship, or even personal issues affecting the apprentice's work. Here, the key is employers and training providers working proactively and collaboratively together.

In positive scenarios, apprentices explained that they were helped through difficult moments. These young people received practical support to address the challenges they were facing, allowing them to progress on their programme.

"They gave me the chance to open myself and being honest about my fears and doubts..." - Female, 29, Still Undertaking, Level 6

"Knowing you have someone to turn to if you ... just need emotional support can give you the push over the finish line." - Female, 25, Completed, Level 5

In some cases, this saw a training provider tutor acting as an intermediary between the employer, training provider and apprentice. This allowed them to advocate for apprentices where training was not being prioritised by employers, for instance.

"I got an assigned tutor who regularly checked in my progress and we would make training plans, set goals and review the progress I've made." - Female, 21, Completed, Level 3

"They would check in with you and have meetings in person to come and visit your workplace, they were also always on hand to sort any issues."- Female, 23, Completed, Level 3

Many apprentices who had dropped out had faced similar difficulties to those who completed. The difference here was that they did not receive the necessary support to overcome these challenges.

There was a common pattern here where apprentices would fall behind with their OTJ training and the employer would lack the capacity, capability or willingness to help them navigate this challenge and ensure, at the very least, that their training time was protected.

Instead, these apprentices would often have to deal with challenging employer workloads as they fell further behind with OTJ training. Their development, including their OTJ training and time with their line manager, would be squeezed out by more immediate employer priorities.

These experiences, over time, raised or reaffirmed doubts about their own abilities, seeing them torn between workplace and training commitments, and ultimately leaving them questioning the suitability of their apprenticeship. In this situation, young people said it was hard for them to see a pathway through to completion, contributing to them dropping out of their apprenticeship.

"My team became understaffed and I had no time for the apprenticeship in work, and I didn't have time for it out of work." - Female, 28, Dropped Out, Level 3

"The company weren't set up for an apprentice... They didn't know what to teach me, how to help me." - Male, 27, Dropped Out, Level 4

"I was too tired to study anyway... it felt draining and depressing... Just how overworked and underappreciated I felt." - Female, 19, Dropped Out, Level 3

"I felt very alone and lost and made me begin to fall behind in my course... I began to get increasingly frustrated with my lack of support." - Female, 22, Dropped Out, Level 2

"I really wouldn't say I got much, it was much less supportive than described on the course outline, I barely heard back when I emailed them and got little to no help on assignments." - Female, 22, Dropped Out, Level 3

Part of this comes down to the importance of training for line managers and tutors in how to spot, raise and respond to concerns. However, another key aspect was having strong systems in place that are understood and easy to navigate for all parties. As one training provider described it, there should be a triangle between the employer, training provider and apprentice, where they share through-lines of communication and provide support – to apprentices but also to those around the apprentice, such as line managers.

Tailoring support for 16-18-year-old apprentices

One employer we spoke with explained that they had taken several additional steps to support their 16–18-year-old apprentices, with a strong investment in relationships with apprentices' parents and carers. This included producing guidance booklets aimed at parents at carers to help them support their children through their apprenticeship. In addition, they had commissioned paid summer interns to review their communications materials and ensure that they were well-targeted towards young people.

Where there were weak or non-existent support systems in place, apprentices faced a lottery, where the support they would receive would depend almost entirely on whether they had a line manager, tutor or other professional figure willing and able to advocate for them and provide adequate support.

"I didn't have a job description and my employer didn't want to give me one... The provider struggled with this but there was no pathway for them to highlight to my employer why this was needed." - Female, 29, Completed, Level 6

Interviewees were clear that strong checks – both before and during the apprenticeship – were needed to ensure that there were clear routes for them to escalate concerns, whether that be around employer behaviour, dissatisfaction with the structure of their programme, or a perceived misalignment between their working responsibilities and the apprenticeship standard.

Building a sense of cohort and community among apprentices

The experts we spoke with stressed the value of young people feeling part of an apprentice cohort - sharing tips, advice, challenges and experiences with one another. This could be particularly helpful to those who are nervous about entering the world of work. For some employers with many young apprentices this might be reasonably straightforward. For others, more intentional innovation might be necessary.

One larger employer we spoke with explained that they might only have one current apprentice in a given office but they were able to connect them to previous apprentices and current apprentices in other offices to build a sense of a cohort. Similarly, some apprentices - notably those on highly competitive degree apprenticeships - will also benefit from contact with apprentices who started the year before them.

In contrast, SMEs will quite often have only one apprentice. Here, employers may wish to look to local clusters of organisations – linking apprentices up with others in a similar field. These could be led by larger employers, who may have greater leadership capacity. In addition, networks such as the Association of Apprentices can offer the community and development opportunities that young apprentices might otherwise be unable to access.

Navigating an apprenticeship on low pay

"The low pay grade definitely [drove the decision]. It felt forced, I enjoyed the job but it wasn't financially viable for me." - Female, 29, Dropped Out, Level 3

Those from lower-income backgrounds and those who live in areas of higher deprivation are more likely to drop out of their apprenticeship.[53] In our sample, those in the C2DE and FSM categories also had lower rates of completion than their more affluent counterparts (see Figures 12 and 13).

Many young apprentices also reported facing significant financial barriers during their apprenticeships. At the heart of this was low pay. The apprenticeship minimum wage is only £8 per hour (£8.31 from April 2027), which can cause apprentices difficulties, particularly in the context of enduring cost of living challenges. Apprentices can only access the National Minimum Wage for their age group if they are 19 or over and have completed the first year of their apprenticeship.

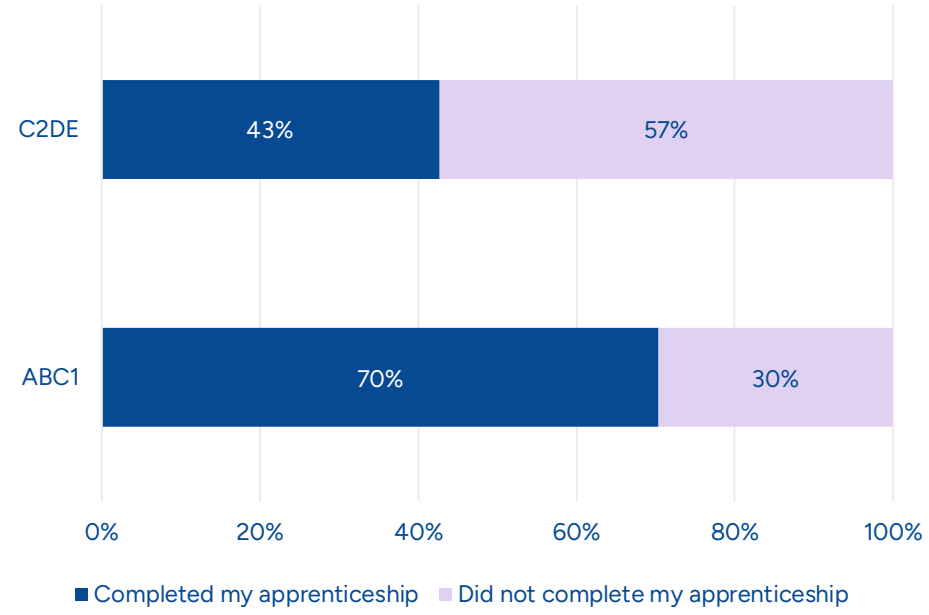
"Many young apprentices also reported facing significant financial barriers during their apprenticeships. At the heart of this was low pay."

The Low Pay Commission have previously found that almost a third of 16–17-year-olds and almost a fifth of 18-year-old apprentices earn the apprenticeship minimum wage.[54] Moreover, many of those earning above the minimum wage will still be on low pay. In this context, many young apprentices shared how their finances affected their work and learning but also their wellbeing, families, relationships, and other facets of life.

[53] Bocock et al. 2026. 'Securing success from start to finish'. NFER. http://nfer.ac.uk/media/buujsvfo/securing_success_from_start_to_finish.pdf

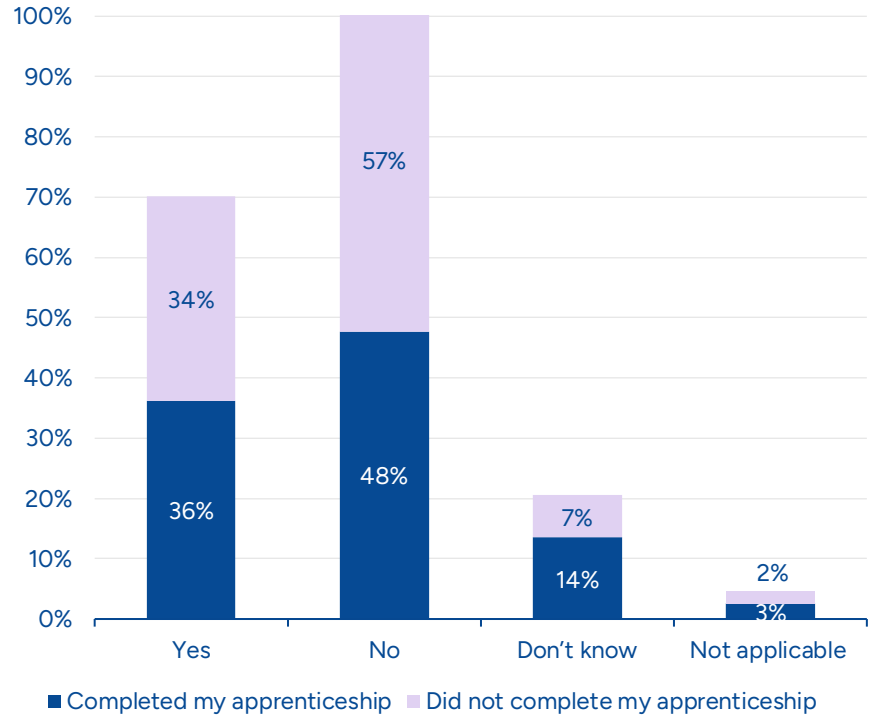
[54] Low Pay Commission. 2024. 'Four facts about apprentice pay from the latest data'. https://minimumwage.blog.gov.uk/2024/05/03/four-facts-about-apprentice-pay-from-the-latest-data/

Figure 11: Achievement rates by socio-economic background



Sample size = 237 (ABC1= 169, C2DE =68)

Figure 12: Achievement rates by FSM status (Yes n= 90, No n=131)



Sample size = 255 (Yes= 90, No =131)

A reduction in benefits is a key barrier for young apprentices

At present, if a 16-18 year-old starts an apprenticeship, families in receipt of Universal Credit experience a reduction in their benefit entitlements. This is because the young person is seen as working and is therefore removed from the family unit.[55]

As one policy expert explained, this creates two issues for apprenticeship achievement. One is a deterrent effect, where a young person may decide (or be encouraged by their parents) to not take on an apprenticeship because of concerns about household income implications. The other is a response effect, where an unexpected reduction in household benefits affects young people's living situation, and ultimately their ability to complete their apprenticeship. Another expert recalled one young apprentice being kicked out of their house once their mother had seen how the apprenticeship start would interact with their benefit entitlements.

In March 2026, a report from the Social Security Advisory Committee found that families could be losing up to £339.92 per week when a young person starts an apprenticeship. In response, the government announced a new bursary worth up to £4,500 per household to address this issue. The bursary targets single parents with a disabled child – a group that find themselves worse-off following a young person starting an apprenticeship.[56] While for other households, the young apprentice's income should compensate for lost benefits, this is not always the reality given parents will not always lay claim to their child's income.[57] This means that at present, the social security system can act as a barrier to apprenticeships for young people from low-income backgrounds.

[55] Work and Pensions Committee. 'Youth employment, education and training'. https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/54402/documents/302186/default/

[56] Department for Work & Pensions. 'Letter from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions…' 26th October 2026. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-response-to-ssac-occasional-paper-27-the-influence-of-the-social-security-system-on-educational-and-vocational-decision-making-at-age-16

[57] Social Security Advisory Committee. 2026. 'The influence of the social security system on educational and vocational decision-making at age 16'. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6ab3df0d8cb3c0580e5010a0/ssac-report-on-young-people.pdf

These pressures were not felt equally by young apprentices. Those able to rely on family for financial support would often frame their low-paid apprenticeship as an investment in their future. In contrast, those without such support or savings to draw from found financial pressures competing with the demands of their apprenticeship. They explained that what little they did earn was absorbed by housing, travel and other essential costs, causing a strain on their personal and household finances.

“These pressures were not felt equally by young apprentices. Those able to rely on family for financial support would often frame their low-paid apprenticeship as an investment in their future.”

"I had no financial backing from my parents so every penny was mine and the apprentice rate is very low." - Female, 24, Completed, Level 3

"Experienced financial pressures, as I’m paid minimum wage... I live by myself and pay all my rent and bills." - Male, 19, Completed, Level 3

Those that moved house to access their apprenticeship also faced additional costs, as did those driving to their workplace. Our expert interviewees also explained that areas with expensive, unreliable or even non-existent public transport created further costs for apprentices. Young apprentices who are parents and carers also face further challenges when trying to stretch often meagre apprenticeship incomes to make ends meet.

"I moved for the role so I had to pay for lots more in terms of renting and stuff like that... I did struggle a lot more" - Male, 22, Dropped Out, Level 3

"Personally my pay is very low for the area, and I need a car to commute, as well as having to move out of my family home. As a result my finances are pretty tight each month." - Male, 22, Still Undertaking, Level 4

Young apprentices ultimately want to have the financial security they need to pursue their programme. However, too often, their apprenticeship wages would not stretch far enough.

Supporting with travel costs

One of our expert interviewees worked for an organisation that delivers sports-related apprenticeships for young people. They explained that their delivery model required multiple community visits, which had been a barrier for some young apprentices who did not have a car or otherwise struggled to make travel arrangements.

In response, they partnered with another organisation to provide free bus passes to apprentices. They also encouraged the employers they worked with to use some of the grant they received from them to support with travel costs.

The interviewee noted that this intervention had helped tackle immediate travel barriers faced by some young people but that this needed to be accompanied by a wider investment in transport infrastructure, so that these funds are not such a necessity in the future. Moreover, Policy Exchange research has highlighted that available financial support (such as travel subsidies) available to young apprentices varies greatly across the country, meaning where young people live can drastically affect the financial viability of apprenticeships.[58]

"I felt the scheme was not fit for a parent... I couldn't switch off at the end of the day because I still had to be a mum." - Female, 18, Break, Level 5

"It was important to have my own money to support my parents with paying the bills and to buy things for myself." - Female, 24, Dropped Out, Level 3

These financial pressures had a range of direct and indirect consequences for young apprentices' experience. In some cases, young people took on weekend jobs on top of their apprenticeship, which could have a bearing on their time available for work and study. We also heard from young apprentices who had struggled for meals and borrowed money from family and lenders. These circumstances can clearly have dire consequences for young people's physical and mental health, personal relationships, and

[58] Dowsett, O. 'The Postcode Lottery of Apprenticeship Support'. https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/the-postcode-lottery-of-apprenticeship-support/

other aspects of young people's lives, as well as affecting their ability to progress with their apprenticeship.

"It was quite hard at the time for my family and myself because we didn't have a lot of money. So I would struggle for meals sometimes." - Female, 20, Completed, Level 3

"I wasn't able to manage on my income and I had to borrow... I borrowed [from family and creditors] more than I was comfortable with and it led to stress during the apprenticeship." - Female, 27, Completed, Level 4

For apprentices from low-income backgrounds or those otherwise struggling financially, such challenges led them to question the viability of their apprenticeship and, in some cases, drop out altogether. We heard from one young apprentice, who dropped out of their course to take on a retail job. This was a financially rational short-term decision but meant they were unable to complete their course and benefit from the knowledge, skills and experience that their apprenticeship may have given them in the longer-term.

"I was working more hours than my previous role and getting paid about half as much... hard psychologically for me to justify." - Male, 22, Dropped Out, Level 2

"I quit the apprenticeship as I found a full-time retail job... [because of the] higher pay. It was something I had to do." - Male, 22, Dropped Out, Level 3

For some of those we spoke with, financial difficulties were the primary driver for them dropping out of their apprenticeship. However, it was more often the case that financial circumstances were a key additional, aggravating factor – making it difficult for young people to manage the other challenges they were facing through their apprenticeship. While some were able to persevere and complete their apprenticeships, for others it felt like quitting and getting a higher-paid job – regardless of long-term returns – or pursuing something with less pressure attached was the only realistic option.

Apprenticeship drop-outs: an accumulation of challenges

As outlined earlier in this report, the government's Apprenticeship Evaluation Survey shows that apprenticeship drop-outs are often driven by

multiple contributing factors, rather than a single cause.[59] This was borne out in our interviews.

Many of the young apprentices we heard from had stuck with their apprenticeship in the face of challenges, hoping that their experience would improve, only leaving as a last resort.

"I was hoping that I'd begin to find the content more engaging, but this didn't happen... I didn't feel engaged or motivated." - Male, 29, Dropped Out, Level 3

A combination of repetitive, unfulfilling work and poor training led some young apprentices to feel they were giving more to their employer than they were getting back. For these young people, the justification for being on lower apprenticeship wages was that they would gain learning opportunities that they would not otherwise. Where it became clear this was not the case, the apprenticeship stopped looking like a viable option.

Some apprentice non-completers felt that their poor experience affected not only their work but also their personal lives and general wellbeing.

"I didn't have time to do anything but work and sleep... I had fallen behind and was unable to catch up." - Male, 26, Dropped Out, Level 4

"I noticed my quality of work was slipping, I didn't socialise as much and my home life wasn't kept how I liked it." - Female, 26, Dropped Out, Level 5

In other cases, apprentices experienced declining support whether at work, through their training provider or both. This could leave them feeling isolated or abandoned, leading them to consider dropping out.

"It felt as if the education side had hit a plateau and they just gave up on me. They didn't care to teach me." - Female, 26, Dropped Out, Level 3

Young apprentices rarely reported dropping out at the first sign of difficulty or in response to a single challenge with their apprenticeship or in their personal lives. However, these experiences could constitute the final tipping point or highlight the weaknesses in their apprenticeship that they had been feeling or suspecting for some time.

"However, these experiences could constitute the final tipping point or highlight the weaknesses in their apprenticeship that they had been feeling or suspecting for some time."

[59] IFF Research. 2024. 'Apprenticeship Evaluation 2023: Learner and Non-completer Surveys'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-evaluation-2023-learner-non-completer-and-employer-surveys

For some, their decision to drop out was crystallised by a key moment - someone observing how miserable they were at work or realising through a conversation that they were not going to get the development opportunities they expected.

"I relayed my concerns to my manager but was met with little care or concern or support by my manager and was instead told that they had a business need." - Male, 24, Dropped Out, Level 4

"A customer said I looked unhappy and we spoke for a few minutes, I realised that I was and left moments later." - Male, 23, Dropped Out, Level 3

In other cases, personal circumstances exposed shortfalls in pastoral support. Some apprentices had had crises in their personal lives, whether to do with family, health, bereavement, childcare issues or other concerns. Here, they felt that the appropriate support mechanisms - whether from their employer or their training provider - were absent at the very moment they needed them.

"It was just becoming unsustainable for me to continue with the pressure and workload with no support. It was also during the COVID-19 lockdown and I had a sick family member." - Female, 24, Dropped Out, Level 3

Overall, this underlines the importance of taking a multi-pronged approach to tackling apprenticeship drop-outs. This means creating apprenticeship opportunities for young people; improving young people's understanding of apprenticeships and improving the support they are given with decision-making and applications; working with employers and training providers to ensure they provide strong, coherent programmes of work and training for young people; ensuring line management and training are of a consistently high quality, and; encouraging employers and training providers to take a proactive, preventative view of pastoral support, putting strong support structures in place, and then escalating quickly and effectively where difficulties arise.

What next for those that do not complete their apprenticeships?

Apprentice non-completers mostly saw the upsides

The government has expressed a clear desire to improve the apprenticeship achievement rate and for good reason. Completing an apprenticeship ensures that young people can gain the knowledge and skills they need to progress to a job within or outside their industry or sector. Moreover, those who drop out of apprenticeships tend to earn much less over the next three years than those who complete their programme and are more likely to be unemployed.[60]

It is important to acknowledge, however, that apprenticeship drop-outs can occur for a range of reasons and destinations may take a variety of forms. For instance, some young people will leave their apprenticeship early as they have received a job offer elsewhere or are starting a university course. Others may leave without an immediate destination in mind.

One of the benefits of our approach to this research was that we could ask young apprentices that dropped out of their apprenticeship to reflect back on their experiences.

"While they may have faced a range of challenges during their apprenticeship, many of those who dropped out reflected positively on their experiences."

While they may have faced a range of challenges during their apprenticeship, many of those who dropped out reflected positively on their experiences. For these young people, not completing their apprenticeship may have felt like a setback at the time but it also helped them decide what their next step should be - later viewing it as a positive turning point for them. Some interviewees explained that their apprenticeship had helped crystallise both what they did and what they did not want from their career.

"At the start a set back because it felt like I wasted my time but now I see that I learnt a lot." - Female, 20, Dropped Out, Level 3

"In a positive way. It helped me to realise more of what I do want... I knew it wasn't right for me." - Female, 23, Dropped Out, Level 3

[60] Bocock et al. 2026. 'Securing success from start to finish'. NFER. http://nfer.ac.uk/media/buujsvfo/securing_success_from_start_to_finish.pdf

"I don't have any regrets especially because I'm so happy now with where I'm at... I'll always be grateful for my time there." - Female, 20, Dropped Out, Level 4

For a smaller group of apprenticeship non-completers, sentiments were more negative. Once the immediate relief of having left their apprenticeship had settled down, they were left to reflect on what might have been had they had a better experience or completed their programme. Some young people explained that shortly after they had dropped out, they felt lost or that they did not know as much as they initially thought about where their career was heading.

"Lack of confidence and again back to worthlessness, I thought I had made the biggest mistake of my life and was very stressed." - Male, 27, Dropped Out, Level 4

"I don't know anything about myself or the world and I thought I did. I am so far behind [friends]." - Male, 24, Dropped Out, Level 3

Others felt a sense of bitterness and frustration regarding their apprenticeship; that they had missed out on what could have been a great opportunity.

"Frustrated that the work and employer had pushed me to start disliking something I enjoyed." - Non-Binary, 30, Dropped Out, Level 4

Experiences differed greatly depending on immediate destination

Just as young people's reasons for dropping out of an apprenticeship vary, so do their destinations after non-completion.

Many interviewees had moved quickly into work or further study, causing little disruption and allowing them to either progress or regroup and shift to a path better suited to them. In some cases, young apprentices were able to shift to the job that they were originally aiming to arrive at through their apprenticeship, reflecting the knowledge and skills they gained through their programme.

Other apprentices had dropped out at a moment that was well-timed with their next destination, such as a university course. Many in this group reported being satisfied with their next destination and feeling that their apprenticeship had helped them get there, either through the knowledge or skills they gained, or through helping them realise what it was they did or did not want to do.

"I ended up getting a new job, in that role I was preparing for by the apprenticeship" - Male, 26, Dropped Out, Level 4

"I ended up quitting the apprenticeship but staying on for a regular role" - Non-Binary, 23, Dropped Out, Level 3

In contrast, some young people needed to regroup and consider their next steps after dropping out. For this group, leaving their apprenticeship was often initially seen as a setback, involving unemployment, picking up temporary work, receiving benefits or moving back to their family homes. This was often described as a difficult period, with young people coming to terms with their apprenticeship not going according to plan.

However, many of these young people used this experience to take stock and consider their next options, drawing on their apprenticeship experience. This could involve reflecting on their chosen sector, considering what sort of working environment they are best suited to, or exploring alternative pathways such as university.

"I'm glad I did it to get my foot in the door. It has shaped my longer-term plans by helping me understand what I want from a job/career and what I don't want. I learned about how I prefer to work and what doesn't work for me." - Female, 28, Dropped Out, Level 4

"I decided to leave the apprenticeship to pursue my postgraduate studies... I think things worked out well, and my decisions were all valuable parts of my journey." - Female, 23, Dropped Out, Level 3

Another significant group of young apprentices had dropped out following burnout, anxiety or other wellbeing-related struggles and did so without another option lined up afterwards. These interviewees would often spend weeks or months recovering and getting back to regular routines before being able to consider their next steps.

Some of these young people were then able to access new study or work opportunities. A smaller group, however, found it very difficult to get back on their feet after dropping out. This was often true of those who had left their apprenticeship in particularly difficult circumstances, such as losing their job. These young people noted the scarring effects of apprenticeship non-completion in terms of their CV and missed experience but also on their self-confidence and self-worth. This group was characterised by uncertainty about their next steps.

"I ended up quitting... my mental health comes first... Just taking time for myself." - Female, 19, Dropped Out, Level 3

"I think I began to believe that it was a bit of a lost cause" - Male, 21, Dropped Out, Level 2

Getting support with next steps

Overall, this section illustrates the variety of experiences an apprenticeship non-completer might have. Many apprentices dropped out of their programme with knowledge, skills, experience and a plan for what they wanted to do next. For others, it took weeks or even months to get back on their feet.

While there is a laudable ambition to raise the apprenticeship achievement rate, employers, training providers and policymakers also need to consider how they can best support young apprentice non-completers with their next steps. This might involve signposting other apprenticeship, work or study opportunities; connecting them to other organisations, such as Youth Hubs, that can offer tailored support or, in cases where personal circumstances may have been flagged as a reason for drop out, more specialist forms of support.

“Crucially, not all young people will have the time or resources to spend a long time deliberating their next steps, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.”

Crucially, not all young people will have the time or resources to spend a long time deliberating their next steps, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The financial necessity of work may lead young people to make faster decisions and to take the first opportunity they are offered, as outlined earlier in this report. This speaks to the importance of offering support on next steps prior to young people leaving their apprenticeship - ensuring they are not left to navigate a challenging labour market on their own.

Discussion and recommendations

Currently, around one in three apprenticeship starts end in non-completion. This represents a great cost – for apprentices, employers, training providers, the taxpayer, and the economy at large. Against the backdrop of the Milburn Review and the government's ambition to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), we have sought to understand what shapes young people's experience of apprenticeships and their propensity to drop out of their programme.

We have seen that many young people – including many of those who ultimately do not complete – gain valuable knowledge, skills and experience from apprenticeships that set them up for working life. For many young people, their programmes do ultimately live up to the 'earn as you learn' model, which is a credit to them, their employers and their training providers.

"Improving the apprenticeship achievement rate is a complex, multi-faceted challenge."

However, we also find that many young people face challenges at all stages of the apprenticeship journey, from patchy careers education and a dearth of available opportunities, to inconsistent line management, low quality off-the-job training, and a disconnect between their employer and training provider.

We have also heard how young people's individual circumstances – where they grow up, their financial situation, challenges in their personal lives, their special educational needs and disabilities, among other factors – can affect their ability to get the most out of their apprenticeship.

Improving the apprenticeship achievement rate is a complex, multi-faceted challenge. It therefore requires considered reform at all stages – from improving young people's understanding of what apprenticeships entail, right the way through to their experience of their programme and their support with future destinations.

In its desire to boost apprenticeship starts and achievements, the government must ensure it goes about this the right way – increasing the supply of high-quality apprenticeships, matching young people with such opportunities, and ensuring that all young people, regardless of background or individual circumstances, are offered the support they need to thrive on their apprenticeship.

This means building on some of the great work already happening across the sector: an employer that is offering great line management support to young apprentices; a provider that is working closely with employers to ensure that apprenticeships are functioning as a coherent programme of learning. We offer a series of recommendations for employers and training providers that can help take this work forward.

It is also important to recognise the significant policy development in this area, whether it be the Apprenticeship Accountability Framework, existing guidance and evidence to support best practice, or incentives aimed at supporting particular groups of young apprentices. With this in mind, we offer a series of recommendations that build on existing policy where possible, presenting a series of recommendations that, taken together, will help boost apprenticeship achievement among young people.

Recommendations for government

Matching young people with apprenticeship opportunities

There is a clear need to both improve the supply of opportunities and the matching between young people and apprenticeships.

In the Autumn Budget, chancellor John Healy announced £100m of funding over 2027/28 and 2028/29 to grow the Mayoral Apprenticeship Brokerage Pilots out from 7 Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) to 14. This represents an exciting opportunity to connect young people with employers, particularly SMEs and those that have not previously taken apprentices on.

The government need to take several key steps to maximise the success of local apprenticeship services:

- **Give employers support that goes beyond matching and focuses on boosting apprenticeship completion, as well as starts.** This will help ensure employers and apprentices benefit as much as possible from the programme and increase the likelihood of employers taking on further apprentices in the future – raising the long-term, sustainable impact of brokerage services.

- **Set out plans to expand local apprenticeship services to areas not currently represented by mayors.** While there is a strong argument that mayors are well positioned to support a place-based approach

to coordinating between young people, education institutions and employers, there are currently only 14 existing Mayoral Strategic Authorities. The government need to clarify how it plans to deliver the pilots or an equivalent brokering service in areas not currently represented by mayors.

- **Offer support to employers to improve access and success among those that may face barriers to apprenticeships, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds**. There is a great opportunity here for these brokerage services to support employers to enable apprenticeship access for those that may face barriers to apprenticeship achievement. The government should consult with organisations with expertise on challenges faced by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, young carers, and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) to help design evidence-informed guidance, with a view to boosting apprenticeship starts and achievements among these groups. This should also be used to raise the visibility of existing support, such as the care leavers' bursary.

- **Work closely with alternative provision providers, local charities, community organisations, youth groups and other non-mainstream settings to meet young people where they are.** While schools and colleges will be central to the success of the brokerage services, it is crucial that the service reaches out to non-mainstream settings, pooling their knowledge of young people, and acting as trusted adults that can pass information, advice and guidance on to young people and help them connect with potential employers. This will be particularly crucial if the brokerage services are to boost apprenticeship starts and achievement among those who are currently NEET.

- **Tailor employer support by industry, sector, size and level of experience with apprenticeships.** Different employers will have different considerations when it comes to whether they want to take on an apprentice. In construction, for instance, there may be concern that apprentices will start and then leave to take on self-employed work, where they may immediately earn more than their apprenticeship wage. In addition, different employers will be at different stages of their journey with apprenticeships and have different levels of familiarity with the system. Brokerage services will be more effective if their support accounts for these differences.

Wider steps to boost supply

Getting apprenticeship supply right is key to boosting achievement rates – allowing young people to access opportunities that are a better match for their knowledge, skills, interests and ambitions.

Investment in brokerage services should therefore be accompanied by several other steps to boost the supply of apprenticeship opportunities. This involves building on existing local plans and infrastructure, and thinking creatively about the use of incentives to target access and achievement for groups currently underserved by apprenticeships.

- **The government should explore targeted incentives for training providers, focusing on both apprenticeship starts and achievements.** At present, apprenticeship incentives are primarily aimed at employers. While this can be an effective way to encourage employers to take on new apprentices, there is a missed opportunity here to look at incentives for training providers. A small incentive to boost achievements (not just starts) for young people who are NEET, for instance, could – given the scale of training providers' reach – have a great impact on both apprentices and their employers. This would need to be carefully managed, particularly given the prominence of large training providers and concerns about quality, as discussed in the 'Improving quality and consistency of provision' section of these recommendations.

- **The government should pilot staggered incentives for employers and training providers within the 16-24 age group (such as those who are 16-18).** This could help the government realise its vision for apprenticeships as being primarily about early experiences in the workplace. In the context of a challenging labour market, this may have adverse consequences for those who sit outside of these criteria, hence the need for consultation.

- **Skills England should commit to extending Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) beyond 2029, improving local coordination and boosting apprenticeship opportunities.** LSIPs can provide a vital join-up between Get Britain Working Plans, skills assessments and industrial strategy – allowing local actors to pool local knowledge and create new opportunities, including apprenticeships, that match local areas' ambitions. Extending the programme would help provide an impetus for all stakeholders to commit to current plans and to feel invested in the long-term future of the scheme.

"Getting apprenticeship supply right is key to boosting achievement rates – allowing young people to access opportunities that are a better match for their knowledge, skills, interests and ambitions."

- **The Mayoral Strategic Authorities receiving the Local Growth Fund should invest it in supporting apprentices in industries and sectors with particular skills needs.** This could take a variety of forms, including investment in education and training facilities but also in 'connective tissue', e.g. facilitating SMEs in local economic clusters to share best practice when it comes to supporting their apprentices.

Improving quality and consistency of provision

It is crucial that the drive to improve apprenticeship starts does not come at the expense of quality, which will harm both the achievement rate and the value of the apprenticeship for those that do complete. Building on existing policy investment in this area, the government should look to help employers and training providers improve the quality of their provision.

- **Apprenticeships should have a minimum requirement for face-to-face off-the-job (OTJ) training, with greater clarity on what counts as OTJ training and tighter enforcement of training requirements more generally.** In addition, this should be accompanied by a strong emphasis on improving the quality of training – drawing on the science of learning and evidence-informed resources, including those from the Education Endowment Foundation.

- **Skills England should consider allowing a set number of OTJ hours to be used prior to an apprentice officially starting their programme to ensure apprentices can start on the front foot**. This approach should be piloted across several industries, sectors and levels before assessing and expanding depending on outcomes. The DWP should also gather data to get a more detailed understanding of the different forms that OTJ training is taking.

- **Skills England should introduce a fully funded, optional line management training unit for SMEs taking on young apprentices.** This builds on a previous Chartered Management Institute recommendation.[61] The unit could draw on existing resources, such as the Association of Apprentices' Guide for Managers of Apprentices and existing evidence on the effectiveness of such training, such as the government's evaluation of the civil service's

[61] Wilton, P. 'Beyond Technical Skills: Why Young People Need Leadership Skills to Thrive In The Workplace'. FE News. https://www.fenews.co.uk/exclusive/beyond-technical-skills-why-young-people-need-leadership-skills-to-thrive-in-the-workplace/

Line Management Training Programmes.[62] Free training should provide an incentive to SMEs to take on young apprentices and also improve the quality of the apprenticeship experience, boosting the achievement rate.

- **The government should consult on rebalancing the timing of funding payments to large training providers so that greater weight is given to apprenticeship completion.** At present, the government makes monthly payments totalling 80% of the agreed total cost of apprenticeships with 20% paid at the end of the EPA.[63] If this balance shifted in favour of achievements (e.g. 70% across delivery and 30% at the end of the programme) this could further incentivise training providers to focus on apprenticeship achievement and the quality of their provision. However, there may be downsides here, including implications for provider running costs. A consultation encompassing training providers, employers, apprentices and other stakeholders should explore the benefits and drawbacks of such an approach.

- **The Department for Education should look to expand teaching bursaries for shortage subjects in Further Education Colleges**. Colleges deliver apprenticeships but also a suite of other academic, vocational and technical qualifications. Investing in bursaries in shortage subjects should help drive staff recruitment where it is needed and minimise disruption for young apprentices, as well as college students completing other aligned qualifications.

- **The Department for Work and Pensions should continue collection and analysis of the 'Apprenticeship Evaluation Learner Survey', sharing results publicly for the benefit of the sector.** The analysis should build on the previous analysis conducted by the Department for Education, with a stronger focus on age groups, socio-economic background and other cross-breaks. This analysis should be published on Gov.uk. In addition, the DWP should explore opportunities to link apprenticeship achievements and non-

[62] Schuster, C. et al. 2025. 'Evaluating the Effectiveness of Line Management Training'. Government Skills. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluating-the-effectiveness-of-line-management-training

[63] It should be acknowledged here that the EPA is gradually being replaced by a new approach referred to apprenticeship assessment.

Ofqual. 2026. 'End-point assessment guide for apprentices'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/end-point-assessment-guide-for-apprentices/end-point-assessment-guide-for-apprentices

completions on different courses to destinations and other longer-term outcomes, to enable a fuller picture of apprenticeship achievements.

Removing financial barriers to apprenticeship achievement

"The government should ensure that the social security system does not discourage disadvantaged 16-18 year-olds from starting and completing apprenticeships."

As discussed throughout this report, young people's backgrounds and where they grow up greatly affect their experiences of apprenticeships and their propensity to drop out.

While there is a compassionate case for further increasing the apprenticeship minimum wage, doing so would narrow the gap between the apprenticeship wage and the regular national minimum wage, further disincentivising employers from taking apprentices on. The government should therefore keep the apprentice minimum wage under review, looking to seek a balance between good pay and the supply of opportunities, as recommended by the Youth Futures Foundation.[64]

There are several key steps that the government should take to address financial barriers to apprenticeship access and achievement among young people.

- **The government should ensure that the social security system does not discourage disadvantaged 16-18 year-olds from starting and completing apprenticeships.** Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) research has found that households in receipt of Universal Credit currently lose out on benefits when their child starts an apprenticeship, often leaving them significantly worse off.[65] This acts as a barrier to young people from low-income backgrounds. In July 2026, the government announced a new bursary worth up to £4,500 to support households comprising a single parent with a disabled child when a young person starts an apprenticeship. While this is welcome, other households will continue to be worse-off when their child starts an apprenticeship unless they can secure a significant portion of their child's wages.

[64] Goulden, C. 2024. 'How could the benefits system help more young people do an apprenticeship?'. Youth Futures Foundation. https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/blog/how-could-the-benefits-system-help-more-young-people-do-an-apprenticeship/

[65] Social Security Advisory Committee. 2026. 'The influence of the social security system on educational and vocational decision-making at age 16'. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6ab3df0d8cb3c0580e5010a0/ssac-report-on-young-people.pdf

The government has accepted recommendations to clarify policy objectives for 16+ year-olds and to review economic dependency and the benefit unit.[66] With the Autumn Budget championing preventative spend, this is a great opportunity to review the 'family unit' category and frontload investment in young people's transition into the world of work.

- **The government should build on existing support and incentives to support apprenticeship opportunities for those from disadvantaged groups, such as care leavers and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.** Different groups of young people will face different barriers to apprenticeships. Young carers, for instance, may need to complete their employer workload and OTJ training alongside looking after a parent. Elsewhere, young people with SEND may face challenges accessing apprenticeships, depending on the nature of their needs or disabilities. The government has already taken some action in this area, such as introducing a £1,000 bursary aimed at workplaces supporting 19-24 year-olds with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and for those that have been in care. The government should look to extend these bursaries, consulting with a range of stakeholders, including representative bodies, employers, charities, parents, and young people themselves. This should also be accompanied by a campaign to improve awareness of existing incentives for employers and training providers.

- **National and local government should explore targeted transport bursaries and view transport infrastructure as a key lever for boosting apprenticeship access.** Where transport links are weak and/or expensive, many young people rely on expensive car travel to access their apprenticeships. In the shorter-term, the government should invest in travel grants to help young people fully participate in their apprenticeship. In the longer-term, there is a need for much-improved public transport infrastructure, particularly in certain poorly served parts of the country. This will help ensure that young apprentices are not having to spend great

[66] Department for Work & Pensions. 2026. 'Response to Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC's) report on: The influence of the social security system on educational and vocational decision-making at age 16'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-response-to-ssac-occasional-paper-27-the-influence-of-the-social-security-system-on-educational-and-vocational-decision-making-at-age-16/response-to-social-security-advisory-committee-ssacs-report-on-the-influence-of-the-social-security-system-on-educational-and-vocational-decision

time and money on their travel – allowing them to focus on their work and OTJ training and get the most out of their apprenticeship.

Setting young people up for success

Apprenticeships should present young people with a great opportunity to get their foot in the door and start their careers. However, concerningly, as the Milburn Review reveals, many employers describe young people arriving to work "not ready, unable to settle, and unlikely to stay".[67] This sentiment is echoed by young people themselves, with less than half (49%) of young people feeling they understand employer expectations.[68]

In this context, T-Levels (a relatively new technical and occupational route with an industry placement) and V-levels (new Level 3 vocational qualifications to be introduced from 2027) seek to provide alternative post-16 pathways that may help improve young people's readiness for their future careers.[69] Meanwhile, the government also intends to expand access to Foundation apprenticeships, which are set at Level 2 and look to "bridge the gap between formal learning in school or college and the world of work".

The government has also set out an ambition for all young people to have two weeks of work by Year 11, comprising at least one week in Years 7-9 and at least one week in Years 10-11.[70] While this is a laudable aim, this will require a significant investment in school capacity to ensure all schools have the careers specialists and administrative capacity necessary to coordinate placements. In addition, the government should urgently clarify whether work placements for under 16s are exempt from requirements surrounding DBS checks, as this will have significant consequences for the number of available opportunities.

In addition, the second Milburn Review report is expected to recommend a national pre-apprenticeship scheme, providing a bridge between school

[67] Department for Work & Pensions. 2026. 'Young people and work: Interim report'. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report

[68] Youth Employment UK. 2025. Youth Voice Census 2025. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report (via Milburn Review interim report).

[69] The Education Hub - Gov.uk 'New V levels and post-16 qualifications explained. https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2026/03/new-v-levels-and-post-16-qualifications-explained/

[70] Careers & Enterprise Company. 2026. 'Modern Work Experience'. https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/modern-work-experience

and the workplace.[71] While we await further details of this announcement, this could help address several challenges identified in our report, including unequal access to work experience opportunities and a weak understanding of apprenticeship opportunities.

Such an investment could be transformative for many young people. However, it is important that this is accompanied by a sharp focus on boosting school attainment, given those who achieve grade 5+ in English and Maths at GCSE are less likely to withdraw from apprenticeships.[72] The proposed Level 1 'stepping stone' qualifications will be an important part of this response, as will the government's wider commitment to closing the attainment gap.[73]

The government is also introducing new vocational GCSEs that young people will be able to study from the age of 14. These reforms raise challenging questions about young people's access to a broad and balanced academic curriculum, as well as about what curricular diet will allow young people to keep their future options open.[74]

More generally, the government should be taking a wider view of 'work-readiness'. Alarmingly, a recent report from the Centre for Social Justice finds that over a third (37%) of 15 year-olds report hardly ever leaving their bedroom apart from going to school.[75] Elsewhere, the IPPR report that one in twenty young people say that they have no close friends at all.[76] In this context, it is little surprise that many young apprentices reported difficulties communicating with colleagues and other core elements of working life. Here, the success of the National Youth Strategy, including the Every Child Can programme, will be key.

[71] Partington, R. 2026. 'Create new pre-apprenticeship scheme to close youth unemployment gap, says Milburn'. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2026/oct/10/pre-apprenticeship-scheme-landmark-alan-milburn-youth-jobs-crisis-report

[72] Bocock et al. 2026. 'Securing success from start to finish'. NFER. http://nfer.ac.uk/media/buujsvfo/securing_success_from_start_to_finish.pdf

[73] Department for Education. 16 to 19 level 1 English and maths qualifications. https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/16-to-19-level-1-english-and-maths-qualifications

[74] Cullinane, C. 2026. 'Sutton Trust response to DfE's vocational GCSE plans. The Sutton Trust. https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/sutton-trust-response-to-dfes-vocational-gcse-plans/

[75] The Centre for Social Justice. 'Inactive Nation. Part two: Getting England's teenagers moving'. https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/CSJ-Inactive_Nation_2.pdf

[76] Harris, E. et al. 2026. 'The loneliest generation'. IPPR. https://www.ippr.org/articles/the-loneliest-generation

Employers should:

- Be **proactive in sharing information** about what the apprenticeship will entail and its different components. Use the application process to reinforce expectations, programme structure and available support.

- Place **strong emphasis on induction** and bridge the gap between education and employment. This should involve making implicit working rules and norms, such as meeting etiquette, more explicit.

- **Invest in line management,** protecting time for regular meetings and goal setting but also investing in line manager training. Line managers should provide constructive feedback, reinforce the importance of off-the-job training, advocate for the apprentice and ensure the apprenticeship is functioning as a programme of learning. Here, there should be a focus on the challenges that young apprentices might face, particularly given that for some it is their first experience of work.

- Try to **pay apprentices at least the Real Living Wage**, where possible. Larger employers can help to promote this shift by requiring companies they are sharing levy with to pay the Real Living Wage, as modelled by the Co-op Levy Share.

- Offer support aimed at **tackling financial barriers.** This might include:

1. Compensating or subsidising travel costs
2. Addressing hidden costs (such as equipment)
3. Up-front payment of the first month's wage to support with start-up costs.
4. Raising awareness around existing bursaries and grants.

- Consider how best to **create an inclusive workplace**, including supporting those that may face barriers to achievement, such as financial barriers and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

- **Create a sense of cohort**. For SMEs, this might mean building ties with apprentices in local clusters – linking with those in a related field. These networks could be led by larger employers, who may have greater capacity to support such partnerships. In addition, networks such as the Association of Apprentices can offer community and development opportunities for young apprentices.

- **Work together with the apprentice towards the end of their programme**, discussing next steps and flagging opportunities with yourselves and other employers, as well as alternative pathways.

Training providers should:

- Ensure that training design and delivery are informed by the science of learning, built around a well-sequenced curriculum. **Evidence-informed teaching** should be the norm in both in-person and online training.

- Work closely with apprentices' employers to **ensure a through-line between off-the-job training and employer-based work**. This means looking at the sequencing of their employer work, as far as possible, and looking for alignment with their off-the-job training.

- Use **online training when effective and proportionate**. This means recognising the benefits of remote provision in terms of access for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, underserved areas, and those balancing other commitments but also looking to build opportunities for face-to-face contact.

- Use **regular one-to-one and small group contact through a personal tutor** to help young apprentices work independently, fit their study around other commitments, and get the tailored support they need. Ensure this support is consistent and robust to staff absence or turnover.

- Support personal tutors to take on more of the **pastoral and mentoring** side of the role, ensuring that they have the training and support they need to do so. This could be particularly beneficial for apprentices working with SMEs that have limited supportive capacity.

- Work closely with employers to **ensure regular communication is shared by the 'team around the apprentice'**. This includes regular meetings that cover the programme, what apprentices are going to be learning, upcoming assessments, and any other issues that need addressing.

- Ensure **apprentices can follow clear lines of communication** and escalation to raise concerns about employers should they need to. Have clear systems in place to flag concerns – take a preventative approach with regular meetings but also have protocols to follow when a young apprentice is at risk of dropping out.

Appendix

Methodology

Sample

Focaldata conducted n=317 qualitative interviews with adults aged 18 to 30 in England who had started an apprenticeship after 31 July 2020. Fieldwork ran from 12th June 2026 to 3rd July 2026. The final sample comprised 155 participants who had completed their apprenticeship, 100 who had not completed it, 54 who were still undertaking it and 8 who were on a break. Participants were recruited through the online panel provider Prolific.

Participants answered screening questions on age, gender, region, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and the level, sector and employer size of their apprenticeship. Representation was monitored across these characteristics, with socioeconomic background measured through free school meal eligibility and the occupation of the main household earner when the participant was 14. The sample is large for qualitative research but is not nationally representative, so findings should be read as illustrative rather than as statistical estimates.

Interview conduct

Focaldata's AI interviewer, FD_AI, conducted all interviews using a semi-structured approach that mirrors a traditional one-to-one qualitative interview. Participants were told in advance that they would be interviewed by an AI moderator. The moderator posed each core question from the discussion guide and generated follow-up probes in response to each answer, so that every conversation was tailored to the participant while remaining consistent across the sample.

Interviews took place online through a text-based chat, with participants typing their answers in real time. Each interview lasted around 45 minutes. Participants could leave the interview at any time. Transcripts were generated automatically on completion and made available for analysis.

Analysis

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis identifies the shared patterns of meaning across participants' interviews. Researchers reviewed the transcripts and coded recurring experiences, explanations and phrases against each research objective: entry into an apprenticeship, the experience of it, and completing or leaving. Focaldata's AI tools supported this by clustering similar responses across all 317 interviews, which allowed researchers to test how widely each theme held. Themes were then compared by apprenticeship status, level, sector, employer size, region and socioeconomic background, and related themes were grouped into the broader findings set out in the report.

Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment analysis tracked how participants felt at each stage of their apprenticeship, from deciding to apply through to completing or leaving. Researchers assessed whether participants described each stage in positive, negative or mixed terms, and identified where that sentiment shifted. This showed when confidence and commitment began to erode, where the experiences of completers and leavers diverged, and how those who left came to view their decision in the months that followed.

Laddering Analysis

Laddering, referred to in the report as pathways analysis, uncovers the chain of reasoning that links what participants say on the surface to the motivations beneath it. Each ladder runs from an attribute, a concrete feature of the apprenticeship such as pay, study time or the line manager; to a consequence, the effect that feature has on the participant; and finally, to an end value, the deeper need at stake, such as financial security, progress or belonging. Researchers traced these 'why' sequences within transcripts, and AI tools mapped them across interviews to identify the most common pathways and the points at which they diverged. This approach underpins the report's account of why some apprentices move from early doubts to leaving, while others facing similar pressures complete.

Further detail on our sample of young apprentices

This section outlines further detail on the composition of our sample of young apprentices. All with a sample size of 317 unless specified otherwise.

Figure 13: Distribution of apprenticeship levels in our sample

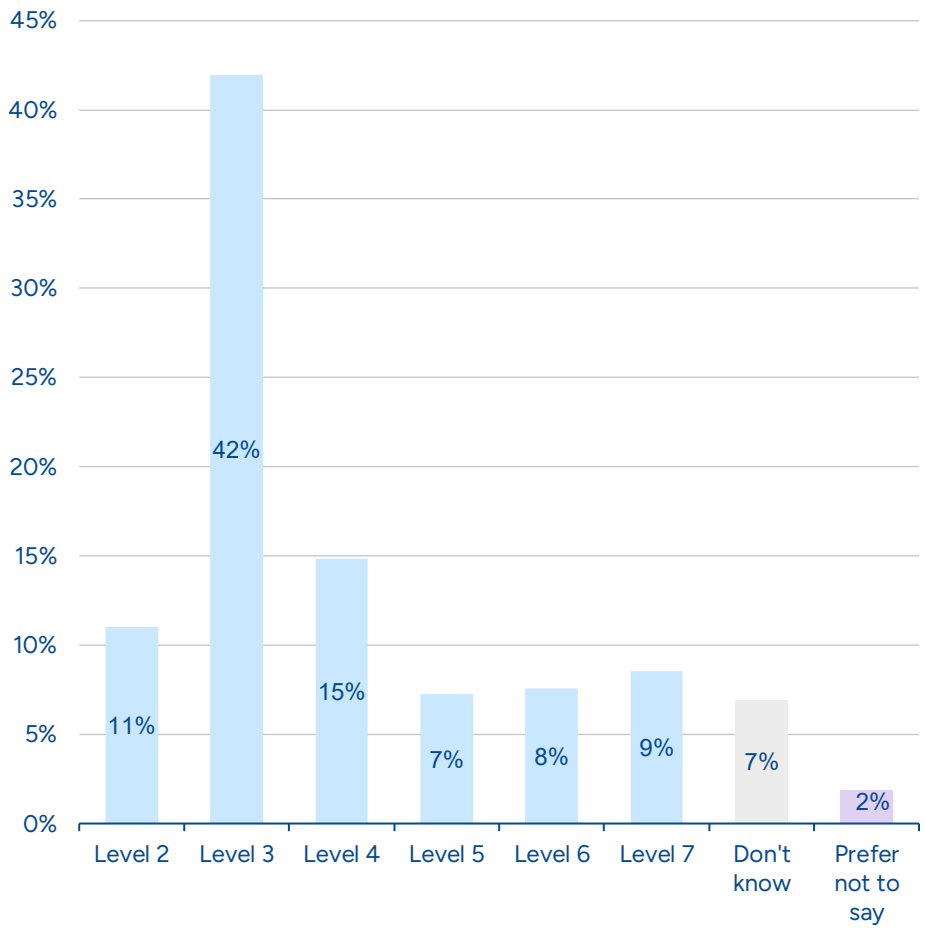


Figure 14: The composition of young apprentices by employer size

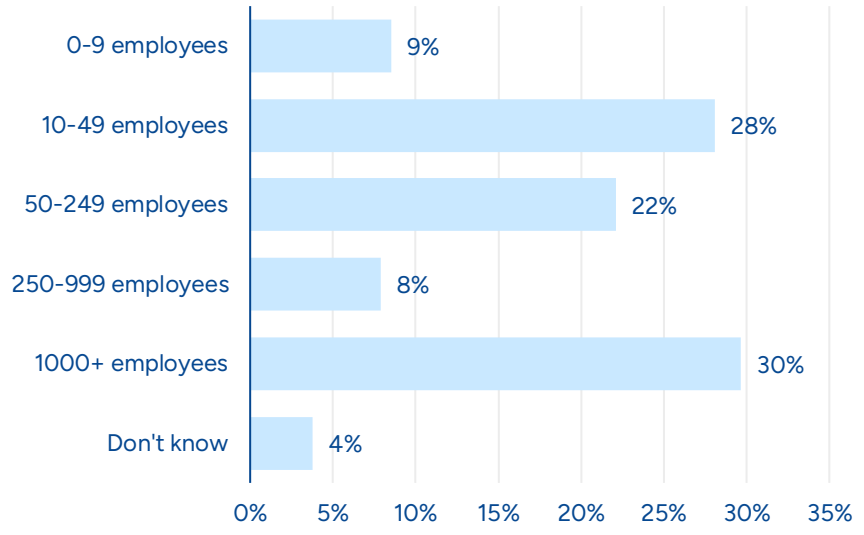


Figure 15: The proportion of young apprentices who attended a pre-apprenticeship programme or course

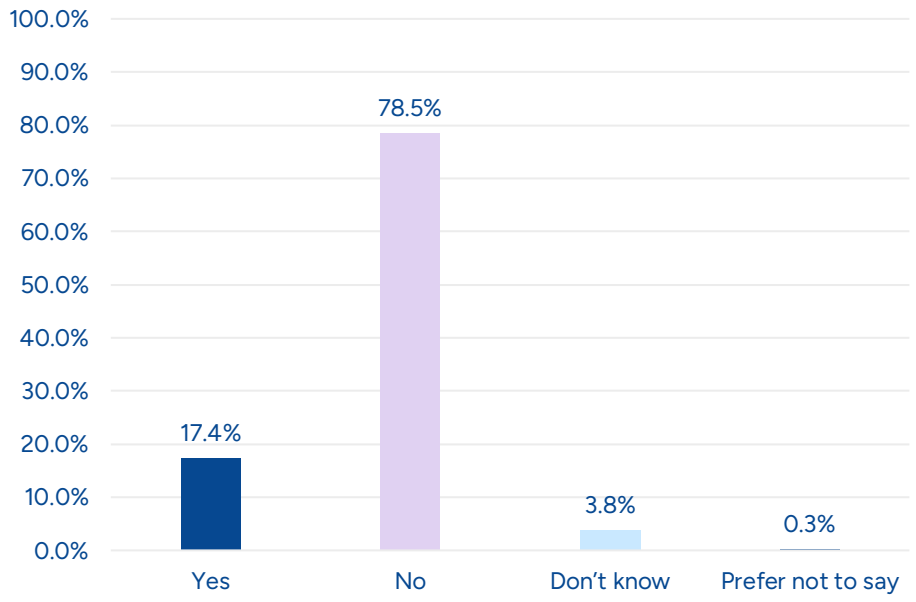


Figure 16: Sources of support for young apprentices (select all that apply)

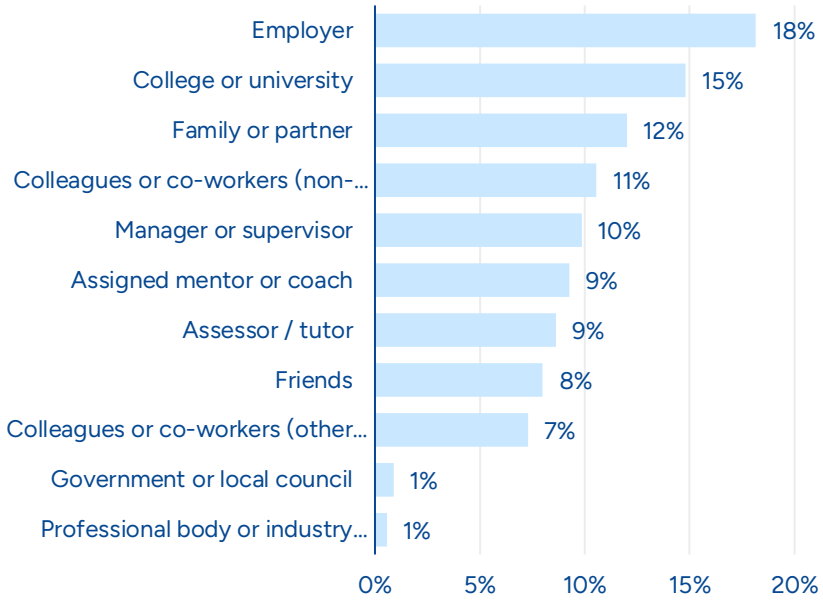
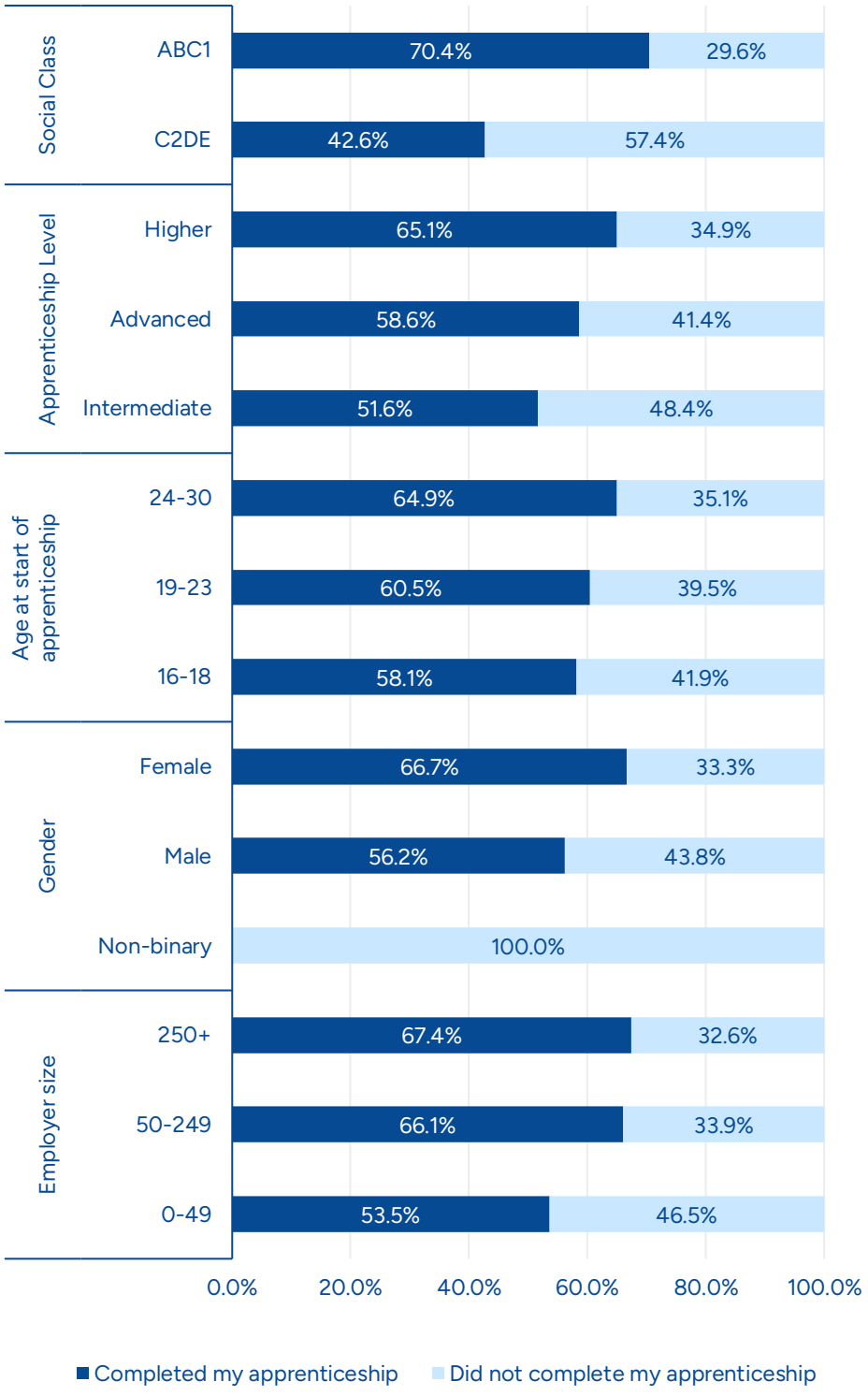


Figure 17: Apprenticeship achievement rates by socio-economic background, employer size, age at start of apprenticeship and apprenticeship level





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