

What apprenticeships are and how to use them

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What is an apprenticeship?

The government defines apprenticeships as a job with training. These work-based training programmes incorporate skills development, technical knowledge and practical experience. An apprentice must be employed in a job role with a productive purpose while being paid for the time spent training or studying.

Apprenticeships are available to both new members of staff and existing employees over the age of 16.

Apprenticeships range from level 2 qualifications, equivalent to GCSEs, to level 7 qualifications, equivalent to a master's degree. Individuals can undertake an apprenticeship at any level (this could be higher, equal, or lower to a qualification they already hold) if it allows them to acquire substantive new skills.

The minimum duration for an apprenticeship is twelve months with the apprentice spending at least six hours a week of their time on off-the-job training (for some roles such as nursing, the requirement may be more). This time is likely to be in a college. Therefore, it is crucial to create a strong working relationship with relevant local further and higher education institutes.

Recruiting an apprentice

To help you start the recruitment process, the government website has a list of apprenticeship providers. The recruit an apprentice service on the government website can be used to advertise apprenticeship job vacancies and manage applications.

The chosen apprenticeship provider can sometimes pass on the details of interested and relevant candidates who can be sifted to check suitability.

The apprentice recruitment process should involve an interview possibly including a practical task, as with a traditional job role.

Remember: For many potential apprentices this may be their first experience of a professional interview.

You may wish to provide the potential apprentice with information about what the process will involve. The government apprenticeships page has a list of considerations from an apprentice's perspective that you may wish to take into account or share with them.

All apprentices must have a contract of employment long enough for them to complete the apprenticeship programme and many employers ensure there is a position available at the end of the apprenticeship. They must also have a job role (or roles) that provides them with the opportunity to gain the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to achieve the standards required to pass their apprenticeship. Employment can be offered either on a fixed-term or permanent basis.

What is the apprenticeship levy?

The apprenticeship levy was introduced in April 2017 and is paid by all employers who have an annual pay bill of three million pound or more. The rate of the levy is set at 0.5 per cent of the total pay bill and is paid to HMRC through the PAYE process.

Levy-paying employers set up an online account to access levy funds which are paid each month. The levy funds are used to pay for apprenticeship training costs, not employment costs. Any funds that are not used expire 24 months after they enter the account. To help minimise the risk of funds expiring, payments are taken from those funds that entered the account first.

To prevent levy funds from being left unused, organisations can transfer up to 25 per cent of their contributions to another organisation or speak to their local council and local enterprise partnerships for transfer opportunities. Explore the options and opportunities for transferring apprenticeship levy funds to or from another employer on our apprenticeship levy transfer page.

Additional funding and access to work

Employers could be eligible for a payment of £1,000 for young apprentices, aged 16-18 years old, or apprentices aged 19-24, who have previously been in care or who have a local authority education, health and care plan and may need extra support.

Access to Work is a government scheme available to all disabled members of staff, or staff with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD), including apprentices. While individuals should apply for Access to Work themselves, employers can signpost to the application and offer support. Find out more about the scheme on the Access to Work web pages.

The Department for Education (DfE) has published guidance on how to support apprentices with a learning difficulty or disability, including the funding options available.

Employers can receive up to £150 a month for additional learning needs where evidence of costs can be provided. There is also funding available which can go directly to the apprentice. There is more information about the funding available on the UK government website.

Building apprenticeships into the workforce strategy

The first step is to decide on an appropriate apprenticeship(s) for your organisation, with consideration towards workforce planning.

An apprenticeship may be a suitable way to recruit for a clinical or non-clinical vacancy. To research the variety of apprenticeships on offer, HASO is a useful resource that shows the approved apprenticeship standards by level. The NHS health careers website also highlights some potentially suitable apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships are available in a range of subjects including, clinical apprenticeships such as nursing, advanced clinical practice, and radiography, and non-clinical apprenticeships such as senior leadership, clinical coding and facilities management.

Consider the following questions when developing your workforce plans:

How can a scaled-up apprenticeship offer act as an enabler of your workforce strategy?

How can apprenticeships enable you to meet key actions from the NHS People Plan, Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES) and the Workforce Disability Equality Standard (WDES)?

How can apprenticeships enable you to be more representative of the community you serve?

Does your current apprenticeship offer align with the skills/talent pipeline you will need over the next five years?

How can the introduction/use of apprenticeships tackle your key workforce challenges?

This infographic covers how apprenticeships can help meet your workforce needs. In this video different NHS trusts discuss how they have been utilising apprenticeships to support workforce supply.

How apprenticeships can benefit your organisation

Apprenticeships help develop clear career pathways and retain staff

Apprenticeship pathways are now being developed to provide higher-level technical skills and provide a great option for retaining the existing workforce and building talent pipelines. Cambridge University Hospitals created a pathway from traineeship to registered nurse, which enabled the trust to retain talent. University Hospitals Southampton have retained 100 per cent of apprentices on their nursing programme. The HASO website also shares a wide array of potential pathways that you could develop in your organisation, including apprenticeships that may not have been considered. To find out more about nurse degree apprenticeships, watch our past webinar focused on the funding and support available to help you to train nursing apprentices.

Apprenticeships can develop your existing workforce

Retaining the skills and experience of existing employees to avoid future skills shortages. Many employers now offer apprenticeships at all levels to existing staff across a wide range of roles and disciplines as part of their strategy via AHP apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships can help you to reshape your workforce

Apprenticeships can be key when thinking about how they can redesign and shape the workforce in order to respond to and anticipate service needs, Chesterfield Royal Hospital introduced band 4 apprenticeships to build a team based on what skills and activities they needed to support their patients.

Apprenticeships can be flexible

An apprenticeship can be done in a flexible or accelerated way based on business needs.

If an organisation has non-typical working patterns, training can be adapted to better suit the business needs. For example, training can be offered in blocks so the apprentice can gain key knowledge and required skills early into the apprenticeship.

If an apprentice has been recruited who has some prior knowledge, experience or skills before starting the apprenticeship, it is possible to recognise this as prior learning. The amount of time spent training and therefore the time spent on the apprenticeship; a reduction of three months or more is considered an accelerated apprenticeship.

Apprenticeships have lower attrition rates

National dropout rates for many university courses tend to be relatively high, particularly within the first six months. Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust also introduced a nursing apprenticeship programme as part of their 'grow your own' approach and reported 100 per cent retention after six months.

Attract and recruit from a wider pool of people in your local community

Apprenticeships present a genuine alternative to full-time college or university study. They can widen access to employment to all areas of your local community. Great Ormond Street Hospital diversified their apprenticeship offer and became a top inclusive recruiter in their local area.

Flexibility and innovation to open the doors for future nurses

Employers can open doors for the existing and future nursing workforce in their local community by building a nursing partnership with their providers. The Open University (OU) has worked with Kent Community

Health NHS Foundation Trust to develop the local nursing workforce through the registered nurse degree apprenticeship and nursing associate higher apprenticeship, through the use of the innovative Nursing Academy. This allows apprentices to earn while they learn, and the OU can give flexibility as a distance learning provider.

Recruit a diverse and representative workforce

Inclusive recruitment to better reflect the community you serve is a key message of the NHS People Plan and can lead to better retention rates and improved workforce supply.

Return on investment

A costing tool has been developed to work out the potential costs and returns to your organisation of delivering apprenticeships and shows a breakdown of the annual salary costs and levy spend, enabling you to calculate a return on the investment made.

Making apprenticeship procurement accessible and inclusive

Stage 1- ensuring that the bidding process is accessible, inclusive and diverse

Here are some key suggestions to think about when preparing the bidding process.



Consider the diversity of those assessing bids from training providers, including age, gender identity, ethnicity, religion/belief, sexuality and disability status.



Advertise the opening of the bidding process as widely as possible to reach a diverse range of providers, ensuring special education needs (SEN) providers have access to the bidding process.



Ensure the bidding process is accessible and compatible with e-readers, available in easy read or alternative formats.



Provide support to any potential bidders who need any extra help due to accessibility needs.



Highlight the requirement for any bidding training provider to demonstrate commitment to your organisational values and vision, including a specific commitment to supporting and promoting inclusivity around disability.



Promote your commitment to inclusive recruitment of apprentices by holding an open day where you promote this to potential training providers.

Stage 2 – setting a specification

It's important to set some minimum criteria for those applying to bid and establish whether the training provider can demonstrate the following.



Their organisational priorities and vision - are they a disability confident employer?



What kind of support do they already offer disabled staff/staff with LDD?



Where do they advertise opportunities? Do they provide training support including end-point assessments?



Are their entry requirements inclusive and are there clear pathways into an apprenticeship?



Do they offer accessible learning and training spaces?

Stage 3 – choosing the training provider

You would need to consider whether all bidders have met the specification you set. You could calculate this through attributing a scoring system based on how important they are to you. Ask for evidence that demonstrates how inclusive their recruitment processes are.



Do they provide learning support to individuals with an education, health and care (EHC) plan or disclosed disability/ learning disability or difficulty?



Do they have established links with SEN schools locally? Do they offer guaranteed interviews for disabled applicants? Is financial support available to help disabled individuals full access training?

Stage 4 – working with the training provider

Once you have chosen your training provider, it's important to maintain high standards of inclusion and accessibility.



Ensure you have regular discussions with the training provider to understand the progress of disabled apprentices or apprentices with LDD.



If issues arise for learners relating to their disability or LDD, be ready to signpost to local organisations, such as a local Mencap, that may be able to provide specific training on raising awareness around learning disabilities within the training provider organisation.

Where adaptations may need to be made, ensure you have information on:



Access to Work – learners can apply for this support, which can either be in the form of equipment, transport or travel expenses reimbursed.



Job coaches – available via Jobcentre Plus, they can support disabled apprentices/apprentices with LDD into an apprenticeship or workplace.

Conversations with your board about apprenticeships

Organisation and system senior leaders play an important role in the successful delivery of apprenticeship programmes. Gaining their buy-in and support will help embed apprenticeships into your workforce strategy. Click through the different roles to review the key messages to communicate to each board member.

Chair and non-executive directors

Provides independent oversight and accountability of board-level decision-making and how the trust is run.



Apprenticeships can complement and help shape current and future workforce supply strategies.



Apprenticeships will address the key theme of tackling workforce shortages: improving recruitment, retention, access to training and education, as set out in the NHS Long Term Plan.



Apprenticeships provide opportunities for cross-boundary working and service integration.



Apprenticeships provide opportunities for people from different backgrounds and staff to progress, in line with trust values.

Chief executive

Sets the strategic vision and direction for the organisation in the short, medium and long-term.



Apprenticeships provide existing staff with career-pathways and development opportunities which can lead to better retention.



Apprenticeships provide an opportunity for people in the local community to enter the NHS, increasing diversity, leading to better patient experience and outcomes.



A strong culture of work-based learning can inspire regular learning in teams, making the best use of existing staff.



Research shows employees favour personal development over career progression and are more likely to stay loyal to a company if given opportunities to develop.



Apprenticeships help reduce agency spend by lowering staff turnover, improving retention rates and increasing staff morale and engagement, which is known to have an effect on sickness absence.

Chief information/IT officer

Responsible for the delivery of Information management and technology strategies that support the trust's corporate aims and objectives.



Delegating tasks to apprentices allows them to learn and take responsibility, while freeing up the time of more experienced staff. Better allocation of work makes teams more productive.



ICT apprenticeships provide many opportunities for people to work in the NHS in non-clinical roles. They can also provide progression routes for existing staff.

Chief people officer

Responsible for the development and strategic planning of a workforce that has the capacity and capability to meet the systems vision, values and objectives to deliver high quality services both today and in the future.



Apprenticeships present a genuine alternative to full-time college or university study to anyone aged 16 and over. They can widen access to employment to all areas of your local community. For example the nurse degree apprenticeship, which leads to the same qualification as the traditional route, can be offered to new or existing staff.



Apprenticeships can improve retention and staff engagement. Hiring apprentices or retraining staff through apprenticeships can improve overall staff satisfaction and retention and reduce agency spend.



Effective workforce planning will help to identify where apprenticeships can support your workforce strategy, meeting skills gaps with new roles.

Chief operating officer

Responsible for leading the operational delivery to ensure the trust delivers high-quality and patient-centred services.



Apprenticeships can be used to fill gaps in the workforce by upskilling or reskilling existing employees. They can also be used to attract new talent into your organisation. Retaining the skills and experience of new and existing employees enables the delivery of excellent patient care.



Inclusive apprenticeship recruitment can improve patient experience and outcomes as your workforce will mirror the patient population. A diverse workforce can ensure a better understanding of patients' needs which is crucial for the delivery of joined-up, personalised care.



Apprenticeships can be a cost-effective way to create a skilled, diverse, flexible and motivated workforce and can help employees keep pace with developments in technology and working practices within healthcare making the trust an attractive employer.

Director of workforce

Enabling the delivery of high standard healthcare to service users through the creation and management of a progressive organisational culture and employment environment.



Consider workforce plans that use apprenticeships to support the required future supply routes.



Use apprenticeships to develop clear career progression pathways for existing staff.



Opportunity to explore where functions can be further supported by offering apprenticeships.

Director of estates and facilities

Responsible for the development and delivery of the full range of non-clinical services from estates matters to health and safety-related responsibilities.



Apprenticeships offer an alternative route into the NHS for people seeking to work in estates and facilities management.



Widening your recruitment and alerting young people to the full range of job opportunities available in the NHS can help with harder to fill vacancies.

Director of finance

Responsible for strategic financial, economic and fiscal leadership and provides advice to the trust board on matters of financial governance.



Long-term investment in apprenticeships and investing in staff development and career pathways leads to increased staff engagement, lower turnover and better retention of staff. This investment will reduce agency spend and sickness absence costs, and help tackle vacancy rates, staff shortages and skills gaps.



Training apprentices can be cost-effective and can reduce overall training and recruitment costs. On top of this, apprentices tend to be loyal to the organisations that invest in them, improving overall staff retention rates.



The apprenticeship levy provides the opportunity to maximise apprenticeships within the NHS. Employers in the NHS are considering

where they can use apprenticeships to address significant supply challenges, improve skill mix and diversity, and develop the existing and future workforce. Our briefings using the apprenticeship levy and maximising your apprenticeship levy showcase examples of how trusts are gaining the most from their apprenticeship levy.

Director of nursing

Provides nursing leadership and management of nursing workforce-related issues and the services delivered by nurses.



Apprenticeships offer people an alternative route into the service helping to develop a local recruitment pipeline. See our routes into nursing infographic.



Apprenticeships are a key part of your supply and retention strategy. They offer career development opportunities for existing staff.



Nursing associates are an asset to a team and a registered profession bringing new skills to your organisation. They also provide a route in for people from different backgrounds wishing to become qualified nurses.



For already qualified nurses, apprenticeships are a great opportunity to help them become advanced practitioners, making your trust an attractive place to work with development opportunities, and upskilling your workforce to meet patient need.

Medical director

Provides medical leadership and management of the services delivered by doctors and medical workforce-related issues.



Apprenticeships for medical associate professions (MAPs) enhance the workforce, performing a range of tasks (under supervision) traditionally associated with doctors in training.



Advanced practitioners enhance capacity and capability within multi-professional teams. There is now a level 7 (master's level) apprenticeship in advanced practice available, which can be funded through the apprenticeship levy.



A new medical doctor apprenticeship is being introduced providing an alternative route into the profession and widening participation to provide opportunities to those that would not have entered the profession.



Related resources



Our extensive apprenticeship FAQs may answer any further questions you have on the specifics of recruiting apprentices.



Our using apprenticeships to support workforce supply infographic explores the benefits of embedding apprenticeships into your workforce strategy.



This editable poster shows the key benefits for apprentices joining your organisation and features a scannable QR code which takes users to the NHS Employers apprenticeships pages. You can print the poster to share in your organisation and take to recruitment and careers events to attract potential apprentices.
