



Department
for Education

Public sector apprenticeship target reporting

Research brief

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Research

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1. Introduction and approach

The following briefing document provides a summary of the key findings from analysis of responses submitted by public sector bodies to understand how they have responded to the public sector apprenticeship target, the enablers and barriers they have faced, and their plans for the future delivery of the target.

The public sector apprenticeship target was introduced in 2017. Under this, public sector bodies with 250 or more staff in England have a target to employ an average of at least 2.3% of their staff as new apprentice starts annually over the period of 1st April 2017 to 31st March 2021.

Public sector bodies were required to submit data on the number of employees and apprenticeship starts they had before and following the target reporting period. They were also required to further contextualise their approach to the target by providing responses of no more than 250 words to four questions via their Apprentice Service account, submitted to the Department for Education (DfE). Specifically, public sector bodies were asked:

1. What actions have you taken to meet the target?
2. What challenges have you faced in your efforts to meet the target?
3. How are you planning to ensure you meet the target in future?
4. Is there any other information you would like to tell us?

A total of 676 responses were received and analysed out of a possible 820 employers estimated to be in scope of the target (82.4% response rate). A structured coding approach was used to identify both detailed and high level themes emerging from responses, which could be applied across the high number of returns to understand the scale of particular experiences and activities as well as emerging best practice.

It should be noted that as analysis was conducted using qualitative open response data provided by public sector bodies, it only represents the information provided. As such, whilst figures are provided in this report to show scale of experience among respondents, they cannot be considered as exhaustive of all the actions, challenges, and plans and should be treated as indicative. Neither can they be considered as representative of all public sector employers.

The remainder of this briefing document is structured based on: overall progress against the target; actions taken by public sector bodies; challenges faced; future plans; and, key messages and experiences.

2. Overall progress against the target

In total, in the first year of reporting, 11% of public sector bodies that provided a return had met or exceeded the target; 89% had not met the target. However, there were signs from the analysis of significant progress against the target in its first year. Many organisations were starting having previously had no, or only a small number of, apprentices (19% of public sector organisations reported that immediately prior to the target monitoring period they did not have any apprentices, with a further 21% having only 1-5 apprentices). By the end of the reporting period, more than one-half (59%) of public sector bodies had increased their number of apprentices compared to the previous year.

Due to the low proportion of organisations that met the target (some without significantly increasing their number of apprentices), and a significant number that had shown high levels of progress against the target while not meeting it, organisations that were successful and unsuccessful in meeting the target frequently reported similar types of actions used and challenges faced. Based on the self-reported details available, often how these actions were implemented, and the specific challenges they aimed to address, also appear similar. As such, whilst analysis took into consideration whether an organisation had met or not met the target, this in itself should not necessarily be considered the main measure of the quality or success of the activities undertaken by the public sector body. Indeed, many public sector organisations believed the development and capacity building activities undertaken in 2017/18 were required for them to be able to offer high quality programmes, whilst meeting or having regard for the target over the full reporting period (to 2021).

3. Actions taken by public sector bodies

3.1 Overall approach

The majority of public sector bodies have undertaken a range of actions to show regard to and progress towards the public sector target. As noted previously, nearly one-fifth (19%) of public sector organisations reported that immediately prior to the target monitoring period they did not have any apprentices, with a further 21% having only 1-5 apprentices. As such, for many, actions to date have focused on developing the plans and resources required to implement significant change in their approaches to workforce planning and development, including:

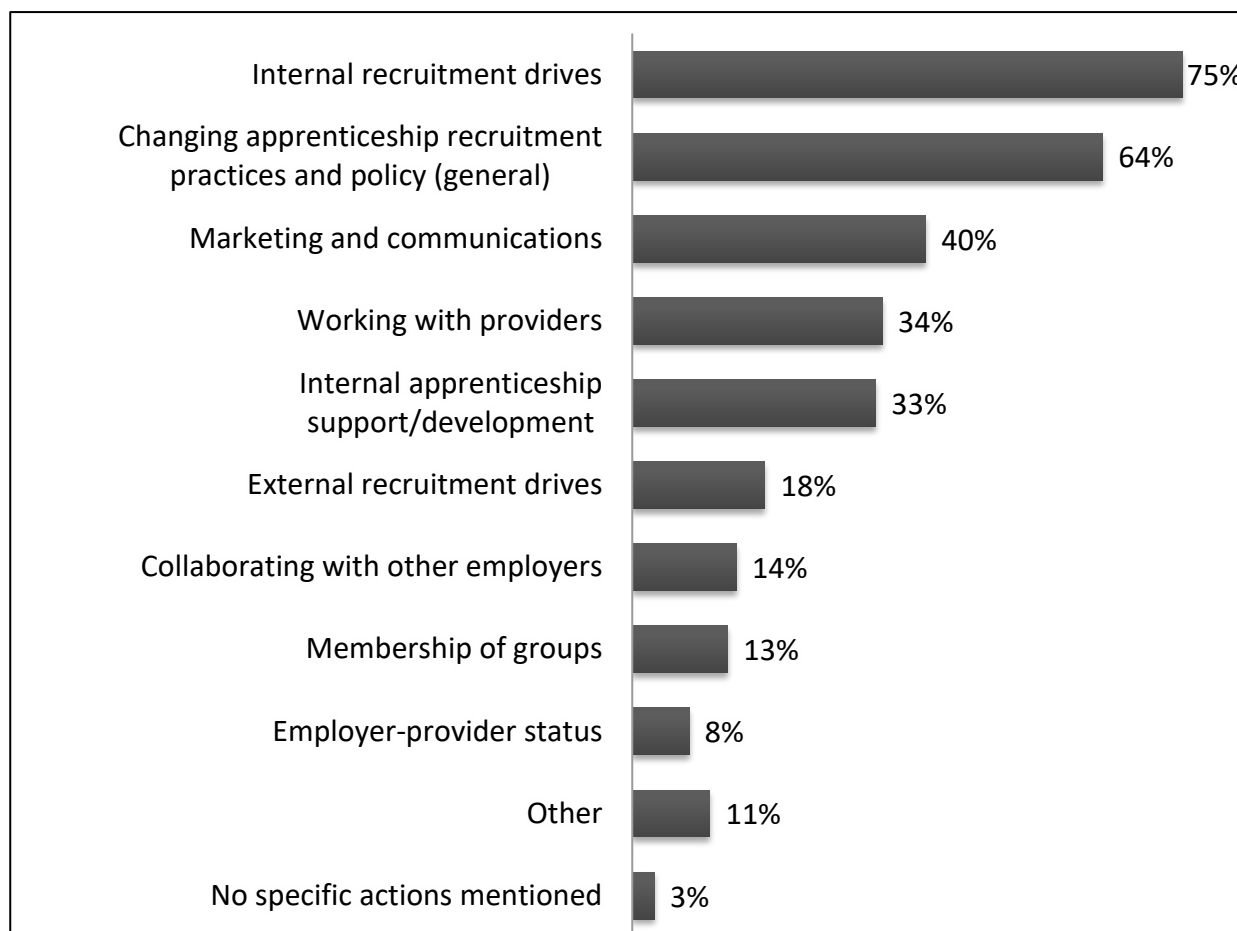
- identifying opportunities for apprenticeships in their organisation;
- navigating and understanding the apprenticeships system;
- recruiting suitable apprentices; and,
- supporting apprentices and their managers in-programme.

To support this more than one-quarter of the respondents had updated or developed their own internal apprenticeship policy. They did this to ensure apprenticeships were integrated into their employment and development plans and seen by all staff to be a core part of their workforce strategy, in many cases appointing or nominating an individual to be the apprenticeship lead.

Many organisations recognised that such activities would not help them meet the target in the short-term; however, they believed this would allow them to develop high quality approaches which would help them to meet or show regard to the target in the future.

As a result, to date the majority of actions taken by most respondents have been more internally focussed, including: exploring the use of apprenticeships for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and the skills development and career progression of existing staff; general changes to recruitment and workforce development practices and policies; working with providers on their offer; and, establishing and developing internal systems and procedures for identifying and supporting apprenticeships. Figure 1 presents the main categories into which actions undertaken by public sector bodies fall. It shows that three-quarters of organisations had conducted internal recruitment drives, and nearly two-thirds had made changes to their recruitment practices and policies.

Figure 1: High-level actions undertaken by public sector bodies



Base=676, Source: Apprenticeship Activity Return

The following sections explore these high level actions and what these involved in more detail.

3.2 Workforce planning, recruitment, and development

To inform their approach to the target, many organisations reported they had undertaken analysis of organisational skills gaps and hard to fill roles. Some respondents reported their nominated apprenticeship leads had meetings with department heads to ensure they were involved in planning generally and to discuss in detail their specific requirements and opportunities for apprenticeships.

The internal recruitment of apprentices, and in particular exploring the use of apprenticeships for the CPD and progression of existing staff was a frequent action taken by public sector organisations, with around half explicitly stating they did this. For most, this option was particularly beneficial because it allowed them to provide development opportunities for existing staff and address any skills gaps in their workforce. It also reduced the potential need to recruit new staff to meet the target, particularly where the

organisation was experiencing budget pressures or hire-freezes or if they did not require additional staff.

Where vacancies did exist nearly two-fifths of public sector bodies specifically stated that they sought to convert these into apprenticeships to help meet the target.

Many respondents also recognised the importance of providing support for apprentices and their managers to facilitate high quality experiences and avoid 'drop-out', and had developed mechanisms to facilitate this such as mentoring schemes and information resources.

3.3 Marketing and communications

To support these activities, nearly two-fifths of the respondents had developed or created marketing and communications strategies to promote their apprenticeship offer. This included activities targeted at three key groups: internal staff who may benefit from undertaking an apprenticeship; internal managers who may address workforce needs through apprenticeships; and, external audiences including potential recruits and influencers. These activities included sharing good practice about existing schemes, and dispelling myths about apprenticeships, who they are for, and what they involve.

3.4 Engaging and developing relationships with providers

More widely, over one-third of the public sector bodies were working with providers to ensure their organisation's apprenticeship approach was well supported and their needs met. This included establishing, developing, and maintaining relationships with providers (and identifying new providers) to identify appropriate Apprenticeship Standards and how they could be delivered to meet requirements, and working with providers to support the recruitment of apprentices.

3.5 Wider collaboration

A small proportion of public sector bodies (around 1 in 7) noted that they had been involved in wider collaborative activities with other organisations to either support the development of Standards through trailblazer groups, or share best practice. Involvement in the development of Apprenticeship Standards was seen as particularly important for those respondents that require specific opportunities to be available for either their existing staff's development, or to address their own organisational skills gaps. The availability of relevant Standards was seen as imperative so they could meet the target in a high quality way that makes the best use of the levy for their organisational needs.

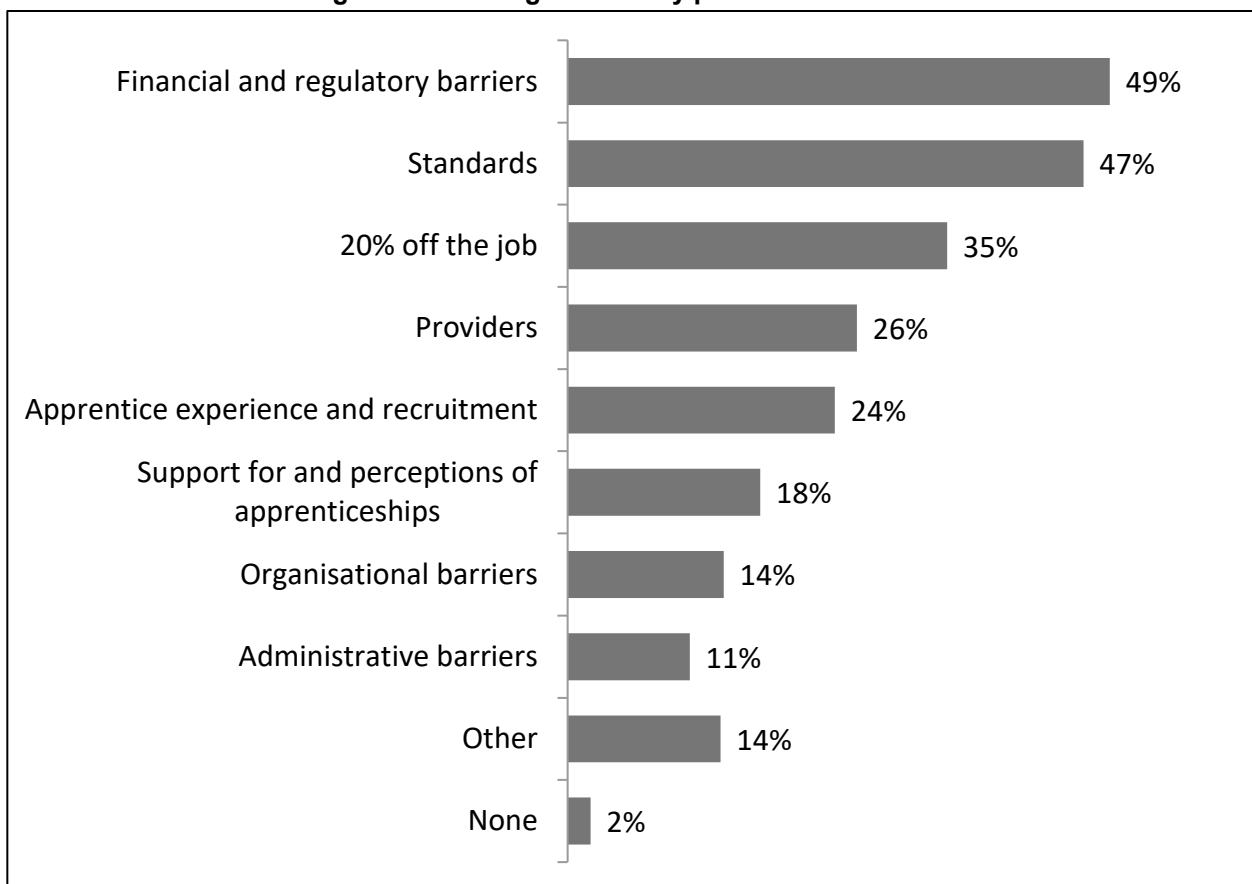
4. Challenges faced by public sector bodies

4.1 Overall challenges

Many public sector bodies have experienced a range of key challenges that they have needed to overcome and will need to continue to address to meet the apprenticeship target. As such, many reported that whilst they may not have achieved the target in 2017/18, the activities and development work undertaken would allow them to achieve it in the longer term.

Figure 2 below shows the main areas that the challenges faced by public sector bodies fall into. It shows the two most frequently cited areas of challenge faced by public sector bodies are financial and regulatory barriers (49%), and issues relating to Standards (47%).

Figure 2: Challenges faced by public sector bodies



Base=676, Source: Apprenticeship Activity Return

Overall, challenges tended to fall into two categories: systematic challenges and procedural issues in navigating the apprenticeship system and how the target is monitored; and, wider perceptions and understanding of apprenticeships. These challenges are explored more in the following sections.

4.2 Systemic challenges and procedural issues

Over one-quarter of the respondents reported that they had faced challenges due to public procurement regulations, which apply when purchasing apprenticeship training, being too lengthy and complex. This led to these respondents needing to establish new processes and systems to navigate these challenges, and in some instances identify and work with new providers.

A further quarter of respondents said they had experienced budget limitations, and several reported high and inflexible costs from training providers, or concerns that the levy could not be spent on wider apprenticeship costs, such as travel or wages.

Nearly one-half of public sector bodies reported they had experienced challenges relating to the available Standards, either because there was not currently an end-point assessment organisation attached to these (which was preventing apprenticeship completions and start dates for subsequent cohorts), or because a Standard they wanted to use was not yet available.

Over one-third of public sector bodies reported they had experienced challenges related to the 20% off-the-job training requirement. This was a particular concern for respondents from the NHS relating to apprenticeships in primary care roles. This included the requirement: conflicting with safe staffing numbers and workloads (as replacement staff would need to be brought in and paid to provide cover); being perceived as off-putting for managers; and, resulting in high costs for salaries at degree level with no backfill.

Over one-quarter of public sector bodies reported they had experienced challenges with apprenticeship providers, including issues relating to identifying providers in their local area (so training may be delivered face-to-face) or delivering specific Standards, the quality of providers, and provider inflexibility regarding smaller cohort sizes.

Finally, some organisations (around 1 in 7) reported resource and administrative challenges in delivering apprenticeships, with some lacking staff to suitably develop and drive their apprenticeship programmes, and some specifying a lack of staff to process the additional administration requirements for recruiting and monitoring apprenticeships.

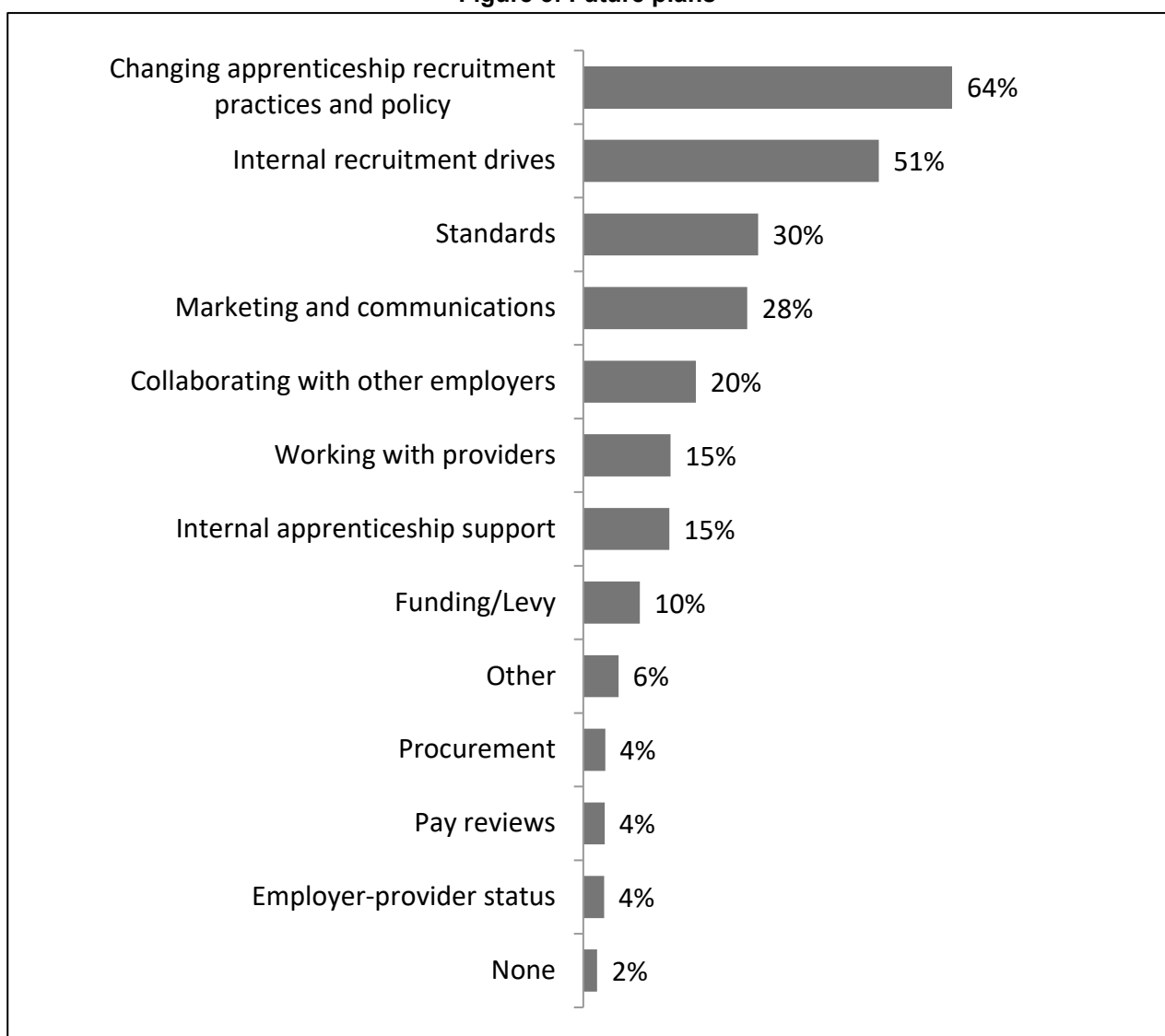
4.3 Perceptual challenges

A key barrier for many public sector bodies was related to perceptions of apprenticeships amongst managers and potential apprentices (both internal and external) deterring engagement. For many managers and potential apprentices, apprenticeships were considered to be for younger or early career individuals, and as such not something they wanted to be involved in. This led to recruitment challenges with nearly one-fifth of respondents reporting that they were unable to find suitable candidates.

5. Future plans for meeting the public sector apprenticeship target

For many respondents, the activities delivered to date have been crucial in establishing a strong position from which they can aim to meet the apprenticeship target overall by 2021. As such, many plan to continue with the approaches they have established in 2017/18, allowing them to support increased apprenticeship numbers over time, whilst continuing to develop and improve key processes and procedures where required. Figure 3 below provides an overview of the areas where public sector bodies plan to develop their apprenticeship programmes in the future, including ongoing changes to apprenticeship recruitment practices and policy (64%), and internal recruitment drives (51%).

Figure 3: Future plans



Base=676, Source: Apprenticeship Activity Return

Examples of how public sector bodies plan to further develop and improve key processes and procedures relating to apprenticeships include:

- ongoing review of vacancies and workforce planning to identify opportunities for apprenticeships (linking these to staff development where possible), and learn from experiences over the last year;
- ongoing promotion of apprenticeship opportunities both internally and externally;
- ongoing development of support for apprentices and the potential use of pre-apprenticeship programmes and traineeships to support recruitment;
- working to make the most of new Standards and continuing to contribute to the development of additional new Standards;
- diversifying their use of Standards and ensuring clear pathways for different apprenticeships;
- working with providers to ensure training best meets their needs and they are getting the most from their levy; and,
- for some, starting to work with other employers to support downstream apprenticeship funding.

However, it was identified by many public sector bodies that key to achieving the above was the successful development of new Standards and their supporting end-point assessments, without which some organisations did not think they would be able to achieve and process the apprentice numbers they would otherwise hope for.

In addition, some respondents expressed concerns about the reporting measures for the target, stating headcount was not the appropriate measure for this, with it often being higher than the number of full-time equivalent staff, thus inflating their target more than some believe is proportionate. Without changes to this, some did not think they would achieve the target, and preferred to focus on apprenticeship quality rather than quantity.

Similarly, concerns were voiced by many respondents about the restrictions in how levy funding could be used, with some wanting more flexibility e.g. to provide support with wider organisational costs of apprenticeships (such as management and pay). They felt this additional flexibility would allow them to address some of the challenges experienced in terms of wider organisational resourcing and recruitment for apprenticeships.

Finally, many local authorities felt more could be done to support schools in their role in meeting the target, as some had not engaged with them regarding apprenticeships. In particular, it was felt more support could be provided in communicating the requirements to schools and providing examples of how apprenticeships could be used in this context.

6. Summary of key messages and experiences

Overall responses showed some common themes and experiences emerging amongst public sector bodies.

- The step-change created by the public sector apprenticeship target and the significant increase for some organisations has meant that significant time and resource has been required to develop the systems and processes needed to support it. As such, most have undertaken a range of actions and activities as part of the development of their apprenticeship programme with both internal and external focus.
- For many organisations there has been an acceptance that they may not meet the target in 2017/18. However, the supporting actions and activities show regard to it as it has reportedly enabled them to establish strong grounds on which to grow apprenticeship numbers between now and 2021.
- Often actions and challenges experienced by organisations that have been successful and unsuccessful in meeting the target are very similar, and both show elements of effective practice (likely due to the low proportion of organisations that met the target, and significant number that had shown high levels of progress against the target while not meeting it).
- For most, apprenticeships include and will continue to include a combination of internal CPD and development opportunities and new vacancies. This means a range of Standards and levels of apprenticeship are being accessed and utilised.
- For some organisations there is a focus on specific Standards to meet their requirements, and their ability to meet the target is contingent on these Standards and their associated end-point assessments being developed and approved. This is particularly the case in sub-sectors such as the Police, Fire Authorities and the NHS.
- Many organisations would like to see increased flexibilities to support them not only to meet the target, but also to deliver high quality apprenticeship offers. In the context of public sector budget challenges it was felt that if the levy could be used more flexibly, they may be able to offer more support to managers and staff.



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