

DEFENCE YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND EMPLOYMENT PLEDGE

A joint commitment between Government and the UK defence industry

We, the UK Government and leaders of the UK defence industry, commit to act together to help more young people, including those who are not in education, employment or training, access skilled, rewarding and sustainable careers in defence. Too many young people are outside education, employment or training, while employers, particularly in manufacturing, need to renew an ageing workforce and build the next generation of skilled workers.

Around one million young people aged 16 to 24 are currently not in education, employment or training. At the same time, the UK Government is increasing defence spending to 3.5% of GDP by 2035. According to ADS estimates, the defence sector supported 189,500 roles in 2025. With defence spending rising, we expect this to grow significantly between today and 2035 - with estimates ranging between a 25% and 50% growth in the sector during that period. Skills England have identified an additional 53,000 roles in priority engineering, computer science, craft related and project management roles in the same period. The workforce of tomorrow is in our classrooms and communities today.

Many more young people are at risk of becoming NEET without timely access to education, training, work experience and entry-level employment. As the world becomes more dangerous, building this talent pipeline now is also essential to defence readiness, strengthening the skilled workforce and resilience needed for the future. Government and industry are not starting from zero. The Defence Industrial Strategy announced a £182 million defence skills package covering Defence Technical Excellence Colleges, the Defence Universities Alliance, and defence-specific apprenticeship and training routes. During this Parliament we expect the defence industry skills package to support tens of thousands of learners. This is in addition to established employer-led programmes that are already strengthening the talent pipeline. This pledge builds on that delivery and connects them through the Defence Jobs Plan, which will outline opportunities across the defence skills pipeline.

The UK Government is investing an additional £2.5 billion by 2029 into the Youth Guarantee and Growth and Skill Levy. This will support almost one million young people and support up to 500,000 jobs, training, and learning opportunities. Around 300,000 of these opportunities will be through expanded access to workplace experience and training. A further 200,000 employment opportunities will be unlocked through significant incentives for employers to recruit and train young people, including up to £5,000 in apprenticeship funding, a £3,000 Jobs Grant for employers who recruit a young person who has been unemployed for six months, and the Jobs Guarantee, which provides long-term unemployed 18 to 24-year-olds with a fully funded six-month job. Government and defence businesses will continue to work together to utilise sector work academy programmes and access relevant support including the youth guarantee and the youth jobs grant.

OUR SHARED AMBITION

Together, Government and the UK defence sector will deliver a 25% increase in opportunities for young people under 25. This includes targeted support for those who are not in education, employment or training, such as through sector work academy programmes, the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Jobs Grant. By the end of this Parliament, we expect that this shared commitment will provide over 40,000 opportunities for young people annually; and by 2035, approximately 50,000 opportunities for young people annually.¹

Government through defence investment, the skills system, careers advice and employment support will address barriers and opportunities to participation. Industry will provide the apprenticeships, work experience, placements, vacancies, employer engagement and sustained career opportunities. Progress will be reported annually.

To achieve this shared aspiration, we make the following four commitments.¹

1. APPRENTICESHIPS

Defence employers already invest in apprenticeships from Levels 2 to 7, including technical, digital, engineering and specialist pathways. Over the last 10 years defence apprentices have made up on average 4.2% of the workforce. This activity is supported by Defence Technical Excellence Colleges, defence-specific apprenticeship units and industry partnerships with further and higher education. In addition, The Defence Apprenticeship and Graduate Clearing System committed to in the Defence Industrial Strategy, will help suitable applicants access a wider range of apprenticeship opportunities across the defence supply chain.

Industry will support the Defence Technical Excellence Colleges by helping to shape provision around priority occupations, contributing employer expertise and opportunities, and strengthening progression from technical education into apprenticeships and sustained defence careers across the UK.

Together, we will expand these routes, align provision more closely with priority occupations and regional demand, and address barriers that constrain recruitment by primes, SMEs and supply-chain employers. Government will maintain the skills infrastructure and industry will grow the number and reach of apprenticeship opportunities.

INDUSTRY COMMITMENT: By 2035, the UK defence sector and its supply chain will collectively support at least 14,000 people annually through apprenticeship programmes, or at least 4-6% of their workforce.²

¹ The 25% increase is not intended as a commitment on an individual supplier. It is a collective ambition across the UK Government and the UK defence sector.

² Supporting 14,000 people annually is a 25% increase from the baseline 2025 ADS apprenticeship numbers for the defence sector.

2. WORK EXPERIENCE AND PLACEMENTS

Defence employers already deliver physical work experience, industrial and T Level placements, employability programmes and accredited virtual work experience for young people under 25. The upcoming Defence Jobs Plan includes the expansion of accessible virtual work experience through ADS Skills and Springpod, alongside specialist outreach partnerships that give SMEs access to established materials, training and delivery support.

Entry-level opportunities have reduced in many parts of the labour market, while employers increasingly expect applicants to have prior experience. This can make it harder for young people, particularly those who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET, to secure a first step into work. Government and Industry are determined to change this by expanding meaningful experience linked to clear progression routes.

Together, we will turn this activity into a clearer pathway from first experience to further training, apprenticeships or employment. Government will connect education and employment support to the available opportunities, while industry will provide meaningful experiences, mentoring and a defined next step for participants.

INDUSTRY COMMITMENT: By 2035, the defence sector will directly and through their supply-chains grow work experience and placement opportunities by 25% against their 2025 baseline.

3. YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND NO WRONG DOOR

Defence employers already provide apprenticeship, graduate, entry-level and wider employment pathways. These routes are being connected to the Youth Guarantee, Sector-based Work Academy Programmes, Connect to Work, employment support and the emerging Jobs and Careers Service. Together we will increase communication and visibility of pathways, to tackle perceptions of working in the defence sector and improve awareness of roles and routes into the sector.

Together, we will connect prepared young people to genuine defence vacancies and support progression through appropriate recruitment processes. Through defence recruitment tools such as the UCAS Defence Portal and the Graduate and Apprenticeship Talent Bridge young people will gain a better understanding of the pathways into a career in defence and access to a wider range of vacancies across the defence supply chain.

INDUSTRY COMMITMENT: By 2035, the UK defence sector and its supply chains will support 25% more young people under 25 who are at risk of not being in education, employment or training through dedicated youth employment pathways. The sector will also increase the number of people progressing annually through defence early-career and higher education pathways by 25%, compared with the 2025 baseline.

Employers will also support a no-wrong-door approach so that, with the individual's consent, suitable applicants can be considered for relevant opportunities elsewhere in the supply chain.

4. ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH

Defence employers already deliver careers, STEM and community engagement through ambassador networks, school and college partnerships, cadet activity, engineering challenges and virtual programmes. The Defence Jobs Plan provides for an ADS-led audit of early STEM activity, a scalable sector-wide engagement programme and partnerships with specialist providers to strengthen local delivery and support SMEs with limited outreach capacity.

Together, we will coordinate and expand this activity, reduce gaps and duplication, and focus engagement on communities experiencing high youth inactivity and places where defence has identifiable workforce demand. Government will strengthen links with schools, colleges, Careers Hubs, Youth Hubs, Jobcentres and regional partners, while industry will contribute ambassadors, mentors, equipment, technical expertise and staff time.

INDUSTRY COMMITMENT: By 2035, the UK defence sector will collectively deliver a 25% increase in careers, STEM and community engagement interactions each year against the 2025 baseline, supported by employer ambassadors or employee volunteer hours.

OUR SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY

Across the UK, Government and the defence industry will act collectively to address cross-cutting barriers to participation, recruitment and retention, including practical support, mentoring and pastoral provision, proportionate entry requirements, SME capacity, the proposed Social Value Charter and appropriate support through security-clearance processes.

The Defence Jobs Plan will provide the primary mechanism through which these commitments and targets are delivered, measured and reported. ADS will coordinate the collective industry contribution, and the Defence Industry Joint Council will provide joint Government-industry oversight and accountability. We will work with the sector to establish systems for measuring and tracking NEET intakes, to inform the delivery of this shared ambition.