

Wigan Borough Employer's Guide to Apprenticeships

This guide is intended as a practical starting point for employers who are new to apprenticeships. It explains what apprenticeships are, why employers use them, what the main costs are, what funding may be available, and where to get local support.

If you are thinking about recruiting an apprentice or using an apprenticeship to develop an existing employee, the sections below cover the main points to consider.

Benefits

Apprenticeships can bring a number of benefits to organisations, including:

- Raise staff morale
- Reduce staff turnover
- Increase your diversity
- Upskill existing staff
- Improve your productivity
- Attract the best candidates
- Create a talent pipeline across your organisation
- Improve your company image
- Match the skills of employees to the skills you need
- Help to meet social value targets.

Recent national employer research published in 2024 continued to show strong employer confidence in apprenticeships, including:

- 83% of commercial employers reported that they were satisfied overall with apprenticeships.
- 89% of levy-paying employers reported that they were satisfied overall with apprenticeships.
- Employers continue to report benefits around developing job-relevant skills, strengthening recruitment and supporting productivity.

As well as being a cost-effective route into skills development, an apprenticeship enables the apprentice to complete high-quality training and work towards a formal qualification while carrying out a real job role. As the apprentice becomes



more skilled and competent, the value they add to the organisation should also increase.

With many employers continuing to face recruitment challenges, apprenticeships offer a practical “grow your own” approach to building a workforce. This can be especially helpful where traditional recruitment methods are not delivering the right candidates.

Levels

Apprenticeships range from Level 2 (intermediate) through to Level 7. The broad educational equivalents are:

- Level 2 (intermediate) – equivalent to 5 GCSE passes
- Level 3 (advanced) – equivalent to 2 A levels
- Level 4 (higher) – equivalent to Higher National Certificate (HNC) / Certificate of Higher Education
- Level 5 (higher) – equivalent to Higher National Diploma (HND) / Foundation degree
- Level 6 (Higher) – equivalent to Bachelor's degree
- Level 7 (Higher) – equivalent to Master's degree

Employers may wish to progress an apprentice from one level to the next following successful completion, subject to availability. Apprenticeships may also include English and maths where these are needed. Although English and maths are now optional for many apprentices aged 19+, they can still be valuable where the job role or future progression would benefit from stronger basic skills.

Costs

The overall cost of employing an apprentice depends on a range of factors, including the apprentice's age, the wage rate you decide to pay, whether training is fully funded, and whether any grant or incentive is available.

Wages / Salary

The rate of pay for the apprentice can be a key factor for employers to consider. Employers have a decision to make regarding how much they are going to pay. Some employers choose to pay the apprentice minimum wage, which is £8.00 per hour from 1 April 2026. Legally, an employer can pay an apprentice this rate (or above) where the apprentice is aged under 19, or aged 19 or over and in the first year of their apprenticeship.

After the first year, apprentices aged 19+ must be paid at least the National Minimum Wage / National Living Wage for their age. Employers may also be able to pay no employer National Insurance contributions for apprentices aged under 25 who are on an approved apprenticeship and earn less than £50,270 a year. Further details and scenarios can be found on GOV.UK.



National Minimum Wage by age from 1 April 2026 is:

Year	21 and over	18 to 20	Under 18	Apprenticeship Minimum Wage
April-26	£12.71	£10.85	£8.00	£8.00

Local and national feedback suggests that many employers now need to pay above the minimum apprentice rate in order to attract applicants. Paying a more competitive wage can widen the pool of candidates and support retention.

Training costs

Apprenticeships sit within Government funding bands, which currently range from £1,500 to £27,000 depending on the apprenticeship standard. The funding band is the maximum that a provider can charge for training and end-point assessment, but the actual agreed price should still be discussed and negotiated with the provider.

In some cases, apprenticeship training will be fully funded by Government, meaning that the employer does not need to contribute anything towards the training. For non-levy employers, this applies where the apprentice starts aged 16 to 21, or aged 22 to 24 and has an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan and/or has been in the care of their local authority.

Where the apprentice does not meet the criteria above, non-levy employers pay 5% of the agreed training and assessment cost, with Government paying the remaining 95% (up to the funding band maximum). Levy-paying employers use funds in their Apprenticeship Service account and can also seek a levy transfer where needed. For example, where the agreed price is £5,000, the employer contribution would usually be £250.

The employer may also wish to consider a request for levy funds from a larger organisation (including Wigan Council) who may be willing to pay the full £5,000 in this example, so that the employer does not need to pay the 5% – see section on GM Levy Matchmaking Service below.

Funding / incentives

FAB Grants

Wigan Council's Future Apprentices for Business (FAB) grants programme was launched in February 2023 to support businesses to create new apprenticeships.



The programme has now paid out over 100 grants to local businesses, helping to create new apprenticeship opportunities for young people across the borough.

Two levels of grant are available and are paid over the duration of the apprenticeship programme.

Basic grant £3,000 - You can recruit any young person to your role using the Find an Apprenticeship service, through a training provider, through your own promotion of the role, or through a combination of these methods.

Enhanced grant £5,000 - You will select your new apprentice from a talent pool of individuals identified by our employment and skills programmes. These will be apprenticeship ready young people from our priority groups including care leavers, Children Looked After, those with special educational needs and disabilities and young people currently not in education, employment or training.

To qualify for the FAB grant, the employer must agree to pay at least the National Minimum Wage for the apprentice's age, rather than the lower apprentice minimum wage. This helps to make the opportunity more attractive to applicants.

To find out more click the link below:

[FAB Grants](#)

Government incentives / wider Youth Guarantee support

The established £1,000 government payment remains available to employers who recruit an apprentice who is either:

- Aged 16 to 18 years old, or
- Aged 19 to 24 and has an education, health and care (EHC) plan or has been in the care of their local authority.

For this £1,000 payment, there is no requirement to pay the age-related National Minimum Wage; employers can pay the apprentice minimum wage (where legally applicable) or above.

The £1,000 payment is usually paid by the training provider at around 90 days and 365 days. Further details can be found on GOV.UK.

Employers can also receive up to £2,000 for eligible Foundation Apprenticeships. Foundation Apprenticeships are aimed primarily at young people aged 16 to 21, with some 22 to 24 year-olds also eligible in defined circumstances.

Government briefings published in March 2026 also indicate that SMEs in England are expected to be able to access a new £2,000 apprenticeship incentive for each new apprentice aged 16 to 24 from October 2026, subject to final guidance.



Wider Youth Guarantee support announced in 2026 also includes a £3,000 Youth Jobs Grant for employers recruiting eligible 18 to 24-year-olds who have been on Universal Credit for 6 months, plus an expanded Jobs Guarantee. Employers should check the latest eligibility rules and whether these offers can be combined with apprenticeship recruitment support.

For companies operating in the construction industry, you may be able to access grants from the [Construction Industry Trade Body \(CITB\)](#) in addition to the employer incentive grant. Unfortunately, plumbing and electrician apprenticeships are not eligible under the CITB programme.

Training courses

The number of apprenticeships is growing month by month, and more specialist apprenticeship 'standards' are being developed by groups of employers all the time. These standards have replaced the older apprenticeship 'frameworks' which were phased out in 2020. You can see the latest standards and those in development on the [Institute for Apprenticeships \(IfA\) website](#). This is a great resource and provides a range of information on approved apprenticeship standards, including:

- An overview / appropriate job types
- Cost / banding for the training
- Typical duration
- Training providers who deliver the apprenticeship
- The Occupational Standard and what it entails
- The Assessment Plan – how the apprenticeship is assessed.

Please note that the apprenticeship chosen and the job role need to match appropriately.

Duration

An employer must employ an apprentice for at least the duration of the apprenticeship. In most cases the apprenticeship is full-time (30 hours or more per week), although this can be reduced in some circumstances. The typical duration published for an apprenticeship assumes full-time hours, so fewer weekly hours will usually mean a longer overall duration.

Where an apprentice has existing qualifications in the same subject area as the apprenticeship type they have enrolled onto, the training provider would be required to take this prior learning into account and reduce the cost and duration of the apprenticeship accordingly. Please note that the apprenticeship cannot be reduced to under 12 months. Foundation apprenticeships are now being introduced in selected subject areas with a shorter minimum duration of 8 months, and eligible employers may be able to access additional incentive



funding. Employers should check the latest availability and eligibility with their chosen provider.

Where an apprentice has existing qualifications in the same subject area as the apprenticeship type they have enrolled onto, the training provider would be required to take this prior learning into account and reduce the cost and duration of the apprenticeship accordingly. Please note that the apprenticeship cannot be reduced to under 12 months. New 'Foundation Apprenticeships' are being rolled out gradually by government, which are Level 2 and have a shorter duration of 8 months. See [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) for more information on those now available for delivery and the timeline for future roll-out.

Finding a training provider

An employer will need to identify a suitable apprenticeship standard and then decide which training provider they want to use. Wigan Council's Economy and Skills Team can help employers to explore suitable training options and local support.

When comparing providers, it is worth looking not only at achievement rates, but also at employer feedback, learner satisfaction, delivery model and how responsive the provider is likely to be to your business needs.

There are a few other key aspects to consider when considering apprenticeship training:

20% off-the-job training

It is a legal requirement that an apprentice undertakes a minimum of 20% off the job training. This means that for at least 20% of their working hours (the time they are contracted per week), the apprentice must be working on their apprenticeship – capped at 6 hours per week for an apprentice working 30 hours or more. This could include working on assignments; watching webinars; online training; work shadowing and much more. The approach to this 20% should be discussed and agreed with the training provider prior to the apprenticeship commencing. You can find out more about what can be included in off-the-job training [here](#).

As an employer, you will be expected to adhere to this requirement and the apprentice should evidence and record all details – [see further information](#).

Delivery Model

How and where the training takes place. Delivery models vary depending on the apprenticeship and the provider, but the options below are the most common:

- At your workplace – where the training provider visits your apprentice in the workplace (possibly every month). This is a more



standard approach for apprenticeships like administration, customer service, hospitality, retail and health and social care. The employer would be expected to allow the apprentice time in work to meet the 20% requirement, although there may be times that are more suitable for this.

- Block release – where the apprentice would attend the training provider in a block at set times during the apprenticeship, for example a week every 3 months.
- Day release – as detailed above.

Please note that the apprentice must be paid for all the times they are training, whichever delivery model is used. The [Find Apprenticeship Training](#) Tool will indicate the delivery model used by a particular provider, although in some cases this can be flexible to accommodate employer needs.

It is also worth considering the feasibility of how your apprentice can get to any day or block release. Although we would not discourage using training providers from outside the borough, careful thought needs to be given to this. Local training will be more accessible, especially for apprentices who are reliant on public transport.

Existing workforce

Apprenticeships are not just for young people entering work for the first time. They can also be used to upskill existing staff, whether at a lower level or at higher and degree level.

For many SMEs, apprenticeships can represent very good value for money when compared with other training routes. The main practical point to consider is that the employee will still need protected time for off-the-job training.

Apprenticeship Service Account

From April 2021, all employers have needed an Apprenticeship Service (AS) account in order to start an apprentice, whether this is a new recruit or an existing employee starting an apprenticeship.

You can access guidance on this process and set up your AS account on gov.uk [here](#). The account allows employers to complete various tasks including:

- Access and managing apprenticeship funding
- Receive a levy transfer
- Advertise vacancies
- Find a suitable apprenticeship standard
- Choose a training provider to deliver the apprenticeship(s)
- Select an End Point Assessment (EPA) organisation



- Give feedback on provision.

In most cases, your chosen training provider will be able to help with setting up an AS account, should this be needed. There is also scope to give a training provider certain access / permissions to your AS account so that they can carry out tasks on your behalf.

GM Levy Matchmaking Service

Greater Manchester was the first sub-region in the country to launch a collaborative approach to transferring unused apprenticeship levy funds. The [Levy Matchmaking Service](#) is a web portal that has been commissioned by Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) to facilitate funding transfers and create more apprenticeships in GM. It aims to ensure that as many levy payers (public and private sector) as possible transfer unspent funds to non-levy payers negating the need for them to pay the 5% co-investment costs.

In simple terms, if you are a smaller employer based in Wigan borough who is keen to either recruit an apprentice aged 19+ or up-skill an existing member of staff who is aged 19+, you could request unused funds from a levy payer (generally a larger employer) who is keen to consider transferring their funds to others. Depending on the apprenticeship banding (cost) this could save the employer anything up to £1,350 – the 5% that they would need to contribute towards the training otherwise.

You can [find further details on our website](#).

The option to request levy funding from a donor is now also possible through an employer's Apprenticeship Service (AS) account in addition to via the GM Levy Matchmaking Service. Further details can be found [here](#).

Support

Wigan Council's Economic Development Team can provide free support to local organisations that are considering apprenticeship recruitment or workforce development through an apprenticeship. This support includes help to understand funding, identify apprenticeship standards, find training providers and consider local grant support.

We also deliver programmes to support care experienced young people and other residents who may be ready for an apprenticeship opportunity. Employers willing to offer meaningful work experience, supported recruitment activity or apprenticeship vacancies are encouraged to get in touch.

We hope that this guide has been useful but if you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

See further guidance here:



How to Create a High Quality Apprenticeship

Updated April 2026