



Apprenticeships in 2026 and Beyond: A Guide for Employers



Overview

We're entering a period where skills are evolving faster than many businesses can keep up. Engineering, digital, healthcare, construction, automotive and other sectors are all feeling the pressure.

At the same time, the government is pushing to see more young people entering skilled work, more adults returning to the workplace, and more employers taking responsibility for building future talent pipelines.

With the recent reforms, apprenticeships are becoming more flexible, more employer-led, and better aligned to the skills businesses actually need. However, they are also becoming more time-sensitive, with tighter rules, shorter funding deadlines, and a greater need for strategic planning.

That's why 2026 is such a significant year. If you understand how the system works now and how it is changing, apprenticeships can become one of the most effective ways to futureproof your workforce. In this guide, we have compiled some important information about how apprenticeships and funding work and what it means for your business.

Our expert team is on hand to provide guidance and support at every stage. We can explain how apprenticeships work, help you choose the right programme to meet your business's skills needs, and support your recruitment requirements by connecting you with our pre-screened pool of motivated candidates.

Contact employer.training@gloscol.ac.uk for a no obligation consultation.

Contents

How the Apprenticeship System Works	3
The Growth and Skills Levy	3
Apprenticeship Funding.....	3
Shorter Courses and Faster Pathways.....	4
Off-the-Job Training	4
How Training Is Delivered.....	4
Apprentice Wages.....	5
Recruiting an Apprentice	5
Choosing the Right Training Provider.....	5
Compliance and Documentation	6
Safeguarding and Duty of Care.....	6
Mentoring and Day-to-Day Support.....	6
Progress Reviews.....	7
End Point Assessment (EPA)	7
Retention and Progression.....	7
Building a Programme, Not Just Hiring One Apprentice	7
Next Steps for Employers.....	7
Contact information	8

How the Apprenticeship System Works

An apprenticeship is a job first and a training programme second. Your apprentice is a full-time employee on your payroll with the same rights as any other member of staff. The difference is that their role is built around learning a specific occupation through structured training.

Every apprenticeship follows a standard. This sets out the knowledge, skills and behaviours required for someone to become competent in that role.

Training must be delivered by an approved apprenticeship provider, regulated by Ofsted. They are responsible for delivering the training, carrying out reviews and assessments, and preparing the apprentice for the End Point Assessment (EPA). This is where the apprentice demonstrates they can do the job to achieve the qualification.

[Discover apprenticeships at Gloucestershire College, a Technical Excellence College](#)

The Growth and Skills Levy

Funding is where employers either gain huge value or unintentionally lose money.

Businesses with a payroll above £3 million pay into the Growth and Skills Levy (previously the Apprenticeship Levy). This is 0.5% of their wage bill. The money goes into a digital account that can be used to fund apprenticeships and, increasingly, shorter modular training.

Smaller employers do not pay the levy but can access heavily subsidised training through co-investment.

In simple terms, the levy is your training budget. If you do not use it, it expires. Without planning ahead, you can end up funding training for other businesses instead of your own.

Currently, levy funds expire after two years. From 2026, this is expected to reduce to 12 months. That means employers will have less time to understand, plan and spend their funds effectively.

Apprenticeship Funding

Every apprenticeship standard has a funding band. This is the maximum amount available to deliver the programme.

If you pay into the levy, you can use those funds to cover training costs. If you do not, government support may cover most or all of the training cost depending on the apprentice's age and circumstances.

There are also additional incentives available in some cases to support employers taking on younger learners, as well as National Insurance contribution reductions.

The key point is that funding is available, but you need to understand how to maximise it.

Shorter Courses and Faster Pathways

Previously, apprenticeships had to last a minimum of 12 months. Recent reforms have reduced this minimum to eight months in some cases, creating faster pathways where appropriate.

Another major change is off-the-job training. Instead of using a percentage model, each apprenticeship standard now has a fixed number of training hours. This makes planning clearer and easier for employers.

From 2026, part of levy funding is also available for shorter targeted training courses, known as apprenticeship units. These have been designed to help employers to upskill their existing workforce quickly by targeting key skills gaps, critical to business growth and productivity.

[Discover apprenticeship units at Gloucestershire College](#)

Off-the-Job Training

Off-the-job training can include classroom sessions, online learning, workshops, shadowing, project work, practical training, and time for assignments or assessments.

It must relate directly to the apprenticeship and take place during paid working hours.

The simplest way to think about it is protected learning time. Apprentices need dedicated time to build technical knowledge and deeper understanding beyond day-to-day tasks.

When that time is planned and protected properly, apprentices progress faster and contribute more value to the business.

How Training Is Delivered

There is no one-size-fits-all model. Delivery model depends on the type of the apprenticeship and can consist of:

- **Day release** – one day a week with the provider, the rest in the workplace
- **Block release** – longer periods with the provider, often suited to cyber security or digital
- **On-site delivery** – a coach visits your workplace to deliver training and support

- **Remote/Independent study** – online learning, portfolio work or assessments completed during paid hours

The best model depends on the programme and the needs of your business.

Apprentice Wages

Apprentices are employees and entitled to the same rights as other staff, including holiday pay, sick pay and pension contributions.

There is a specific apprentice minimum wage for younger apprentices or those in the first year of training. After that, minimum wage rules apply according to age.

The important point is that pay should grow alongside skills, productivity and contribution. A well-planned programme makes progression clear, fair and measurable.

Recruiting an Apprentice

Recruiting an apprentice is different from hiring an experienced employee. You are not mainly recruiting for experience, you are recruiting for attitude, potential, communication and willingness to learn.

When advertising an apprenticeship vacancy, it should be clear, simple and focused on what the apprentice will learn.

Young candidates also expect quick communication and an easy application process. If you move too slowly, another employer may hire them first.

Businesses that succeed usually communicate clearly, respond quickly and create a positive candidate experience.

At Gloucestershire College, we can help advertise your vacancy across Gloucestershire websites, our website and the national government apprenticeship website at no cost. We help pre-screen candidates, providing you with a shortlist to choose from. You make the final decision when it comes to the right apprentice fit for your business.

Choosing the Right Training Provider

The training provider you choose has a major impact on the success of your apprenticeship programme. As an award-winning apprenticeship training provider and a Technical Excellence College, we have a proven track record of delivering high-quality outcomes for both learners and employers.

We understand the needs of businesses and already work with over 1,000 employers to develop talent, close skills gaps, and support workforce growth. We offer one of the largest apprenticeship portfolios in the region, with programmes across a wide range of sectors and levels.

Our results speak for themselves:

- Higher than national average achievement rates
- 9 out of 10 apprentices are retained by their employer and progress their careers
- Ongoing support and guidance for employers and apprentices at every stage of the journey

Whether you are recruiting new talent or upskilling existing staff, we work in partnership with you to deliver apprenticeship programmes that create lasting value.

Compliance and Documentation

Before an apprentice starts, the correct paperwork must be in place. This includes:

- an employment contract
- an apprenticeship agreement between employer, apprentice and provider
- funding and training documentation
- safeguarding and health & safety measures

Off-the-job training must also be recorded throughout the programme.

Good compliance protects funding and keeps the programme running smoothly.

Safeguarding and Duty of Care

When employing younger apprentices, safeguarding becomes especially important.

Apprentices need a proper induction, clear reporting lines, named mentors, safe working practices and access to support if problems arise.

They should never be left without guidance or supervision.

[**View Safeguarding and Prevent Duty Guide for Employers**](#)

Mentoring and Day-to-Day Support

Strong mentoring in the workplace is one of the biggest factors in apprentice success.

A good mentor helps the apprentice learn tasks correctly, build confidence, develop professional habits and ask questions safely.

Without support, apprentices can lose confidence or develop poor habits. With good support, they progress faster and become productive sooner.

At Gloucestershire College, each apprentice is supported by a dedicated Training Coordinator as well as Pastoral Care and Support.

Progress Reviews

These reviews are essential to ensure your apprentice stays on track and progresses successfully towards completion of their training. At Gloucestershire College, we carry out provider reviews every 6–12 weeks, depending on the apprenticeship programme. These reviews focus on workplace progress, development of the required knowledge, skills and behaviours, mentor feedback, and identifying and addressing any issues at an early stage.

End Point Assessment (EPA)

At the end of the programme, apprentices complete an End Point Assessment. This is carried out by an independent organisation.

It may include tests, practical observations, professional discussions or presentations.

Before EPA, the apprentice must pass Gateway — the point where employer, provider and apprentice agree they are ready.

Retention and Progression

When an apprentice qualifies, the real value of your investment begins.

They move from apprentice to skilled employee, already understanding your systems, culture and business. Many employers then support progression into higher-level apprenticeships or further training.

Retention is one of the strongest signs of a successful apprenticeship programme.

Building a Programme, Not Just Hiring One Apprentice

Many employers start by hiring one apprentice to “see how it goes.” But this can be riskier than building a structured programme.

If one apprentice leaves or struggles, the whole plan can collapse.

The strongest businesses build repeatable systems: they know how many apprentices they need each year, which roles they support, and how long it takes for them to become productive.

That creates a more stable and cost-effective workforce plan.

Next Steps for Employers

If you want apprenticeships to work in your business:

1. Review your workforce plan
2. Identify hard-to-fill roles and future skill needs
3. Check your levy or funding position

4. Match roles to apprenticeship standards
5. Choose the right training provider
6. Plan mentoring and support
7. Treat apprenticeships as an ongoing programme, not a one-off hire

When done properly, apprenticeships can become one of your greatest long-term competitive advantages, with your training provider acting as a trusted partner in supporting your business and helping to build your future workforce.

Contact information

Gloucestershire College

Employer Training & Apprenticeships

Employer.training@gloscol.ac.uk

0345 155 2020

www.gloscol.ac.uk/employers

Some content adapted from Apprenticeship Central