

LGA Apprenticeship Health Check Survey 2025/26

Quick summary guide | 14 July 2026

This short guide summarises the main messages from 132 council responses to the LGA's 2025 survey. It follows the survey presentation in order and reproduces the Impact & Implications tables setting out key challenges, opportunities and actions, with a short introduction to the evidence behind each section. You can access the presentation slides with the link to listen to the recording in the final slide in the webinar section of the apprenticeship gateway <https://khub.net/web/apprenticeships-gateway/resources> or at the direct link below:

https://khub.net/web/apprenticeships-gateway/resources/-/ddl_display/ddl/1455679689/1189290316/maximized

Overall considerations for 2026 and beyond

The survey points to a more demanding operating environment: councils must be able to commit funds more quickly, respond to Level 7 restrictions and make better use of limited capacity. The opportunity is to become more tactical and evidence-led - targeting workforce priorities, measuring impact, collaborating and sharing proven practice.

Challenges	Opportunities & Actions
• There are a lot of changes to the apprenticeship programme this year - how fit for purpose are current strategies, plans and actions? • You may need to change what you track and value. • Spending the same amount will probably be harder with the changes coming this year. • Occupations supported by Level 7 need a replacement recruitment and retention plan.	• Have a strategy that responds to the new landscape. • Be tactical - target time and energy to where it is most needed and has most value. • Spend more time finding out what works or fixing what does not. • Measure and act on where impact is greatest. • Collaborate wherever possible on everything. • Share experiences, tools, practices and materials - and use the K-Hub.

The Year in Summary

The survey shows a sizeable but uneven apprenticeship programme. Councils reported over 7,000 starts since April 2025 and over 2,500 in maintained schools; around 53% of contributions have been spent, while 101 councils have returned approximately £126 million in expired funds. Stable sector totals therefore mask different local pipelines and continuing scope to improve levy use.

Observations	Implications	Opportunity / Priority Action
Overall starts are substantial. Performance varies widely between councils and service areas – what can be learned quickly	Headline totals can conceal gaps in participation, locations or apprentice groups. This makes it harder to respond quickly to shortages and restructuring pressures.	Segment starts by service, occupation, age, level and new or existing employee. Set local targets and focus support on areas with low or falling participation. Learn from others with successes.
Schools are an underused route for workforce development Tactical deployment of a firmer commitment to use apprenticeships may be needed.	With fewer standards, less time and less resource, continued low take-up anywhere will contribute to levy underspend and missed opportunities in hard-to-fill school roles.	Develop a growth plan, with priority standards, named contacts, provider options and a realistic start pipeline. What would work best as a focussed tactical delivery of the strategy and opportunities ahead.
- Reported levy income is materially higher than reported expenditure –Is there a plan to use the funding to its maximum - More than three-quarters of councils have already experienced levy expiry.	- With reduced funding flexibility and a shorter expiry window, uncommitted funds will become harder to recover through current planned activity. - Expiry is no longer an exceptional event; it represents recurring loss of workforce investment at a time of severe budget and capacity pressure.	- Do something new - Maintain a rolling 12–18 month levy forecast covering planned starts, committed costs, likely completions and funds at risk of expiry. - Reprioritise a monthly expiry-risk dashboard and require recovery actions for funds approaching expiry, including shared cohorts and accelerated recruitment.
Recent starts are broadly stable overall, but councils are almost evenly split between higher and lower activity levels.	A sector-wide average will not help councils whose pipelines are declining. Some will face a sharper fall as funding rules and Level 7 eligibility change.	Identify the causes of local decline and compare practice with higher-growth councils. Replicate successful approaches to engagement, approvals and cohort development.

Responses to changing programme and funding structures and rules

Councils expect this year's funding reforms to make planning and spending more difficult: 66% think the shorter expiry period will make levy use harder and 69% think expiry will become more likely. Level 7 restrictions are also expected to reduce starts, weaken professional pipelines and limit equitable access, while viable alternatives are not widely available.

Structuring apprenticeships and apprentice support		
Observations	Implications	Opportunity / Priority Action
- Removing the 10% top-up and shortening the expiry period will reduce purchasing power and the time available to commit funds. - Most councils expect the 12-month expiry period to make spending harder and levy expiry more likely.	- Councils will need to make faster, better-evidenced decisions while managing constrained budgets and lengthy recruitment and procurement lead times. - Existing underspend could accelerate, especially for specialist standards, small cohorts and services	- Model the combined financial impact, maintain a live 12–18 month pipeline and bring forward decisions on priority cohorts. - Implement apprenticeships first or expand its current reach, revisit levy transfers, consider routes for specialist standards
The removal of Level 7 funding will reduce starts and weaken pipelines into critical professional roles.	Recruitment and retention pressures may intensify in planning, legal, accountancy, environmental health and other specialists	Complete a profession-by-profession risk assessment. Expand use of apprenticeships at lower levels –'first steps' alongside LLE
- Level 7 alternatives are not readily available, and self-funding would reduce equitable access. - Removed Level 7 funding is not expected to redirect automatically to younger or lower-level apprentices. - The combined policy changes increase the need for collaboration and workforce-led prioritisation.	- Costs may shift to constrained service budgets or individuals, excluding lower-paid staff, experienced workers and career changers. - Councils could lose advanced capability while still failing to increase other starts, resulting in greater levy expiry rather than successful redeployment. - Pressure to spend quickly could produce reactive or low-value activity, while councils acting alone may struggle to form viable specialist cohorts.	- Assess equality and workforce impacts, set transparent access criteria and explore shared purchasing. - Create a plan with named lower-level opportunities sponsored by service owners, dates. Move the focus to earlier recruitment and Level 5 entry points. - Create a specific plan for specialist occupations and monitor these rather than total starts alone.

Structuring apprenticeships and apprentice support

Operational support is generally well established: 92% undertake at least quarterly progress reviews, 96% provide mentoring and 97% offer managers at least a guide or handbook. The development need is to make support more consistent and strategic, using apprentice and manager feedback, stronger peer networks and better EDI data to improve retention, progression and provider performance.

Structuring apprenticeships and apprentice support		
Observations	Implications	Opportunity / Priority Action
Communication, progress reviews and recognition are comparatively strong.	Councils have a solid operational foundation, but good delivery practice is not always connected to strategic workforce outcomes.	Retain these strengths and link them to retention, progression, equality and workforce-planning measures.
- Apprenticeships First is not consistently embedded across recruitment and staff development. - Mentoring and manager support often rely on-line managers and written guidance.	- Managers may continue to choose conventional recruitment or training leading to further underspend - The apprentice experience may vary significantly depending on individual manager confidence, capacity and commitment.	- Reinvigorate the value of an Apprenticeships First check in vacancy approval, learning requests and workforce-planning processes to meet strategies - Learn what is effective and efficient-ask apprentices and line-managers. Measure the value the impact of what is offered. Ask for / offer materials and tools.
- Apprentice networks and peer support are not consistent – what is the shared voice saying ? - Feedback and underperformance processes may not be driving strategy	- Apprentices may have fewer opportunities to build belonging, share experience and access support outside their immediate team. Leading to retention challenges - Provider or apprentice issues may be identified late, repeated issues across cohorts or fail to inform future purchasing decisions.	- Consider new types of network and explore what impact these have on retention – implement more of what has a proven value. - Run regular apprentice and manager surveys, maintain an issues log and connect findings to provider reviews, intervention and procurement.
Inclusion activity is more developed than EDI monitoring.	Councils may promote opportunities to underrepresented groups without knowing whether access, retention and achievement are improving.	Track applications, starts, withdrawals, achievements and progression by relevant demographic group etc - then target support and align resource where gaps persist.

Procurement & Provider Management

Most councils have an established procurement route, but provider management and collaboration are less mature. Seventy percent report a flexible procurement process, though 42% do not currently undertake any joint procurement which may in the shrinking pool of apprenticeships, be a useful strategy. There are also relatively low levels of structured provider reviews (28%) and 40% of councils collect limited or no provider-performance feedback.

Procurement & Provider Management		
Observations	Implications	Opportunity / Priority Action
- Procurement processes are more mature than provider performance management. - Joint procurement may be underused, sharing good practice underused between and within councils	- Councils may be able to appoint providers efficiently but lack the controls needed to secure quality, responsiveness and value quickly. - Councils may face limited provider choice, small unviable cohorts and slower starts under the shorter levy-expiry window.	- Review the provider lifecycle and identify where limited resources can be used to greater impact e.g. covering specification, selection, mobilisation, performance review, intervention and renewal. - Consider additional sectoral, occupation or regional demand pipelines and shared cohorts for specialist or low-volume standards to share oversight and resource.
Regular provider reports are common, but KPI-led management is not.	Reporting can become descriptive rather than driving improvement, challenge or contract decisions.	Adopt a common scorecard covering starts, progress, withdrawals, off-the-job delivery, satisfaction, achievement, timeliness and employer actions.
- Nearly one-third manage providers ad hoc or have no formal process. - Reactive procurement and lower levels of provider management often occur together.	- Performance concerns may escalate before action is taken, increasing withdrawal, delay and reputational risk. - Fragmented arrangements make it challenging to aggregate demand, compare providers or respond to changing workforce priorities.	- Set review frequencies, escalation thresholds, improvement-plan requirements and clear responsibility for intervention. - Use pre-agreed effective procurement routes and a controlled provider portfolio aligned to priority occupations.
Even strong procurement does not guarantee strong contract management.	Procurement assurance is not as effective as performance management after contract award.	Make mobilisation and ongoing quality oversight mandatory, using apprentice, manager and service feedback alongside provider data.

Schools

School engagement is generally stable or improving and maintained-school starts have risen though the operating model remains a challenge due to resource levels in councils. Barriers to increasing school engagement with apprenticeships include off-the-job requirements, limited capacity and knowledge about the programme, but most councils (78%) do no individual school apprenticeship plans. A key opportunity is to move activity from awareness to supported pipelines and targeted practical school-level planning.

Schools Programme		
Observations	Implications	Opportunity / Priority Action
Engagement with maintained schools is generally stable or improving.	The main challenge is converting established relationships into actual starts rather than creating awareness from scratch.	Use engagement activity to agree named opportunities, expected start dates and barriers requiring council intervention.
Off-the-job training requirements are the most frequently reported barrier.	Schools may avoid apprenticeships because of concerns about cover, timetabling and operational disruption.	Provide practical off-the-job planning templates, examples of compliant activity and support for managers to schedule learning.
Schools and councils both report limited time and resource.	Without targeted support, apprenticeship activity will remain dependent on individual enthusiasm and will be displaced by immediate operational pressures.	Offer a proportionate support model: standard guidance for all schools, group briefings and intensive help for schools ready to recruit.
Many schools do not understand the apprenticeship system.	Uncertainty about eligibility, funding, employment and provider responsibilities can lead to risk-averse decisions or delayed starts.	Provide a simple school-facing guide and regular briefings for headteachers, business managers, HR and payroll staff.
Salary and budget pressures restrict schools' ability to recruit apprentices.	New-start apprenticeships may be deprioritised even where levy funding is available, particularly in small schools.	Develop affordable workforce models, including shared roles, progression apprenticeships for existing staff and coordinated recruitment campaigns.
Individual school apprenticeship plans are largely absent.	Council-wide communications cannot reflect each school's workforce profile, vacancies and development needs.	Re/Introduce a light-touch annual school plan covering workforce needs, potential apprentices, expected levy use and support required....see the K-Hub

Programme Leadership, Strategy & Management

Senior support and basic resourcing are positive though 17% of councils are without an apprenticeship strategy. There is a strong indication that councils could connect apprenticeship delivery more firmly to workforce and corporate priorities. 43% of councils do not have a levy spending plan, half do not use workforce analysis to underpin their plan and 39% do not assess impact against council objectives.

Programme Leadership, Strategy & Management		
Observations	Implications	Opportunity / Priority Action
Most councils have some strategic framework, but many remain at action-plan level.	The programme may be vulnerable to changing priorities, restructuring or the loss of a key individual	Create a multi-year apprenticeship strategy with senior sponsorship, clear outcomes, governance and an annually refreshed delivery plan.
Apprenticeships are widely used for workforce pressures but are not consistently a core workforce strategy.	Activity may remain opportunistic rather than directed towards future skills, retention and organisational redesign.	Embed apprenticeships within workforce, recruitment, talent, transformation and organisational-development plans.
- Role mapping and workforce intelligence are behind programme ambition. - Talent and succession pathways are still developing.	- Councils may miss suitable standards, duplicate training or invest in apprenticeships that are not aligned to priority gaps. - Councils may struggle to retain staff and fill future specialist or leadership roles internally.	- Map standards to job families and combine this with vacancy, age-profile, turnover, shortage and succession data. - Build visible apprenticeship career pathways for shortage professions, progression roles and future leaders.
- Monitoring is more focused on activity than organisational impact. - Levy spending plans and strategic engagement with new standards are needed to underpin priorities	- Senior leaders may see starts and levy spend without evidence of improved capability, retention, productivity or service outcomes. - Councils are less able to manage expiry risk or influence the standards needed for emerging workforce requirements.	- Introduce outcome KPIs and an annual impact report linked to corporate objectives, workforce risks and return on investment. - Maintain a multi-year spending profile, scenario-test policy changes and coordinate participation in trailblazers through regional or professional networks.