

Spotlight



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Skills and the road to recovery



Even before the pandemic-induced economic crisis, the UK was dealing with stagnant productivity and a major skills gap. In 2018, research by the Open University found that the skills shortage was costing employers some £6.3bn a year in additional training for lower-skilled staff, temporary staffing, and other costs. Some 91 per cent of UK organisations reported having struggled to find people with the right skills over the previous 12 months. As the economy evolves, this will only become more acute. In 2020, a CBI report found that nine in ten workers will need some form of reskilling by 2030.

Alongside its oft-repeated rhetoric on levelling up the UK economy, this government has also made a point of its commitment to boosting further education (FE) and skills development to plug this gap. Last year, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson announced that the government was dropping the commitment to getting 50 per cent of school-leavers into university one year after it was first achieved, and pivoting to focus on vocational education. In a speech on this new direction last July, Williamson derided the “inbuilt snobbishness” towards FE and pledged to work towards a “world-class, German-style further education system”.

The government’s *Skills for Jobs* white paper, published in January, fleshed out the ideas floated in that speech in more than 30 proposals, some building on old ideas. Key among the new ones were Local Skills Improvement Plans, which will be piloted in 2021, backed by a £65m Strategic Development Fund, and a greater role for employers in designing vocational courses. The latter is based, according to the white paper, on German best practice.

But these reforms cannot paper over long-term funding gaps. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, FE “has seen the largest falls in per-pupil funding of any sector of the education system since 2010-11”. Per student, funding for FE and sixth-form colleges fell by 12 per cent in real terms to 2019-20. As the Centre for Cities think tank outlines in its latest *Cities Outlook* report, if investment in further education is essential to economic recovery and “levelling up” in the long term, then any boost to FE will require the funds to make up that gap, and make up for lost time. ●

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News



White paper proposes lifelong loan entitlement

Jonny Ball

The government's *Skills for Jobs* white paper has promised the introduction of a lifelong loan entitlement in 2025, and has pledged to make it "just as easy to get a loan" for a higher technical course as it is for a full-length university degree. The proposals set out in the publication also include plans to give local employers (represented by Chambers of Commerce) a say in the design of vocational courses. A recruitment drive for further education practitioners will also be launched, hoping to attract those "with experience and skills in industry" to teach vocational courses.

While the white paper promises £1.5bn of additional capital funding for further education (FE) colleges, research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies published in November last year showed that per-student funding for FE and sixth-form colleges had fallen by 12 per cent since 2010.

Teacher workload increases due to pandemic

Jonny Ball

A report by Ofsted into remote education has found that teacher workload has increased over the pandemic as a result of teachers having to provide both remote education and face-to-face education in the classroom for the children of key workers. Some 86 per cent of teachers told the schools inspectorate that their workload had increased, with 45 per cent saying it had increased greatly.

After surveying parents, Ofsted found that the biggest challenge associated

Report: skills focus is key to recovery

Jonny Ball

A new report by the Centre for Cities, an urban growth think tank, has warned of the risk of a process of "levelling down" as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and three successive lockdowns. Improving skills and training will play a major part in post-pandemic recovery, says the report, as strengthening the skills offer of local labour markets will be essential to attracting high-productivity businesses and private investment.

The centre's *Cities Outlook 2021* report, published in January, claims that places that were relatively prosperous before the pandemic –

places where "levelling up wasn't an issue" – are among the hardest hit.

The report cites London, Crawley and Slough as areas with previously high rates of growth, productivity and gross value added (GVA), but say that they have suffered a precipitous decline in output since March 2020. The report welcomes the government's promotion of a Lifetime Skills Guarantee, which provides college courses to anyone without A-levels, but recommends that the offer is extended to anyone who has lost their job as a result of the coronavirus recession.

with remote learning was maintaining “my child’s focus”, with 40 per cent of parents saying this was a major barrier. “Lack of contact with classmates” and “lack of motivation” were also cited by 38 and 36 per cent of parents respectively. A third of teachers told inspectors they weren’t confident delivering remote learning, and that on-screen lessons posed problems when it came to reading students’ body language. Students with special educational needs and disabilities encountered the most severe difficulties when it came to remote learning, the report said.



UK’s “green skills deficit” harming net zero target

Rohan Banerjee

The UK is severely lacking specialist “green skills” relating to various renewable and electric technologies, according to a new report. The Electrical Contractors’ Association (ECA) surveyed a range of businesses in the electro-technical and engineering sectors as part of its recent Skills4Climate review, with nearly half (48 per cent) of the companies featured expressing concerns over there being “insufficient training” in this area.

The ECA said it was worried about electricians being able to construct or install “active” green technologies, such

as heat pumps, electric vehicle charging infrastructure, and various types of energy storage.

The ECA found that despite widespread support for investment in and the roll-out of green technologies as part of the UK’s economic response to the Covid-19 pandemic, a quarter (25 per cent) of electrical companies would struggle to recruit new workers with the skills necessary to deliver on this vision.

The report highlighted the need for greater crossover and collaboration between manufacturers and installers, and urged the government to play a role in better embedding low-carbon awareness and skills into curriculums at school and university levels.

Unemployment among young people at nearly 5%

Rohan Banerjee

The unemployment rate among 16 to 24-year-olds in the UK is close to 5 per cent, according to the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics, with around 250,000 fewer people from this age group in paid work since before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Young people represent a large proportion of the retail and hospitality sectors, which have been hit particularly hard by lockdowns.

Commenting on the ONS figures, the Chancellor Rishi Sunak said: “This crisis has gone on far longer than any of us hoped. Whilst the NHS is working hard to protect people with the vaccine we’re throwing everything we’ve got at supporting businesses, individuals and families.” He added: “Our Plan for Jobs includes grants and loans so that firms can keep employees on, the furlough scheme to help protect jobs, and programmes like Kickstart alongside record investment in skills so that people can find their first job, their next job or a new job if needed.”



Most over-45s would invest in digital know-how

Rohan Banerjee

Nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) of UK adults over the age of 45 would be willing to invest time and money in learning new digital skills, according to research carried out by Microsoft. Within that figure, just over four in ten people (44 per cent) said they were actively considering a change of career. Nearly one in four (23 per cent) said they would be open to a career change that took them into a field specifically related to technology. People in the over-45s age group were willing to commit an average time of just over three and a half hours per week to reskilling. Despite this apparent enthusiasm, 60 per cent of this group said they were unaware of where to find the resources to help them.

Simon Lambert, Microsoft’s chief learning officer, said in a statement that there was a “dangerous misconception” that the tech industry was the preserve of young people alone. “The truth is that we need people with a diverse range of experiences, backgrounds and ages,” he explained. “And we need them now to fill the growing skills gap which, left unplugged, will significantly impact the UK’s recovery [from the pandemic].” ●

Delivering a resilient economy



**Gillian Keegan,
Minister for
Apprenticeships
and Skills, says
the government
is committed
to supporting
a revolution
in technical
education**

Last year, 2020, will go down in history as the year that the world battled a dangerous and indiscriminate virus. Yet it was also the year in which education fully embraced the latest 21st-century technology.

Remote education is not new – the Open University is an example of an organisation that has been successfully delivering online education for many years. But the scale of the shift to online delivery due to the pandemic was unprecedented. Colleges stepped up to the challenge and rapidly shifted to delivering digital provision. Throughout 2020 I undertook a series of virtual college visits where I participated in online lessons and interacted with staff and students.

This government's priority is making sure students receive the best education and training possible whether at home or in a classroom, so we invested in increasing the training opportunities available for teachers and funded seven further education college partnerships to

develop high-quality digital resources. I believe this new approach to education will last and benefit generations to come. Technology has impacted everything about the way we live our lives, and we must embrace this change.

I have always believed that technical education can change lives, which is why I was delighted to become the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills. Thanks to our reforms, apprenticeships have continued to play a key role in developing new talent from all walks of life, helping to ensure employers of all sizes have access to the skills they need to grow. Apprenticeship opportunities are now available in a wide range of exciting fields, from artificial intelligence to space engineering.

Having left school at 16, in Liverpool in the 1980s, against a backdrop of high unemployment, my apprenticeship was a life-changing experience. Still, decades later, I believe that studying alongside working is a brilliant way to make sure you are gaining valuable



skills. Apprenticeships form a central part of our revolution of technical education, and since 2010 nearly five million people have started their apprenticeship journey.

We will supercharge these efforts in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, as we have an urgent need to close huge skills gaps in our economy.

The first six weeks in my post, before the first lockdown, were spent in meetings about how dire our skills shortages are – from digital to construction, agri-tech to graphic design. I would hear, day after day, how we could not meet demand from businesses for the skills they need. This issue extends beyond our borders, with companies in the US, Mexico and Italy, to name a few, struggling to find and retain the best talent. Having spent many years working internationally in various sectors I know first-hand the difficulty in recruiting where these skills are lacking.

Research reveals that a quarter of vacancies in England were hard to fill because applicants lack the appropriate skills, qualifications or experience. That's why we are taking the steps needed to make sure further education providers deliver the skills employers need to grow. As it stands, only 4 per cent of young people achieve higher technical qualifications, despite employers crying out for skills at this level. If the UK is to achieve some of its bold plans – bringing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050 through green jobs and improving the country's infrastructure through major projects like HS2 – then we need the workforce to do it.

Our recently published Skills for Jobs white paper will introduce a dynamic programme of measures to reshape this country's technical education landscape. This white paper outlines our blueprint for creating jobs and rebuilding our economy. But to achieve this we must ensure that technical education and training meets the needs of employers locally and nationally. That is why we are

putting employers at the heart of the system and making sure local employers have a say on what local courses and training will be delivered. And by 2030 the vast majority of technical courses will follow employer-led standards, ensuring that the education and training people receive are directly linked to the skills needed for real jobs.

These changes haven't come about by accident. We built on the success of our apprenticeship programme and learnt from other countries, such as Singapore and Germany, having cherry-picked the successful elements of these systems so that our technical education system is the envy of the world. This will act as a springboard for dynamic economies that present challenges and offer opportunities and innovation. However, it is not just about the economy; it is about a system working for people, that levels-up opportunities across the country.

The unfortunate and sad fact is that we all have friends and family who are stuck in relatively low-paid and insecure work, through lack of opportunity or support to learn the skills employers value. That's why we must give people the opportunity to access high-quality training opportunities so they can get ahead.

We are also introducing modular, flexible study, and flexible funding so that people who have work or family commitments can continue to train and retrain throughout their lives. For example, our Skills Bootcamps will offer adults the chance to undertake short, flexible training in a range of exciting industries including digital, engineering and construction.

This kind of flexibility is made possible by technology. It is this technology that the education sector embraced almost overnight and to powerful effect. The world has changed, and we owe it to our young people, and to adults looking to retrain, to change with it and deliver a truly cutting-edge, future-proof skills system that will deliver for both individuals and employers. ●



The UK is facing a dire skills shortage

Digital skills and the future of work

New technologies are only as effective as the staff trained to use them, says **Thomas O'Reilly**, head of group strategy at QA Ltd

In the 1990s, buying a personal computer was a serious consideration. The device itself was expensive, and buyers could spend hours poring over specs to identify the maximum storage and processing power available within a budget. Today, the power of the cloud means that the hard drive capacity of a laptop, or the storage available with a smartphone, is far less of a deal-breaker.

Instead, cloud-based services provided by Spotify, Netflix and Apple allow us to access a library of music, films or photos on any device, at any time. Our personal documents are increasingly stored “in the cloud” too, through services such as Google Docs, Microsoft Office 365, and Dropbox.

The same applies to businesses. There has been a significant democratisation of workplace technology. Supporting email or the company’s operating systems used to mean buying expensive servers and locking them in an overheating cupboard. Now every organisation has access to software, storage and even raw computing power itself on-demand through the cloud, and only needs to pay for the IT horsepower it uses.

This “democratisation of digital” has never been more important. While many organisations have suffered enormously as a result of Covid-19, there have also been great examples of smaller businesses using digital services to adapt quickly and thrive.

But here the great levelling power of digital starts to falter. The ability to instigate a social selling strategy on Facebook might come naturally to many, but for business owners that have long operated a model based on footfall or word of mouth it is not so easy. It might not be high-end programming, but effective social media advertising is still a digital skill. Equally, on-demand, pay-as-you-go cloud services might be more accessible financially, but the ability to maximise value from them is not so straightforward. Using the cloud to capture and store data, building analytics tools to scrutinise it, and integrating advanced features into a website requires skillsets that are still rare and often expensive.

The competitive advantage previously reserved for organisations with the wallets to invest in the hardware of servers and data centres is increasingly the privilege of those that have access to the best digital talent.

But the ongoing digital skills scarcity in the UK means that attracting and retaining digital talent is a significant challenge for all. The reality is organisations are now seeing the consequences of the shortage. Businesses that have failed to move beyond legacy tech, and the skills needed to look after it, are struggling to take advantage of the revenue opportunities presented by cloud-based services. At the same time, stories of a cyber attack are now a weekly occurrence; it is hard to think of a more visible warning of what can happen to those that fall behind.

Reskilling and upskilling existing staff is essential

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Achieving the skills transformation

Organisations should start by looking inwards. Reskilling and upskilling existing employees is the best place to begin. QA client Nationwide has recently completed a programme of intensive, digital boot camps where both employees and new hires were trained from scratch in skills such as software development, cloud technologies and cyber security. This allowed individuals previously in branch management (for example) to move to a new digital career. The key is to recruit for these programmes based on potential, underlying aptitude and attitude, rather than formal qualifications, pre-existing knowledge or experience.

It's not just individual employers seeing the potential of this training route. QA has just completed a pilot boot camp programme in Greater Manchester taking people from the

fringes of the labour market and providing them with the training and support needed for a long-term digital career. By working closely with local employers, these government-funded programmes do a brilliant job of providing talent for local organisations that may otherwise not have access to the digital talent they need.

Building a long-term talent pipeline

Alongside intensive reskilling and upskilling activities, the strategy should also include longer-term talent programmes. Misunderstood, even unfashionable for many years, apprenticeship programmes are now vital for any organisation serious about closing its digital skills gap. The modern apprenticeship is also more flexible, for both individuals and employers. Apprenticeships can start in any month of the year and more off-the-job training can now be completed digitally for

most tech disciplines. The programmes deliver a continuous flow of the latest digital skills into the workplace.

Organisations such as QA provide safeguarding, mentors and real-time dashboards alongside the recruitment and tech training itself, reducing the administrative and management burden on the employer.

It's not only young people at the start of their careers choosing apprenticeships; they're a popular way for more experienced employees to retrain into new roles too. The structure and qualification an apprenticeship programme provides makes it ideal for someone looking to pivot their career without breaking from work. Degree apprenticeships at undergraduate or master's level are rightly increasingly popular as a development route for high-potential staff.

A race every organisation can win

The skills gap will not be solved if business leaders revert to thinking this is just a hiring game. Augmenting existing teams with tech talent is important, and absolutely has its place, but if organisations focus all of their efforts on competing for experienced individuals, this is a race that SMEs will lose. This approach purely favours those already in the game and with the deepest pockets.

Instead, organisations need to develop talent from new sources, and grow the employees they already have. Investing in people, and building sustainable, long-term talent pipelines, means every organisation will emerge stronger from the global pandemic, and thrive in the technological world that follows. ●

QA is the UK's leading tech talent and training organisation. The company specialises in the people side of tech transformation – training programmes that help organisations to upskill or reskill their existing employees and talent services. Last year, QA delivered services to more than 6,000 corporate clients, representing over 85 per cent of the FTSE 250.

Steve Rotheram, mayor of Liverpool City Region, on the skills MPs need and the role of apprenticeships in Merseyside's post-Covid recovery. By Jonny Ball

How devolution could plug the UK skills gap



When I was in parliament it was really interesting to see that hardly anybody else there had a trade background,” Steve Rotheram tells me when we meet over Zoom at the start of England’s third lockdown. The metro mayor of Liverpool City Region – a devolved body encompassing Liverpool itself along with five neighbouring local authority areas – Rotheram was an apprentice bricklayer before entering politics, an unusual background for the British political class.

From 2010 to 2017, Rotheram was member of parliament for Liverpool Walton, the safest seat in the country, where Labour’s vote share hasn’t dipped below 70 per cent for 30 years. In 2015, he became parliamentary private secretary to the new leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn. But his time in SW1 was “frustrating”, with the levers of power turning “very, very slowly”.

Before the 2017 general election he stepped down to run as Labour’s candidate for Liverpool metro mayor, a new role at the head of the newly formed Combined Authority on Merseyside, which would control a budget of £900m and have significant devolved powers, including over skills and training. The Labour MP for Leigh at the time, Andy Burnham, also stepped down to become metro mayor of the neighbouring body in Greater Manchester.

“When the opportunity came to do something more locally, and perhaps to forge a new way of doing things and accelerate delivery, I thought ‘yeah okay, let’s have a look at that’,” says Rotheram.

His own professional background set him apart from most MPs. “I’d say 99 per cent of them had come through academia,” he says. “They had gone to school, done A-levels, done a degree at a posh university, a lot of them anyway, and had ended up there”.

In the 1983 parliament, just over half of the Labour benches were made up of university graduates. Now, the party’s parliamentarians are more likely to have a degree than their Conservative counterparts (84 per cent and 83 per

cent respectively, while the figure for the whole country is around a third).

Last year, the Conservatives shifted government policy to boost further education. Gavin Williamson, the Education Secretary, announced the government was scrapping the target of 50 per cent of school leavers going to university, set by Tony Blair two decades ago, only one year after it was first achieved. In a speech at the time Williamson said there was an “still an inbuilt snobbishness”, and that further education (FE) was so undervalued in the UK it “may as well have stood for “forgotten education”.

A government white paper in January proposed an expansion of lifelong learning, designed to help older workers retrain in new industries and professions, and suggested giving employers more influence in developing vocational training. But Rotheram describes the proposals as having “sidestepped devolution and reverted to a Whitehall knows best approach”, asking ministers to “change course”.

The mayor says any problems are not just about the Secretary of State for Education. “It’s easy to have a pop at Gavin Williamson because he’s fairly poor,” he says, “but he is the whipping boy for the department – and that’s got structural issues. . . They are probably the most centralised of all departments... and there’s lots of churn, you seem to be making some progress, and then somebody else comes in.”

Across the North, the pandemic has hit harder economically than in the South East, with northern unemployment benefit claimants making up a larger proportion of the total than before the lockdowns and closures began.

The northern economy has been hit hard

This puts the government’s “level up” agenda in jeopardy. In addition to poor infrastructure and historically lower levels of investment, the productivity gap between the North and South has been partly blamed on low skills in some of Britain’s northern regions. London’s higher growth and higher public and private investment – with their associated employment opportunities – attract educated, skilled young people from all over the country, reinforcing the dominance of the capital.

Training, skills and apprenticeships will be key to Liverpool’s post-pandemic recovery, according to Rotheram. “We’re going to need people with different skill sets,” he says, keen to emphasise that economic revival and “building back better” won’t just be about rebuilding those sectors normally associated with Liverpool – its cultural and visitor economy.

“If you look under the bonnet you see a completely different way in which the whole city region is starting to transform,” he says. “We’re hoping to build a tidal barrage project worth billions of pounds, and I don’t want people from all over the world taking those job opportunities away from local people. . . To be able to compete they need those vocational qualifications.”

While the Conservatives under Boris Johnson have tried to put more focus on those vocational qualifications, Rotheram is sceptical: “I’d like to see what they say in parliament become the reality in areas like ours.”

But the Tories’ new emphasis accompanies a slow but steady change in the demographic of its voters and MPs, not least in the fallen “red wall”. Historically, Labour grandees often made the journey from manual professions to workplace organising, then through the trade unions to become MPs. Now, you are far more likely to find seasoned Westminster “insiders” in the Parliamentary Labour Party.

“Parliament is supposed to reflect the society that it’s drawn from,” says Rotheram. But while undoubted progress has been made over the past

four decades in representation for women and ethnic minorities, the perception of politicians as a closed “political class” is as strong as ever.

Internal debate still rages within Labour about whether the party has become too metropolitan, too middle class. Was its recent failure to win the votes of the skilled and unskilled manual workers who used to make up its base linked to the lack of MPs from similar backgrounds? The 2019 election saw the majority of those voters shift to the Conservatives for the first time, while the Labour led among university graduates.

But beyond simple electoral calculations, selecting MPs from such a homogeneous pool of talent limits their skill set. “I’m not having a pop at academia,” Rotheram assures me. “It’s great for some people... but the vocational route gives you a better understanding of working as part of a team... And you know there have been many promising political careers that have died on the altar of individuals not being able to work as part of a team.

“All those phrases like ‘there’s no I in team’ – well go and work in parliament for a bit and you’ll see that they don’t exist,” he says. Rotheram could be referring to any number of high-profile political spats – Thatcher vs the “wets”, Blair and Brown, or even Corbyn and McDonnell.

He speaks from personal experience too. In the race to become Labour candidate for Liverpool’s metro mayor, Rotheram fought a selection battle against Liverpool city mayor Joe Anderson, as well as the Wavertree MP Luciana Berger. Liverpool’s Labour members overwhelmingly chose Rotheram, encouraged by his “Corbynite” credentials (a 2018 article described Rotheram as “the most powerful Corbynista in the country”), but it wasn’t long before tensions between Anderson and Rotheram spilled onto the front pages of the *Liverpool Echo*.

This rivalry has had its day. Anderson has now stepped down following his arrest on suspicion of bribery and corruption, and a referendum is



Rotheram with Jeremy Corbyn after winning Liverpool’s first metro mayor election

planned on abolishing his post. Many Liverpoolians had wondered why Liverpool the city and the city region had two overlapping executive mayors.

Rotheram, meanwhile, was recently catapulted into the national limelight for different reasons. Boris Johnson praised him for supposedly co-operating with the government over the Covid-19 tiering system, comparing Liverpool favourably against Burnham’s stubborn Greater Manchester, the public face of opposition to the government’s measures.

Rotheram tells me this was a deliberate strategy to “divide and rule”, used “as an attempt to drive a wedge between myself and Andy”, his “best friend in politics”. He adds: “We were told that Dominic Cummings had his fingerprints on this as well.”

Now Liverpool is out of its tiers and, along with the rest of the country, into its third lockdown in less than 12 months. Its hospitality, tourism, culture and leisure sectors – central to the port city’s revival following its post-war decline – will be battered by months of enforced closures. Figures released last year showed that Liverpool experienced the second-highest rise in the jobless claimant count after the first lockdown.

Johnson tried to “divide and rule”

The mayor is keen to talk up the city region’s economic offer: high-value manufacturing projects; green energy hubs; materials innovation; automation and robotics; four universities and a vibrant knowledge economy; and the opportunities in big data due to a planned “digital ring” based around the Hartree supercomputer. Capitalising on all of these requires a highly skilled labour market – something the Combined Authority is working on. Before the pandemic, and in partnership with local employers, the authority created 9,000 jobs and 5,500 apprenticeships using skills capital funding and the devolved adult education budget.

But Rotheram is keen for further devolution. With control over revenue from the Apprenticeship Levy he’d be able to do more, he says. Devolved authorities, unlike the Department for Education, have an intimate knowledge of their local areas, an awareness of the needs of local businesses, relationships with local enterprise partnerships (LEPs), and the ability to be flexible.

“People don’t just appear with, for instance, expert skills in modern methods of construction. People need to be trained. How can they be trained if there’s no local college that’s delivering that?” he asks.

Much like the pandemic response, the government can be slow to learn how important local knowledge is in delivering policies and making smart budgetary decisions.

“[The government] keep on saying, ‘we’re going to do X’. And X for them is a major capital investment project, a big shiny thing,” says Rotheram. “But they won’t say anything about who’s doing it. I keep on asking them: ‘Who’s building that for you? Where are the skills gonna come from?’ HS2, Northern Powerhouse Rail, all these new hospitals, the bridges that are supposedly going to be built from Scotland to Ireland. Who would do it even if those fanciful things ever came to fruition? We’ve got skill shortages now, and we need people with different skill sets for the future. We can deliver that locally, whereas government could never do that.” ●

How apprenticeship policies can boost opportunity



Employers and government must prioritise disadvantaged apprentices, says Sandra Wallace, co-chair of the Social Mobility Commission and joint managing director, UK & Europe, at DLA Piper-

To recover from the pandemic we need a resilient workforce, one that can deliver results, drive innovation and offers access to all. Apprenticeships have a vital role to play in that recovery – 92 per cent of firms who run a scheme believe it leads to a more motivated and satisfied workforce, while 80 per cent report higher retention rates. And those who start their careers via an apprenticeship have unparalleled knowledge from working their way up, which can lead to greater efficiencies.

For individuals, access to apprenticeships and further education can be a game-changer. When I was starting on my legal journey, I was told I wouldn't become a lawyer because I didn't go to the right university and I didn't get the highest grades. Overcoming these barriers hasn't been easy. But providing access to opportunities is critical, especially to those who come from less privileged backgrounds and are currently reeling from the economic fallout of the pandemic. Apprenticeships are a great tool to help us level the playing field.

When disadvantaged workers complete their apprenticeships they get a bigger boost to earnings than their more privileged peers (16 per cent vs 10 per cent). We need to make sure those who need it most receive the right support – whatever point of their career they are at.

So, at the start of National Apprenticeship Week (8-14 February), we would urge the government, via policy, and employers, through their recruitment efforts, to prioritise disadvantaged apprentices of all ages.

Between 2015/16 and 2017/18, the number of apprenticeship starters from disadvantaged backgrounds fell

by 36 per cent. The impact was even greater for older (aged 25 and over) and female apprentices. One of the recommendations in the Social Mobility Commission's apprenticeship report was for the government to increase the share of apprentices from disadvantaged backgrounds to pre-Apprenticeship Levy levels.

The DfE Learners and Apprentices Survey 2018 identified that among the main reasons for lower completion rates among disadvantaged apprentices were travel issues and low pay. We urge the DfE and Low Pay Commission to address the financial, as well as the non-financial, aspects of training. The government should further review the clustering of disadvantaged workers in lower-level apprenticeships.

To employers we suggest a clear pathway for apprentices when they finish their training. It's not just about getting on a scheme, but also what happens once it has been completed. That could take the shape of sequential levels of training (i.e. moving from Level 2 to Level 3), or it might be a programme to progress talented apprentices. Employers also need to ensure they offer comparable opportunities for progression and reward to those taking non-graduate routes – who may not have traditional academic qualifications, but a whole range of skills that could benefit their business.

The Covid-19 outbreak has created acute challenges for individuals and employers alike, and it is likely to further reduce opportunities for aspiring apprentices. Let's use this week to reinvigorate apprenticeship programmes, and make them fit for purpose and accessible by all. ●

The data on local authority apprenticeships

Analysis shows some councils are better at taking on apprentices than others. By **Samir Jeraj** and **Nicu Calcea**

Local government provides everything from housing to refuse collection. It is also a significant supporter of apprenticeships, hosting thousands each year. Apprentices learn part-time and work part-time as part of a path into a specific job, such as administrator or social worker. *Spotlight* crunched the data to get a picture of apprenticeships in local authorities.

Like most of the public sector, local government is behind on its target. The government’s aim is for apprentices to make up at least 2.3 per cent of the public sector’s overall workforce by 2021. The armed forces and fire authorities were the only ones to hit that goal in 2019-20.

Of the apprenticeships offered, business and admin, finance, and law were the most popular. This was followed by health and social care, education and training, and retail and commercial enterprises. Based on a sample of one-third of councils, 91.6 per cent of people who completed an apprenticeship had a “sustained positive destination”, going into employment or further education or training. Some apprentices, for example, will complete a lower-level apprenticeship, progressing to a higher level (potentially up to degree level).

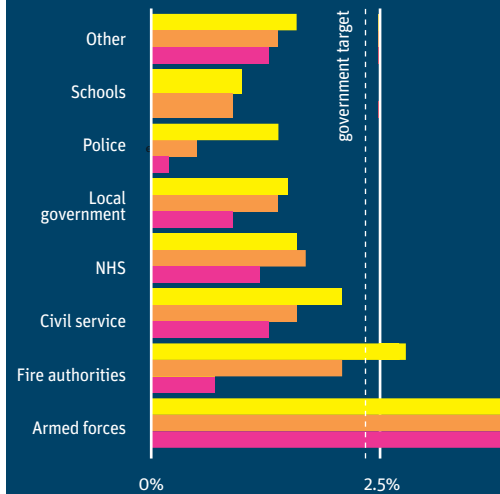
Some councils are more enthusiastic supporters of apprenticeships than others. While larger councils in London have greater numbers of apprentices, they are behind some parts of England when it comes to the share among the councils’ total headcount. For example, in Basildon, Essex, 4.7 per cent of the headcount was made up of apprenticeship starts, more than twice the government target, whereas Broadland in Norfolk is only a sixth of the way there at 0.4 per cent. Among the bottom are Redditch Borough and Bromsgrove District Councils, where only one in 1,000 employees (0.11 per cent) were apprentices. Greater Manchester, at double its target (4.6 per cent), is one of the leading councils.

Since 2017, all employers with a wage bill of £3m or more are subject to a levy that they can draw on to provide apprenticeships. Local government schemes existed from the mid-1990s until the new system was introduced, but the levy and 2.3 per cent target have driven an increase in the past four years.

Apprenticeships in local government clearly have a positive impact. Local authorities now have an opportunity to demonstrate a model of best practice for the rest of the public sector. ●

MOST OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR IS MISSING APPRENTICESHIP TARGETS

Share of employees starting apprenticeships



BOTTOM-PERFORMING COUNCIL

Redditch Borough Council / Bromsgrove District Council

0.11%

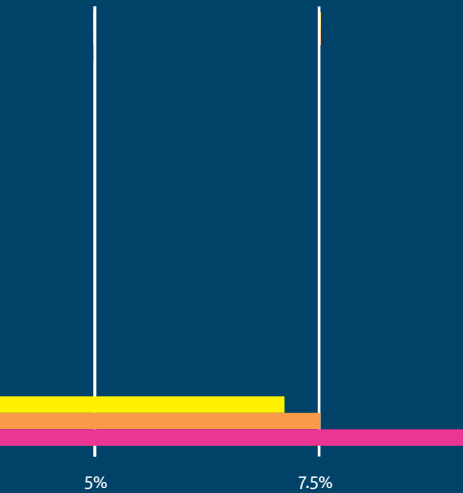
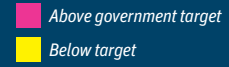
Bottom and top councils’ percentage share of employees starting apprenticeships between 2017-18 and 2019-20

SOURCES: DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION



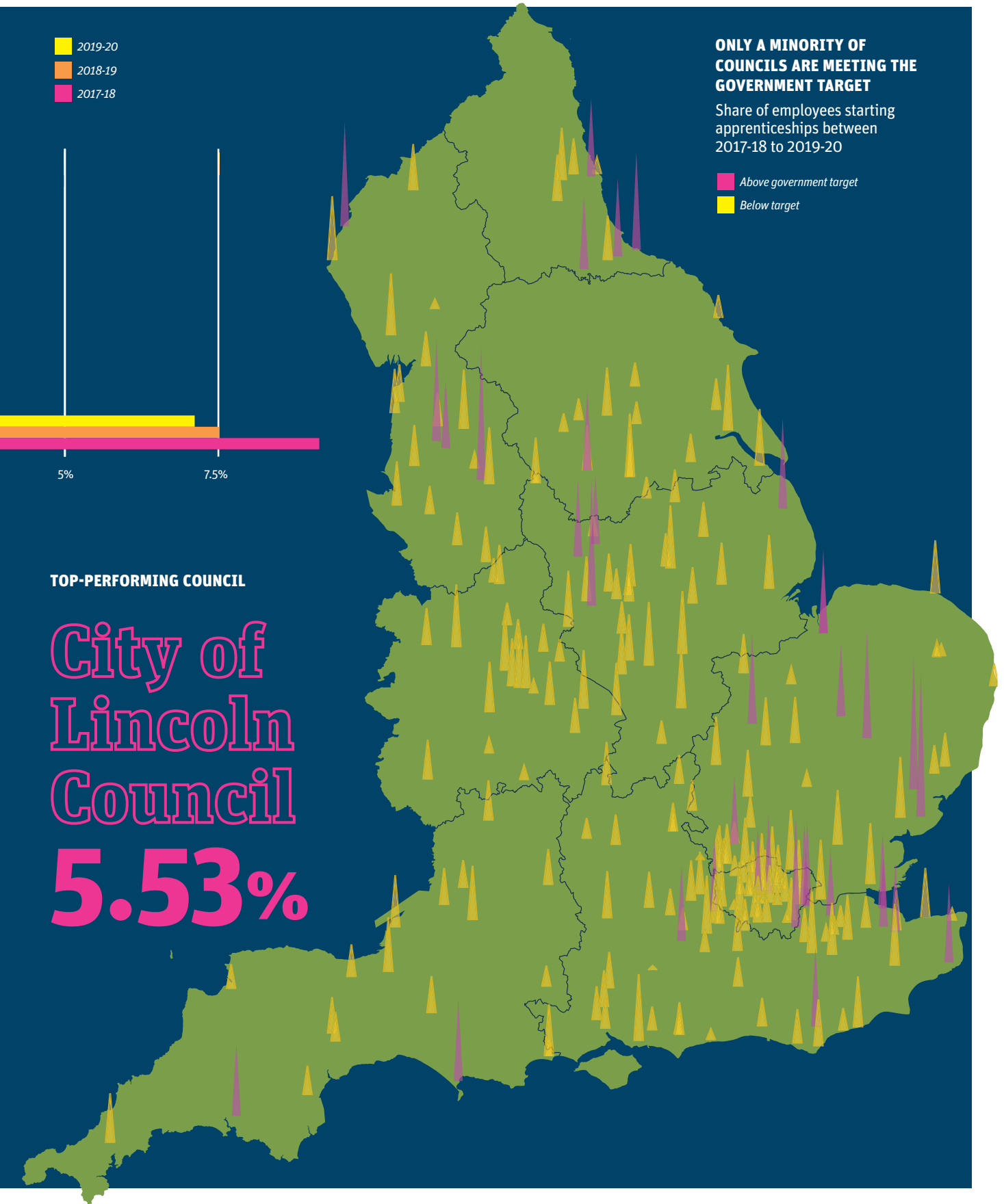
ONLY A MINORITY OF COUNCILS ARE MEETING THE GOVERNMENT TARGET

Share of employees starting apprenticeships between 2017-18 to 2019-20



TOP-PERFORMING COUNCIL

City of Lincoln Council
5.53%



NHS apprentices on working and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. By Samir Jeraj

Finding your vocation in a crisis

Laura Walsh wanted to work in an ambulance when she left school, but “life and subsequently children happened”, she says. But last year, the 36-year-old saw an advert for an NHS ambulance care assistant apprenticeship. “What better example could I set my children?” she asked herself, and decided to apply. It was the start of 2020, and the experience would be very different to what she had expected.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, apprentices – like other NHS staff – have found themselves in the middle of the greatest health crisis in generations. They have been working on the front line and in the back office, supplementing their practical experience with distance learning. For some, real-world experience has become virtual.

Around 18,000 people started an apprenticeship in the NHS in the 2019 to 2020 academic year, and more than 51,000 have done so since 2017, when the Apprenticeship Levy was introduced on employers, including those in the public sector, with a wage bill of £3m or over in order to boost vocational training. The NHS has provided such schemes since the mid-1990s, when Modern Apprenticeships were created by the Major government.

Apprenticeships mix formal study at a further education institution and learning in the workplace. Depending on the level of study, from GCSE equivalent to a degree, they can last from 12 to 18 months through to four years. Being able to earn a salary while learning makes them an attractive option.

The NHS, along with the civil service, is more likely to recruit apprentices over

the age of 25 across a range of vocations. In 2017 to 2018, 30 accountant, 130 assistant accountant, and 50 engineer apprentices started in the health service, alongside thousands of clinical roles such as healthcare support workers and nursing associates.

Matthew Fairclough, a mental health nursing degree apprentice, is a peer supporter within a community treatment team in north-east England. Social distancing has impacted how he works. “Facial expression means so much, especially for my patients,” he says, “but many of them have actually really embraced the idea of wearing PPE.”

During the first lockdown, contact with the people Fairclough supported was limited to phone calls, but he is now back to doing some face-to-face appointments, which can be really important to the more vulnerable. “My

Nursing students
have been helping
out at Covid-19
vaccination
centres.





Student paramedics receive training to deal with coronavirus patients.

visits may be the only time they feel safe and comfortable in leaving the house.”

Some apprentices have had to take on new roles as part of the pandemic response. Amber James started a healthcare assistant apprenticeship in May 2019, with the plan to complete a year as a band 2 worker and go up to band 3, enrolling on further training. She worked shifts at Great Ormond Street Hospital while having specific study days where practice educators, who are allocated to particular wards and clinical specialities, teach apprentices about their areas of expertise. This was on top of the core skills needed to work in a hospital ward. “You really got a feel for what the patient’s day looks like,” she explains.

Early into the pandemic, however, James volunteered to be redeployed to one of the Nightingale Hospitals established as part of the pandemic response. She joined as a clinical support worker and her apprenticeship was put on hold for three months, but it gave her an opportunity to build skills and experience across different departments.

James originally qualified in early years child development and was working in a children’s centre, but was frustrated by the lack of clear career progression. Like Laura Walsh, the idea of working in the NHS had been in the back of her mind for years. James recalled doing a week-long placement at Great Ormond Street Hospital in her final year of university. At the time she thought it was where she wanted to be. “I love the whole ethos of

the hospital, I love the atmosphere, the work that they do,” she says.

James worked with adults for the first time at the Nightingale, learning the skills needed to help those fighting Covid-19: ventilation observations, suctioning the tubes, and “proning” patients – turning them safely from their back onto their abdomen – to help them breathe. With the help of her colleagues she also dealt with deteriorating and dying patients for the first time, supporting people at the end of their life and their families.

She says that when starting out in the NHS there is an emphasis on being “one team. . . and that was something that I instantly recognised when helping out with other teams in the pandemic”.

Walsh is another front-line worker and apprentice, whose role involves transporting patients to and from hospital appointments. Keeping the vehicle clean and well-stocked with PPE is a critical task for ensuring the health of staff and patients, but she also provides emotional support. “Sometimes the day involves you being a counsellor, or a friendly ear, and

“I feel very lucky to be in this position”

sometimes you are the only person a patient may have seen for a few days, or even weeks,” she says.

The patients Walsh works with don’t have serious or life-threatening conditions but can still be very vulnerable. She is there to make sure that the clinicians she hands the patients over to get vital information. “Covid-19 has been a real struggle for everyone, more so for some of the patients we transport,” reflects Walsh. “I’ve done as I’ve always done and come to work realising I have a job to do that other people rely on.”

It is not just apprentices working in front-line roles who have had to adapt to supporting the NHS as it copes with the crisis. Michael Bottomley is in a finance team, working and studying virtually. “At times it can get a bit lonely working from home, especially as I previously worked in the bustling hospitality industry,” he says.

Like many of those who cannot meet colleagues and fellow students in person, Bottomley has had to find the joy in the everyday, taking early-morning walks with his dog, listening to the radio, and having lunch with his girlfriend. He is also positive about the support of colleagues and the distance-working systems they use to keep working. It is a stark contrast to his former colleagues from his time in hospitality, many of whom have been furloughed or made redundant. “I feel very lucky to be in this position,” he says.

Back at Great Ormond Street, Amber James has returned from her deployment at the Nightingale and is now working across several different wards. She has moved into a four-year nursing degree apprenticeship. When she finishes she will be a registered nurse, and the scheme means she can continue to work while her tuition fees will be covered.

Thinking back over 2020, she says the experience underlines the importance of staff being really flexible and versatile. “This past year has really taught us that we have very little understanding of which way things can turn,” she says. ●

Putting an end to digital poverty

Better infrastructure will help education technology to meet the evolving needs of teachers and students, says **Ji Li**, managing director at Plum Innovations Ltd

The coronavirus pandemic has injected fresh urgency into the education technology conversation. As schools and universities have been ordered to close for months at a time due to lockdown measures against the virus, educators have had to adapt to new ways of teaching online. This has led to mixed results, usually depending on what level of digital provision institutions had in place to begin with.

Education technology encompasses a plethora of tools, devices and techniques. Access to these things is as important as engagement – both emotionally and intellectually. And we should acknowledge that moving lessons online is not simply a case of doing the same thing you would in a classroom, but in front of a screen. Alongside digital adoption, there needs to be a shift in educators’ mindsets, and an appropriate blended learning strategy that accompanies new equipment. When it comes to managing a budget, technology should be thought about with its wider value in mind, rather than simply in terms of its upfront cost.

It is important to note that there is no “one size fits all” solution to modernising education; it will very much depend on individual courses or student needs. What might work for English classes may not be suitable for science or physical education.

While Rupinder Bansil, head teacher at the Inspire Partnership Multi-Academy Trust, notes that there is “no substitute for face-to-face learning”, she is enthusiastic about teachers’ abilities to “adapt their skills to deliver education virtually”. Interaction is key. Over the course of the pandemic, teaching staff have widened their toolkit to include live lessons, the use of different online platforms, feedback tools, and many other ways to interact with pupils digitally. Bansil notes there needs to be a “balance” between the real and virtual world, and does not think moving online is necessarily a long-term solution, but in the interim it represents an opportunity to ensure that learning continues, and guards against “large gaps in society”.

The pandemic requires us to think differently about how we live, work and learn. Julia Garvey, deputy director general at the British Education Suppliers Association, says the past year can be viewed as a “tipping point” for technological adoption. Circumstances have catalysed the uptake of new edtech, and that is no bad thing. Edtech has become “part of learning as usual”, she says, “rather than simply learning during lockdown”.

Reliable access to the internet is now widely viewed as a core requirement for students and teachers alike, and David Lakin, head of education at the Institution of Engineering and Technology, characterises the inconsistency in internet access across the country as living in or outside of “digital poverty”. If digital skills are to become essential in most lines of work post-pandemic, it stands to reason then that the government should invest in allowing as many people to learn them as possible. At Plum, we aim to help in achieving that aim. ●

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To boost apprenticeships, the government must address the biggest cost – wages, says **Kate Green**, Shadow Secretary of State for Education

An entire generation deserves better



The UK has experienced the worst recession of any major economy due to the coronavirus pandemic. The government's irresponsible response to Covid-19 is causing a weekly cost to the economy of £5.3bn and an average of 23,000 jobs to be lost every week.

Young people have borne the brunt, with workers aged 16 to 25 twice as likely to have lost their job during the pandemic compared to older workers. At the end of October, nearly 370,000 under-25s were on furlough, with research suggesting their jobs are likely to be the least stable if the government removes the furlough scheme.

Urgent action is needed if we are to avoid the next generation suffering long-term damage to their labour market prospects. Yet the government's strategy has been insufficient for the scale of the challenge facing these

young people. In the Kickstart Scheme and a cash incentive to take on apprentices, the government has been handing out sticking plasters not long-term solutions.

Even prior to the pandemic it was clear that the government's strategy for apprenticeships was failing. In the years since the government introduced the Apprenticeship Levy, the number of starts, particularly among young people, have plummeted and ministers have failed to get to grips with this problem.

Over the past decade of Conservative government, Labour analysis shows the number of apprenticeships has fallen by a quarter, with over 130,000 opportunities being lost. In 2018/19 alone, the number of young people starting an apprenticeship fell by a fifth, to just over 270,000. This is expected to fall further as businesses continue to feel the impacts of the pandemic.

Apprenticeship starts for those under 19 account for only 24 per cent of the total of all apprentice starts, and entry-level apprenticeships (Levels 2 and 3, equivalent to GCSEs and A-levels) account for just 31 per cent of apprenticeships undertaken in 2019-20. This presents a bleak outlook for young people looking to gain skills and enter the jobs market.

Ministers have recently tried to revive the fortunes of apprenticeships, offering incentives of up to £2,000 for employers to take on new, young apprentices. So far, however, only 8,000 claims have been made according to the government's own figures. With youth unemployment estimated at over one million, this policy will barely make a dent.

Even the announcement shortly before Christmas that the incentives will be extended for two months will not offer much hope for young people, or support



Young people should earn as they learn

HOLLIE ADAMS/GETTY IMAGES



for employers seeking to create long-term opportunities and fill skills gaps in their businesses.

The government has attempted to tweak the Apprenticeship Levy, in recognition of the fact that small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have been left without the funding they need, while many levy-paying companies struggle to spend their funds. However, the levy transfer system (making it easier for larger companies to pass their levy contributions to businesses in their supply chain) has led to fewer than 8,000 transfers being approved, with 34 per cent of transfers being between levy-paying companies rather than SMEs.

This tinkering around the edges has not reversed the downward trend in apprentice numbers. Nor, in the context of the pandemic recession, is a cash incentive enough to persuade employers to take on the wages of new apprentices

while also providing training and opportunities for new, young workers to learn skills.

It is time for a bold alternative that will bring together businesses and young people to boost our economy and help to combat skills shortages. Having spoken to businesses, sector bodies, independent training providers, and colleges, it is clear that any workable incentive policy must address the main cost of an apprenticeship: wages.

With the Apprenticeship Levy funds underspent last year and the government's mishandling of the pandemic creating further challenges for our economy and our young people, Labour is proposing a policy to create 85,000 new apprenticeships for 16 to 24-year-olds this year to provide them with the opportunity to get their "foot on the ladder" and learn a trade.

Our policy is for the government to pay 50 per cent of the wage contributions for the first year of an apprenticeship, starting off at 100 per cent for the first three months, and tapering off to 50 per cent in the next six months and 25 per cent for the remaining three months as the apprentice becomes more productive to their employer.

Whereas Kickstart and traineeships offer a quick fix but an uncertain future, apprenticeships are a tried-and-tested way of providing young people with a job, and the chance to learn a trade and earn a wage while they progress.

With unspent levy funds of £330m pocketed by the Treasury last July, which is regrettably becoming an annual occurrence, followed by further peaks in Covid-19 infections and further underspent funds, this policy puts that underspend to good use – and to the purpose the levy was intended for.

Without action, a generation of young people will be condemned to insecure, lowly paid and unfulfilling work, wasting talent and economic potential. This cannot be allowed to happen. Unprecedented challenges call for innovative solutions and Labour is ready to propose bold new policies to boost our economy and provide opportunity. ●

How jobs in the hospitality and retail sectors are changing.

By Rohan Banerjee

The Covid-19 skills shift

Fabio Crepaldi, a barista based in south London, has worked in the hospitality sector for just shy of a decade. He was an old hand at the job before the coronavirus hit, but the disease has changed expectations. Pre-pandemic customers generally wanted “speed of service” to get through a busy queue and back to the office, but now the job is “much more about attention to detail, so you have time to talk to the customers and then know them better.” Customers also need more reassurance about hygiene. With people worried, he says, it makes a difference for them to see “how you prepare the coffee, how you handle the things that they are going to eat.”

Covid-19 has hit retail and hospitality particularly hard. According to figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), there were 819,000 fewer workers on UK company payrolls last November compared to when the pandemic began. Hospitality accounted for the highest proportion of those losses – a third – with retail coming second. According to Fourth, a computer software firm specialising in restaurant and hotel operating systems, in 2020

the overall headcount in the hospitality sector dropped by 28 per cent compared with the previous year.

With many shops, pubs, restaurants and tourist attractions ordered to close their doors when Covid-19 lockdowns and tiered containment measures have been put in place, these businesses are either having to adapt with new products or services, many of them online, or plan for a future in which, even with the roll-out of multiple vaccines, they are unlikely to be as reliant on footfall or passing trade as they were in the past.

With a new status quo come new skills, and jobs in retail and hospitality are expected to change significantly. In June last year, the HR consultancy firm People 1st released a report predicting an increase in the demand for “critical skills

There will be fewer shop floor workers

in relation to the pandemic”, including greater health and safety awareness, better hygiene practices, and enhanced customer service skills, requiring staff to take the initiative and make firm decisions in uncertain situations.

The premise of “having someone come in and pour a few pints and have the craic with the locals” is simply “not enough anymore”, says Adam Noble, who co-manages The Jolly Brewers, a pub in rural Norfolk. “You need people who absolutely understand technology,” he says.

The Jolly Brewers, which had only been in business for 18 months before the pandemic started, has managed well through a series of lockdowns. “We’ve actually recruited, so our team is bigger than it was this time last year. . . We’ve now got a team of 20 people,” Noble says, as he explains how the pub has started operating a basic grocery store with a delivery service.

Last August, the government’s Eat Out To Help Out Scheme saw large numbers of people able to access food discounted by 50 per cent at participating pubs and restaurants three days a week for the whole month. But even during that period, Noble says, the shop and its deliveries still accounted for around 20 per cent of The Jolly Brewers’ business.

Richard Lim, the chief executive of market research firm Retail Economics, says the pandemic is bringing about a change in consumer habits, much of which is contextualised by a “seismic shift towards online”. In September last year, the ONS reported that the proportion of total sales in the UK that took place online had grown by more than 10 per cent.

Some of those “underlying trends” that existed pre-Covid-19, Lim predicts, will accelerate and more businesses will look at having “fewer stores and less space”. With more sales moving online “there will be fewer shop floor workers”. The remaining retail labour market will move to “higher-skilled and also higher-paid” roles.

“From an economist’s point of view, we see that. . . transference of skill sets



Many shops and restaurants are having to rethink their offerings due to Covid-19 restrictions

move more into other areas,” Lim says. “And that might be in... warehousing. That might be in logistics, for the kind of final-mile delivery for online orders.” He predicts a “rebalancing of that part of the labour market”. Retail has always been resilient, he says.

The role of the shop floor worker, and indeed the shop floor, is likely to change, too. “It won’t just be about the distribution of products from stores; it will be more about building the brand, merging online and digital together, and using the store as an effective customer-acquisition tool,” Lim explains. Shop floors would be like showrooms for customers, that are “super-charged with technology”, he says.

In terms of customer acquisition, Noble says social media will continue to play a huge part across both retail and hospitality. Instagram in particular, he notes, has been helpful in expanding The Jolly Brewers’ audience reach and showcasing its latest products. “I’ve never had that before last year,” he says, adding, “but now it’s a big thing because people see a picture and they say, ‘right, how do I order that meal to be delivered to my house right now?’” In the same

way pubs might previously have had separate bar and kitchen managers, Noble can “absolutely see a future where you would have a delivery manager or a takeaway manager”.

Kate Nicholls, chief executive officer of the sector’s trade body UK Hospitality, predicts that, in the short term, pre-pandemic jobs will return as hospitality venues re-open. The sector “is one of the quickest [sectors] to recover in terms of jobs”, she notes, adding that after the 2009 financial crisis “hospitality generated one in six net new jobs”. In the long term, however, she predicts roles will evolve with continuing investment “in tech solutions to ease the customer journey, [such as] online check-in, online ordering and payment, QR codes for

Roles will evolve with tech solutions

downloadable information – as well as back-of-house IT investment to ease labour scheduling and match demand with supply”. Roles will become “more focused on customer fulfilment and value-added service – what we saw in the summer [of 2020] was a consumer appetite for experiences.” The hospitality sector has “always invested heavily in training, particularly in health and safety, food hygiene and licensing compliance”, Nicholls adds, and she expects Covid-19 awareness to be an enduring skill requirement for anyone working in the sector.

Adaptation is the watchword for people-centric trades such as retail and hospitality. Nicholls is confident they will find a way to cope. “This is something that will be built into future management training to build resilience.” In the face of adversity, there is room for the growth of “new skills around digital marketing, communication, and the implementation of technological solutions”, she says.

Retail and hospitality have undoubtedly suffered during the pandemic, but with new skills they may be equipped to recover. ●

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