

## Apprenticeships – Provider Perspectives from the Heart of the South West

Executive Summary January 2012

This is a summary of findings from a research project, *Apprenticeships – Provider Perspectives from the Heart of the South West*. It was commissioned by the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership in order to understand better the challenges involved in growing apprenticeship provision in Devon and Somerset.

Delivering more apprenticeships is a pivotal element of the Coalition Government's skills strategy, *Skills for Sustainable Growth* (November 2010). Substantial additional funding has been made available for apprenticeships, and providers are under pressure to devote an increasing proportion of their 'employer-responsive' funding to this form of training. Simultaneously, there is a drive to 're-shape apprenticeships' towards Level 3; to increase the number of apprenticeship Frameworks and introduce Higher Apprenticeships. In 2010/11, 15,630 people across the Heart of the South West started an apprenticeship. This represented a rise of 9,320 or 148% over the six years from 2005/06 and a rise of 4,190 or 37% in the last year alone. This was due to a rapid growth in adult apprenticeships, particularly those delivered to people aged over 25. The number of 16 to 18 year old apprentices and proportion of apprenticeships delivered at Level 3 have remained stubbornly unchanged for the last five years.

### Key Findings

- Tensions exist between the Government's desire for provision to be 'employer-led' and its desire to ramp up the delivery of one form of provision – apprenticeships.
- The delivery of qualification units, under the Qualifications and Credit Framework, is attractive to employers, but may dampen demand for apprenticeships and full qualifications.
- Training providers are facing a period of considerable upheaval and competition in the training market place. The growth of national and international players is giving rise to concerns about quality and resources leaving the region.
- The loss of Skills Funding Agency staff and capability suggests that the level of strategic oversight is likely to diminish further, unless other bodies such as Employment and Skills Boards or the LEP take on such a role.
- Providers support a clear, high-quality pathway to enable young people to access apprenticeships. They are concerned that Access to Apprenticeship is inflexible and not 'employer-led'.
- Providers are working hard to drive up the number of young people (16-18) in fully-funded apprenticeships. However, in the current economic climate growth is difficult to achieve.
- Volumes of Adult Apprenticeships are rising, mainly among people aged 25 and over, as a result of employers converting existing employees over to apprenticeships. Concerns exist that

this practice, in pursuit of targets, may result in 'brand-stretch', to the detriment of apprenticeships in the longer term.

- Providers appreciate the need for robust and consistent apprenticeship standards, but also point out that the broadening content of apprenticeships under the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE) acts as a brake on expansion.
- The lack of a clear, consistent employer contribution towards the cost of apprenticeships is a concern for many providers.
- Reductions in *per capita* funding for many apprenticeships is cited as a constraint on growth, with some providers calling for 'full funding' for all apprenticeships up to age 21.
- Providers see opportunities for apprenticeship expansion linked to the major economic developments within the Heart of the South West.
- Providers see a clear need to raise the profile and status of apprenticeships in the eyes of young people and their parents. They identify cuts to Connexions, Careers South West and NAS as making this more difficult to achieve.
- Providers have concerns about schools, particularly Academies, expanding their vocational provision in order to retain pupils. They suggest that such provision could be of poor quality.

### **Recommendations from providers**

HotSW LEP should:

- clarify its intentions and set out the process and structures through which it will communicate with providers.
- prioritise the championing of apprenticeships, particularly with SMEs and employers who have not delivered them before.
- support networks of employers and young people acting as apprenticeship ambassadors and use its influence to ensure that they are able to talk to young people in schools.
- act as a voice for the Heart of the South West on skills issues and establish clear communication structures to ensure that provider concerns are heard and raised, and that feedback is provided.
- work with the ESBs and local authorities to ensure that incentives and activities to promote apprenticeships are co-ordinated across the HotSW area.
- use its influence to ensure that local authorities use apprenticeships as a vehicle for recruiting and up-skilling their own staff and that of their contractors.
- Make a clear statement about its priority sectors and ensure, for the present, that efforts to drive up apprenticeship numbers in specific sectors or geographical areas are based on promotional activity and incentives.
- collate data and examples of high-quality apprenticeship programmes in the area for use as part of a package to attract inward investors.
- support improvements in local and sector focused labour market intelligence in the area.