



**Blueprint or blind spot:**

How will Foundation  
Apprenticeships play out for  
the learner and the employer?

# Foreword

**The UK is facing a well-documented skills crisis. In 2024, 62% of organisations reported skills shortages (British Chambers of Commerce), while ONS data showed youth unemployment at its highest in over a decade.**

To address this, the government has introduced several reforms, including replacing the Apprenticeship Levy with a Growth and Skills Levy, offering employers more flexibility to invest in training and removing the Functional Skills requirement.

The latest initiative is the launch of Foundation Apprenticeships, due to begin in August 2025. Targeted at 16- 21-year-olds, care leavers, and learners with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), these programmes aim to build employability and offer short, sector-focused introductory training. They are intended to support priority industries, including construction, technology, care, retail, and hospitality, and align with the UK's Industrial Strategy to build a future-ready workforce, which has identified eight key sectors for growth: advanced manufacturing, clean energy industries, creative industries, defence, digital and technology, life sciences, financial services and professional and business services.

In June 2025, Lifetime Group brought together employers, partners and membership bodies to discuss whether Foundation Apprenticeships are fit for purpose across a handful of its core sectors, including Health and Social Care, Retail, and Hospitality. While the model shows promise, key concerns remain around duration, funding, and clarity over how they differ from existing Level 2 routes.

At a time of large-scale reform and critical skills need, it is more important than ever that new training routes deliver on their promise. This whitepaper explores the challenges and advantages of Foundation Apprenticeships as they stand and sets out recommendations to ensure the policies surrounding them and their future roll out is clear, credible, and delivers real value for learners and employers.

“It’s vital to ensure there’s a baseline of skill development while ensuring clear progression. Will it be more challenging to employ a young person for an employer in terms of resource, and will it be feasible for them to complete the Foundation Apprenticeships and then go on to the Level 2?”

– HC One







## What are Foundation Apprenticeships?

In August 2025, the first wave of Foundation Apprenticeships will be introduced in health and social care, software and data, hardware, network and infrastructure, engineering and manufacturing, finishing trades and building service engineering. Developed in response to acute skills shortages and high youth unemployment, these apprenticeships aim to provide a more accessible route into work-based learning for young people aged 16-21.

Delivered over eight months (35 weeks), the programmes include 187 hours of off-the-job training, ongoing learning checkpoints, and formative assessments every 12 weeks. Uniquely, Foundation Apprenticeships place an enhanced focus on Employability and Skills Behaviours - helping learners understand not just how to do a job, but how to function and grow in the workplace.

While this new model offers clear potential to open up opportunities and reduce barriers to employment, questions remain. How well will the shorter duration serve both learner and employer needs? Is the distinction from existing Level 2 pathways clear enough? And how can the policy better align with business requirements?

“It may be that learners progress more quickly after eight months as they’ll be more business-savvy.”

– Partou



“How much of the Foundation Apprenticeship will mitigate Level 2? I would consider the criteria of the Foundation Apprenticeship much more suitable for a school environment, not the workplace.”

– Hill Group

# The argument in favour

**Lifetime Groups's roundtable discussions highlighted that many young people are not fully prepared for work, a view supported by CIPD's 2024 report, which found UK employers believe youth lack essential job-ready skills.**

Skills England's engagement with employers late last year revealed that young people need more support with resilience and confidence, challenges worsened by COVID-19's impact on fundamental skills. Foundation Apprenticeships are designed as a stepping stone to address these gaps, offering a broad introduction to sectors, while helping young people explore career options before choosing their learning paths.

Employers see value in Foundation Apprenticeships not only for developing future talent but also for the incentive payments available (up to £2,000), helping to cover supervision time, training and resource.

It was also identified that for sectors where there is no mandatory Level 2, such as construction, software and data, the Foundation Apprenticeship provides a structured, nationally recognised way for young people to

explore these fields and develop a baseline of skills to bridge the gap between education and work.

Employers discussed that Foundation Apprenticeships could also be a powerful tool for social mobility, supporting young people who aren't yet ready for a Level 2 to enter the workforce. Because they don't require prior qualifications or work experience, this is of particular benefit to disadvantaged young people, with research finding that this group often lack access to meaningful work experience, creating barriers to their career prospects and growth.

To make Foundation Apprenticeships work, participants discussed the need for clear advice and guidance for employers, schools, and parents about progression routes after the course, ensuring young people and stakeholders understand their purpose. The concept of "right learner, right programme" should be considered, with Foundation Apprenticeships reaching learners at a formative stage. Courses must be carefully aligned and matched to an individual's strengths and ambitions. Employers discussed the importance of testing young people's suitability prior to course, for example through tester days.

"Foundation Apprenticeships could be massive for care services as there is a much-needed skills gap that's not being filled. They could be instrumental in increasing retention."

– Bupa



# Practical considerations and challenges

## Resource

If employers are having to buddy or mentor colleagues, does that pose an issue? This demand on resources can present a key challenge, especially for SMEs with limited people on the ground. This also comes at a time when employers are facing economic headwinds with increases to national insurance and minimum wage. Having to pay a full salary to a person not yet fully productive could pose a challenge to some employers. Understanding how businesses can manage these commitments will be essential.

## Considerations around perception and regulation

Many employer partners noted that having a young person working with them who isn't fully trained in terms of competencies could be problematic. For example, how would customers, clients and service users perceive being served or cared for by a young person aged 16-18? In care, young people must not be left alone unsupervised with vulnerable individuals if they are not perceived to be mature enough and doing so could put them at risk. The required competencies are usually gained within the Level 2, where regulatory standards are met with the care certificate. In hospitality, Level 2 includes formal certifications around Food Safety, which are essential in many roles.

## Duration and assessment

The Foundation Apprenticeship will be 8 months long, but many employers felt it doesn't clearly serve as a stepping stone to test if an employee fits the sector. In addition, there is a lack of clarity around who is responsible for conducting assessments, with the onus being on each employer to put together their own criteria for employability behaviours. While traditional assessments focus predominantly on skills, Foundation Apprenticeships also emphasise work readiness and behaviour, which can be harder to measure. It was also discussed that testing suitability would be vital as employers would need to trust the young person would be committed to the role, given the length of the course.

## Mapping, reputation and funding

How Foundation Apprenticeships map to Level 2 standards remains a critical consideration. Employers need clarity on how these apprenticeships complement Level 2 qualifications. Legally, Foundation Apprenticeships must be eight months long, however it was questioned whether this would be of benefit to the employer if the length of their tenure is so short. With full apprenticeships now holding an eight month minimum, this further blurs the lines between the two courses.

# The view from the care sector

**Because Foundation Apprenticeships do not include the care certificate, which is crucial to complete for meeting compliance and standards, some employers questioned why they wouldn't just place new recruits directly onto a Level 2 Apprenticeship instead.**

Including the certificate as a bolt on was raised as an option, but there was concern this would undermine the purpose of the course in developing basic work readiness. Partners suggested a shorter Foundation Apprenticeship to place less strain on employers and to enable young people to progress onto a Level 2 more quickly.

The perception gap is also important. Employers expressed concerns that young people may not be ready to carry out tasks, such as personal hygiene. Another area of concern was dementia care, an extremely complex and challenging setting. Would young people be equipped emotionally to deal with this?

"It feels like we already have such a comprehensive induction, that the Foundation Apprenticeship simply isn't needed. This gap doesn't exist for us – within the first 12 weeks, the learner will be fully inducted and have achieved their care certificate."

– Priory



## Mentors matter

Roundtable attendees emphasised that young people also need to understand where they 'fit' in an organisation. Could the message of 'Foundation' potentially send an undermining message? This is especially important in a sector where retention is an ongoing issue. A report by the King's Fund found the care sector can be a challenging place for young people, and support in feeling like an equal and important member of the team is essential. Participants spoke about the importance of mentorship and the role of the learning coach in providing clear points of contact. This is especially important when considering the requirements for the portfolio and MCQ assessment and ensuring young people understand how to meet these.

Other partners said Foundation Apprenticeships could help to address retention through providing a structured and supported entry point and offering broad exposure to the range of career pathways available. Embedding this awareness early could support long-term workforce development, but only if accompanied by clear progression and sufficient resource. It was raised that this could be a challenge for SMEs, who are time poor and have limited funding for learner support.





# The view from hospitality and retail

## Retail

It was almost unanimous across the retail sector that the need for Foundation Apprenticeships is negated by the fact that many young people ‘fall’ into the sector. Many begin as part time staff, coming in to cover sales or work alongside studying. This means most would move straight onto a Level 2.

One of the solutions discussed was the potential for bite-sized modules that allow learners to build up credits over time, even if they don’t start with the full Foundation Apprenticeship. This would serve to align with the casual nature of many first retail jobs.

However, others discussed that for some young people they might need that extra additional initial support, potentially if a young person has special education needs or comes from a challenging background and needs further guidance when it comes to soft skills and resilience.

With one employer saying “The majority of our colleagues are part time or have been in retail quite a while and have got the experience already. They would then go straight onto the Level 2... eight months is too long. We need them up and running in eight weeks.”

“If a ‘Retail Foundation Apprenticeship’ was a broad sectoral introduction this would be something that we would be really interested in as an organisation. I see FA’s as an opportunity to embed young people into a business and support them with work ready skills. This can be a huge transition!”

– ASDA





## Hospitality

In a fast-paced sector, characterised by long hours and high service demand, many participants flagged that this could place additional strain on managers who require team members to contribute quickly. As a result, the broad sentiment was that Level 2 is preferable as it gets young people on board faster, without the need for an additional stepping stone.

While the focus on employability skills and behaviours was deemed positive in terms of developing vital communication, teamwork and customer service skills, some employers said they have a 90-day induction so an eight-month course couldn't be justified.

Other partners however highlighted how there is very little support for young people when they leave school. This is echoed in the **Pearson School Report 2025** which found that at least 1.9 million young people are not ready for their next stage of learning. Top factors holding students in college back include soft skills such as social maturity (26%) and adaptability (26%). Only 4% of teachers said the education system helps teachers meet their students' needs. All of this means young people will potentially need additional support when they enter a workplace. Participants said Foundation Apprenticeships could support with this transition.

“The expectation is that young people come straight into a business and do the do... this can put a lot of strain onto the employer. A Foundation Apprenticeship could support in building a young person's soft skills and work readiness.”

– Wagamama







## A word from AELP

**“AELP welcomes the positive intent behind Foundation Apprenticeships, particularly the inclusive approach to English and Maths, which allows learners to build skills without the pressure of immediate pass requirements.**

**“This will help widen access for young people. However, feedback from our Health & Social Care Sector Forum highlights several concerns: the duration feels overly long and academic for its purpose; there is insufficient distinction from Level 2 apprenticeships, raising questions about meaningful progression; and the lower funding band, salary expectations, and age restrictions may deter employer engagement. A more streamlined, impactful model could deliver stronger results for both learners and providers.”**

## What next?

**Despite the concerns, there is no doubt that the intentions behind the introduction of Foundation Apprenticeships are well intended, both for learners and employers. But the extent to which they can fulfil their potential faces challenges from across the sectors.**

It's clear that Foundation Apprenticeships could work in some sectors, such as software and data, where there is not an existing established Level 2, but for sectors such as hospitality, retail and care, which need staff to start contributing quickly, and there is already an established course, its purpose was called into question.

As an alternative to Foundation Apprenticeships, could we extend Level 2 to include employability behaviours if this is what is deemed most valuable?

“The sentiment almost unanimously across the sectors is where does it fit? Whilst there's an intent to get more young people into work, there isn't a natural route into a Level 2. Why would you recruit a young person for eight months and then put them onto a Level 2, without reducing the duration of the Level 2?”

– Carl Cornish, Lifetime



Could this be a shorter course at the start of a Level 2 for example? Or, should teaching employability behaviours happen much earlier in a young person's life, in a school environment? Arguably, why should employers invest and pay if the primary focus is employability?

Despite all the challenges, there could be a place for Foundation Apprenticeships to support specific groups of individuals.



“If you think of it like a ladder, some of those individuals might need an additional run to get to undo that disadvantage.”

– Whitbread



# Conclusion

It's clear there is a long way to go before this policy meets its objectives; but there is strong appetite from employers and the sector to work together to get it right.

While some welcomed the opportunity to engage learners early and provide people with a solid foundation to grow in their business, others raised critical concerns around the programme's clarity, duration, and alignment with existing apprenticeship pathways.

To address some of these challenges, and to help unlock the full value of Foundation Apprenticeships, Lifetime Group and our partners suggest:

## 1. Simplify programme length and delivery expectations

As we heard from employer partners, an eight-month course is too long for many businesses. Questions were raised about what will be left for learners to progress onto if they already include elements from Level 2. Many stakeholders felt that Foundation Apprenticeships would be more effective if they started at Level 1, as this would better match learners' readiness and reduce overlap with Level 2 programmes. Resource was also a concern. Courses should therefore be designed with these practical considerations in mind.

## 2. Clarify the assessment approach

It's important clear, consistent guidance is provided on how Foundation Apprenticeships will be assessed, particularly considering ongoing reform to the entire regulatory framework for apprenticeship assessment. This includes expectations around portfolio evidence, competence and the role of employers. We are working closely with our employer partners to feedback concerns and challenges in relation to the upcoming assessments changes to ensure there is a clear approach going forward.

## 3. Provide clearer guidance on funding – including the Apprenticeship Levy

Employers need clarity around funding pathways, and whether or how levy funds can support development of young people post Foundation Apprenticeship. Greater transparency around whether levy funds can be used for shorter courses such as bootcamps will also be important, as these could be more cost-effective for smaller employers.



## Charlotte Bosworth, CEO of Lifetime Group, said:



“For Foundation Apprenticeships to truly deliver on their promise, it’s important that clearer frameworks are introduced to ensure they are not simply a Level 2 substitute and are suitable for both employers’ and learners’ needs.

Ultimately, we need a fully joined-up skills programme which is aligned to skills shortages, business need, and national priorities. Foundation Apprenticeships can deliver on these goals, but we must have the time to work through the complexities and ultimately ensure a well-managed transition which puts learner experience and quality at the forefront.

Thank you to all our partners for contributing and collaborating with us as we shape Foundation Apprenticeships. We welcome further input so please do reach out to discuss these issues further.”

*Charlotte  
Bosworth*