

A review of the junior apprenticeship programme in Wales

In May 2024, we published our thematic report on the junior apprenticeship programme in Wales. The report was written in response to a request from the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in Estyn's annual remit letter 2023 to 2024 as updated in October 2023.

Our report draws on findings from in person visits to all five further education colleges delivering junior apprenticeship programmes at that time. We held focus group learner workshops with groups of Year 10, Year 11 and former junior apprenticeship learners and spoke with senior leaders and staff of the colleges, schools and local authorities involved. We conducted learning walks at the colleges to visit junior apprenticeship classes and the facilities they use. We also looked at a range of information provided by the colleges in relation to their junior apprenticeship programmes.

Our recommendations

Schools should:

1. Provide comprehensive and timely impartial advice and guidance to all pupils and their parents or carers about all 14-16 curriculum options, including junior apprenticeships where these are available
2. Work collaboratively with colleges and local authorities to evaluate opportunities for developing or extending junior apprenticeship programmes in order to broaden their curriculum offer in the best interests of learners

Further education colleges should:

1. Work closely with schools to make sure that responsibilities for safeguarding arrangements are clear and that individual risk assessments are undertaken for all junior apprenticeship learners
2. Share and agree timetable arrangements with partner schools and local authorities for all junior apprenticeship learners and keep them updated of any changes affecting individual learners, such as pastoral plan arrangements

Local authorities should:

1. Clarify and communicate future funding arrangements for junior apprenticeships with schools and colleges
2. Work collaboratively with all their local schools and colleges to evaluate the potential for introducing or extending junior apprenticeship provision to enhance suitable learning opportunities for Year 10 and 11 pupils struggling to engage with existing mainstream provision in schools

The Welsh Government should:

1. In light of the establishment of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER),

clarify and publish details of ongoing responsibility and continuing arrangements for junior apprenticeships and their funding

2. Review specific curriculum requirements for junior apprenticeship programmes as set out in the Welsh Government programmes directory, particularly in relation to English, mathematics and numeracy qualifications to ensure qualification aims match needs and abilities of individual learners and reflect the new national 14-16 qualifications in place from September 2027

What did our thematic say?

The colleges, schools and local authorities involved have developed a range of effective programmes aligned to junior apprenticeship guidelines established by the Welsh Government to allow participating Year 10 and 11 learners to attend college on a full-time basis. Arrangements are well established in five of the twelve colleges in Wales following an initial roll out of the programme in 2017. However, learners in many areas of Wales do not have similar opportunities because there are no collaborative local arrangements in place within their areas to support the delivery of junior apprenticeship programmes.

We have identified a number of key factors that underpin the establishment of effective junior apprenticeship programmes. These include:

- close collaboration along with open and effective communications between colleges, schools and local authorities
- a range of alternative vocational pathways for learners
- flexibility to accommodate local contexts
- appropriate resourcing of the programmes using a combination of funds accessed through local authority, school and further education funding mechanisms

Schools and local authorities usually work closely with colleges to target available junior apprenticeship places mainly at Year 10 and 11 learners who are struggling to engage with a mainstream school-based curriculum and are particularly interested in work-related vocational options. However, we found the availability of information within schools about junior apprenticeship opportunities is not consistent enough with a few learners and parents/carers only becoming aware of the programme via friends or family rather than directly from their schools.

Delivery and timetable arrangements differ between colleges and for different vocational pathways. Although guidelines state that programmes should be similar to full-time school teaching hours, in practice a minority of programmes and learners were timetabled for fewer hours than in school. Individual pastoral support plans that may allow this were not always reviewed effectively enough to support a return to full-time education and attendance.

Most learners we observed were taught in dedicated junior apprenticeship classes in the colleges' vocational facilities such as workshops or salons, where classes for older learners also take place. In the very few cases where learners take part in post-16 programmes, we found that arrangements for individual safeguarding risk assessments were not always clear or robust enough.

Most learners enjoyed the strong focus on vocational subjects and practical activities. Their improved engagement in learning was reflected in very high success rates for vocational qualifications. However, most learners still struggled to achieve GCSE English, mathematics or numeracy at grade D

or above.

We identified a range of positive impacts of the junior apprenticeship programme including:

- improved levels of engagement and attendance
- very high success rates in vocational qualifications offered
- strong positive learner feedback
- strong progression rates into further education and training

The transformation in many learners' attitudes to learning from relative disengagement to making enthusiastic and ambitious choices to commit and continue to post-compulsory learning was the most striking overall impact of the junior apprenticeship programme.