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| **APPRENTICESHIPS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT** |  |  |

**Guidance for UNISON’s local government branches**

**What is an apprenticeship?**

Apprenticeships provide the chance to 'earn and learn' in a wide range of jobs, giving apprentices the chance to develop skills, experience and qualifications.

They take between one and four years to complete, depending on the level of apprenticeship and the industry or sector. With youth unemployment at a critical level, apprenticeships offer one way of improving job opportunities for young people.

The governments of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales all support apprenticeship schemes and there are some minor variations between them, but the basic premise remains the same.

Apprentices must be paid and, thanks to trade union pressure, there is now an apprentice rate established under the national minimum wage. However, that rate is very low - just £2.68 an hour.

**Background**

Government legislation since the late 1990s has led to a resurgence in apprenticeships in recent years.

Under the Conservative-led Government, the number of apprentices overall has risen, though according to a survey by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, in England only 14% of workplaces either employ apprentices or offer apprenticeships.

Perhaps even more worryingly, the number of apprentices for young people has begun to fall. A report by the Work Foundation in 2013 found that too few apprenticeship opportunities are being taken up by young people. In 2011, 71% of apprenticeship starters were over 25.

In 2013, the Westminster Government announced a series of reforms to apprenticeships:

* The introduction of new employer-designed standards and assessment procedures
* Strengthened English and maths requirements
* A minimum period of 12 months for all apprenticeships.

The new standards and assessment procedures will be designed over 2013/14 and 2014/15 by companies and professional bodies acting as ‘trailblazers’ for their sector. From 2017/18 all new apprenticeship starts should be based on the new standards.

As of January 2014, UNISON had more than 1000 apprentices in membership, of whom 800 worked in local government.

**UNISON position**

UNISON takes a positive view of apprenticeships as a way of earning and learning and getting into permanent paid employment. But to get our support, we require schemes to meet some important standards.

Schemes should:

* Be properly negotiated
* Pay apprentices at the rate for the job – and at least a Living Wage
* Provide high quality training
* Not use apprentices as cheap labour or as substitutes for existing jobs.

In the current economic climate, many employers are coming under pressure to find ways of cutting costs, and unscrupulous employers may be looking to exploit apprentices.

UNISON branches are in an excellent position to monitor schemes in the workplace and to help apprentices get organised to raise their voices about their treatment in the workplace.

**Problems and key issues**

Pay

Apprentices must be paid and, thanks to trade union pressure, there is now an apprentice rate established under the national minimum wage. However, that rate is very low - just £2.68 (it will rise to £2.73 on 1 October 2014).

UNISON believes that decent pay is intrinsic to better apprenticeship completion rates. For example, when the National Minimum Wage (NMW) apprentice rate was introduced in 2010, there was an increase in apprenticeship starts and completions.  Also, there is no evidence that the apprentice NMW rate has had any negative effect on employment. Given the Government’s expansion of apprenticeships we believe the balance of concern needs to be around enforcement and how higher levels of pay can be achieved in order to ensure the expansion of apprenticeships is effective and sustainable.

The 2012 Apprenticeships Pay Survey carried out by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) found that the median rate of gross hourly pay received by apprentices was £6.09 in England, £6.29 in Wales, and £6.15 in Northern Ireland (the survey did not cover Scotland).

There is a strong relationship between apprentices’ pay and their age, with younger apprentices receiving lower pay. For example, in England in 2012, median gross hourly pay was £3.00 for under 19-year-olds, £5.37 for 19 to 24-year-olds, and £7.15 for those aged 25 or more. These figures are all well below the current Living Wage rates (the pay levels workers need to secure a reasonable standard of living) of £7.65 outside London and £8.80 in London. It is clear that most apprentices are not paid a wage sufficient to give them a decent standard of living.

There is also evidence that some employers are not even complying with the apprentice NMW rate. The 2012 apprenticeships survey shows that the level of non-compliance was a massive 27%.

Equalities

Research by unionlearn and the National Apprenticeship Service shows that while there has been a large rise in the number of women taking apprenticeships over the last ten years, many end up working in female-dominated sectors, such as early-years childcare and hairdressing, where wages tend to be lower and where there is less chance of career progression. UNISON is very concerned that young women are often only able to get into care and administration related apprenticeships, and are not given equal access to craft and other traditionally male-dominated apprenticeships. We must make sure that young women are given access to the full range of apprenticeships, and encouraged to apply for apprenticeships in areas they might not have thought of applying for in the past.

The unionlearn / National Apprenticeship Service study also raises concerns about the low number of Black people taking apprenticeships, especially in higher-paid sectors such as engineering and construction.

Substitution

The economic downturn has led to some apprentices being used to plug gaps left by redundant workers. In other words, employers make people redundant, and then replace them with apprentices who are paid a fraction of the price, and who in effect end up doing a ‘regular job’, without the proper training that apprenticeships are supposed to include. This is not how apprentices are supposed to be used, and it is clearly unfair on the workers who are made redundant.

Training

Some UNISON branches have reported that the training provided to apprentices is poor quality, and often used as a substitute for other training that the employer should carry out anyway.

According to the BIS survey, nearly half of the apprentices in England (47%) said they received off-the job training and over two thirds (70%) received training on-the-job. In both Wales and Northern Ireland, more apprentices reported receiving off-the-job training (50% in Wales and 59% in Northern Ireland), but fewer reported receiving on-the-job training (62% in both Wales and Northern Ireland). The questions on training were specific and fully described, so the numbers of respondents not receiving any training are very worrying.

The amount of time spent on training is also a cause for concern. In England in 2012, apprentices received an average of 4.9 hours a week off-the-job training and 11.5 hours on-the-job training. Both figures were lower than in the previous year. The figures were very similar in Wales. In Northern Ireland, apprentices received an average of 6.2 hours off-the-job training each week, and 13.6 hours on-the-job-training.

Linked to this is the area of assessment procedures. In the publication Next Steps from the Richard Review, the Government had stated that “a government body or regulator should approve and oversee the assessment process as a whole, to ensure standards are maintained over time.” However, this sensible suggestion is not mentioned in the Government’s more recent Implementation Plan.

In addition, the Government’s plans focus very much on assessing apprentices at the end of the apprenticeship. For some sectors, as the Association of Employment and Learning Providers have argued, this “may not be the most effective methodology for rigorous and motivational testing”.

The 2013 report by the Work Foundation raised concerns that too many apprenticeships in the UK are currently at level two (GCSE equivalent) rather than the European norm of level three (A level equivalent).

Future employment

UNISON is also concerned that too many apprenticeships don’t offer guaranteed employment at the end, or even a reasonable prospect of future employment. If apprenticeships are to make a contribution to increasing vocational skills and in turn to the economy, then apprentices’ skills need to be used in full once they have finished their schemes.

Day to day workplace concerns

Of course, many of the workplace concerns that apprentices face will be the same as any other worker. However, there are some particular issues which apprentices may be more likely to encounter:

* Isolation from other apprentices. All workers benefit from associating with people doing similar thing. But if apprentices are spread thinly throughout a large organisation like a local authority, the may find themselves isolated.
* Discrimination and disrespect. Many apprentices are young workers, and they may find themselves victims of age discrimination – or disrespect as others may not value the work they’re doing as they learn on the job.

**Negotiating around apprenticeships**

Of course, your specific priorities when negotiating on behalf of apprentices will vary according to circumstances. But in general, UNISON branches should argue for:

* Fair pay
* Proper roles for apprentices which don’t displace other employees
* High quality appropriate training
* Guarantee of future employment
* The same equalities rights as all other workers.

All apprentices are entitled to the following rights and treatments – make sure these are all in place in your employer:

* A written contract of employment
* A full induction in the workplace
* A negotiated training plan or contract between the apprentice, the employer, and the training provider
* At least the apprenticeship minimum wage of £2.68 (£2.73 from 1 October 2014)
* A safe working environment and protection from discrimination or bullying
* Release from work to attend formal training
* Provision of an appropriate range of work experiences to enable the apprentice to complete their qualifications
* Access to support, guidance and mentoring
* Quality training
* Regular assessments and review of progress
* Sufficient time away from work station or desk to study in work time.

For more detailed advice on how to negotiate on behalf of apprentices, see UNISON’s guidance: [www.unison.org.uk/documents/3108](http://www.unison.org.uk/documents/3108)

There is also a model agreement available: [www.unison.org.uk/documents/1716](http://www.unison.org.uk/documents/1716)

If your employer is still in the process of setting up an apprenticeship scheme, work with them on it – this is a key way to make sure apprentices are paid and treated fairly from the outset. Press on them the importance of giving equal access for all applicants to all apprenticeships, and ensure that they monitor applications and admissions to apprenticeship schemes by gender, race, and the other equality strands.

And even after apprenticeship schemes are set up, you can always argue for improved educational content of apprenticeships. In particular, you could suggest that your employer expands both advanced and higher level apprenticeships. The current statutory minimum of guided learning per year is 280 hours – but you could argue for a longer apprenticeship, to increase the depth of learning. This would bring it more in line with international standards.

You could also work with local further education colleges to ensure high quality training is delivered to national standards.

If you’re based in a school or have links to schools, you could argue for improving apprenticeship pathways as a route into skilled work for young people. For this to happen, high quality careers advice, provided by fully accredited careers professionals, is essential. Schools now have primary responsibility for providing careers advice, so why not talk to whoever is responsible for providing careers advice in your school about promoting apprenticeships?

**Recruiting and organising**

Many apprentices are young workers, and so they form a key part of the future of our trade union. If the union is to grow in membership and strength, we must recruit apprentices and organise them, getting them involved in UNISON.

Many young people have very little knowledge about trade unions. So make sure you talk to them in inductions and in their workplaces about what we do and why they should join.

UNISON’s own record of providing and arranging workplace learning will likely be very attractive to apprentices, so make sure you make them aware of who their local Union Learning Representative is.

And of course, many of the issues highlighted above, as well as being important issues for apprentices, are core issues for UNISON – like pay, protecting jobs, and fighting discrimination at work.

We must emphasise that if apprentices feel isolated, UNISON offers them the opportunity to come together, discuss their issues, and work together to try to resolve them.

You may find the following recruitment tools useful:

* Essential cover for apprentices – recruitment leaflet <https://www.unison.org.uk/upload/sharepoint/On%20line%20Catalogue/22011.pdf>
* How to recruit apprentices – a guide for members <https://www.unison.org.uk/upload/sharepoint/On%20line%20Catalogue/21906.pdf>

For more information and the latest news, please visit UNISON’s apprenticeships pages for young members:

<http://www.unison.org.uk/about/our-organisation/member-groups/young-members/key-issues/apprenticeships/home/>