

SOCIAL MOBILITY AND APPRENTICESHIPS

A PRACTICAL RESOURCE FOR CHANGE RESOURCE DOCUMENT

Led by the University of Sussex and developed in partnership
with the Sussex Council of Training Providers



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FOREWORD

University of Sussex
Sasha Roseneil
Vice Chancellor, University of Sussex

Higher education has the power to transform lives - but pathways to progression can often be uneven and obstructed. We held three thought-provoking events to explore degree apprenticeships and social mobility from diverse perspectives - including careers professionals, providers and employers, all of whom play crucial roles in widening participation.

This series of events brought together colleagues and partners from across the region, united by a shared commitment to increasing opportunity, access and success in degree apprenticeships. What emerged was a collective ambition grounded in practical expertise and open, reflective dialogue.

This resource brings together insights, useful information and shared discussions from the events, as well as the commitments delegates made towards action and change within their own practice. It weaves together common themes and recommendations, serving both as a record of shared learning and a springboard for continued progress.

The challenges of equal opportunity and access are longstanding and far too complex for any one organisation to solve alone. That is why I am proud that the University of Sussex has supported this work in collaboration with our university partners and regional stakeholders.

As a sector, our responsibility is clear:
to ensure higher education is not only open to all, but actively inclusive.

INTRODUCTION

Apprenticeships have the power to open doors, raise aspirations and support social mobility

But barriers around awareness, support and employer engagement still hold too many people back.

This resource captures the learning from the **Social Mobility and Apprenticeships event series** held in July 2025. The event series was funded by the Office for Students, led by the University of Sussex in partnership with the Universities of Brighton and Chichester, and coordinated by SCTP. Each of the three chapters reflects one of the events in the series: **Careers Support, Raising Awareness and Reaching Potential** (for careers professionals), **Retention, Achievement and Supporting Learners to Succeed** (for training providers and support organisations), and **Engaging Employers in the Conversation** (for employers and business stakeholders). Each chapter brings together insights from keynote speakers, panel discussions, workshops and pledges.

It is designed to be a **practical toolkit**. You can read it as a whole, or dip into individual chapters depending on your role and focus, using the [Contents](#) page to navigate.

For an overview of the background, key findings and contributors, please see the **Executive Summary** which sits alongside this document.



We have also developed a separate **Comprehensive Recommendations** report that brings together the collective insights from across all three events in the Social Mobility and Apprenticeships event series.

All resources are available on the SCTP Social Mobility and Apprenticeships Resource webpage: www.sctp.org.uk/social-mobility-and-apprenticeships-resource

CHAPTER 1

CAREERS SUPPORT, RAISING

AWARENESS AND REACHING POTENTIAL

Audience: Careers professionals and CEIAG stakeholders

Event Summary

The first event in the series brought together careers professionals and Careers Education Information Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) stakeholders to explore how effective careers education and guidance can support social mobility through apprenticeships.

Attendees heard research-led presentations from Anna Morrison CBE and Andrew Hall, **who highlighted the importance of engaging underrepresented groups and promoting clear pathways from Level 2 to Level 6.**

The expert panel and workshop discussions focused on the **barriers faced by potential apprentices, the role of careers professionals and training providers, and strategies to improve awareness and progression.**

The event reinforced **the need for coordinated efforts across the education and careers ecosystem** to raise aspirations and widen participation in apprenticeships.



PRESENTATIONS

Engaging Underrepresented Groups – Anna Morrison CBE, Director, Amazing Apprenticeships

Anna Morrison set the tone for the event with an insightful and data-rich presentation on the barriers faced by underrepresented groups in accessing apprenticeships. Drawing on a decade of experience through her work with [Amazing Apprenticeships](#), she highlighted how apprenticeships have evolved, and the impact of policy reform. She also spoke about the practical steps needed to support greater participation from disadvantaged learners.

Insights from her presentation included:

- Apprenticeship **starts for 16-18-year-olds have declined by 40%** over the past decade.
- Only **6% of young people aged 16-18 begin apprenticeships at higher or degree level**, despite growing demand.
- **Underrepresentation persists** across disadvantaged and minority groups.
- **Levy-driven provision favours existing staff** over young entrants.
- **Costs, transport and benefits issues hinder access** for disadvantaged learners.



Understanding why...

The system	The economy	The wider education system
Framework to standards	Economic uncertainty	More post-16 and post-18 options available
Levy driving employers to maximise spending	National Insurance Contributions/ National Minimum Wage/Employer Representative Bodies	The focus on higher / degree level apprenticeships
Lack of SME incentives	Benefits and welfare	Progression pathways vs cliff-edges
The amount of policy change	Growing NEET population	Resource and capacity
Entry requirements & recruitment processes	Geographical spread of opportunity	Sharing and supporting additional needs

Figure 1

Anna Morrison's presentation – examples of why apprenticeship may have declined in recent years

Anna also emphasised the importance of building confidence among young people and parents. She highlighted the need for clear information, practical application support, understanding the apprenticeships experience, and early help for additional needs.

Her message to attendees was clear: **careers professionals, educators and employers all have a critical role to play** in making apprenticeships more accessible, better understood, and genuinely aspirational for the widest possible range of learners.

Anna's presentation recording and slides can be found at **Annex A**.



Transitions to Vocational Pathways and Careers – Andrew Hall, Skills & Technical Education Senior Manager, The Careers & Enterprise Company

Andrew Hall from the [Careers and Enterprise Company](#) presented national insights into the barriers and enablers young people, particularly disadvantaged learners, face when progressing into apprenticeships. His presentation drew on two major sources of insight:

- The [ATE \(Apprenticeships and Technical Education\) Transition Framework](#), developed with local Careers Hubs and a wide range of stakeholders.
- National findings from the [Future Skills Questionnaire 2023/24](#).

The ATE model visualises the key supports and barriers across the apprenticeship journey, based on consensus from across the skills sector. It showed that:

- The **greatest barrier nationally is conversion and uptake** - interest is high but few secure places due to access and process issues.
- **Employer “willingness” to engage**, especially among smaller businesses, is a limiting factor, often constrained by capacity, administrative burden, or unclear return on investment.
- **Promotion and awareness of apprenticeships** have improved significantly, particularly where [Gatsby Benchmarks](#) are being delivered.
- **Disadvantaged students** feel less career ready, though **effective careers programmes can close the gap**.
- **Regional variation matters** - requiring **place-based solutions**.

Andrew also highlighted findings from the Future Skills Questionnaire:

- **Career interests are increasingly aligned with the labour market**, but confidence gaps remain.
- **Students reported that they feel more careers ready**.
- Work experience is being reimagined as a **modular and progressive journey**.
- **Parental engagement is essential**.

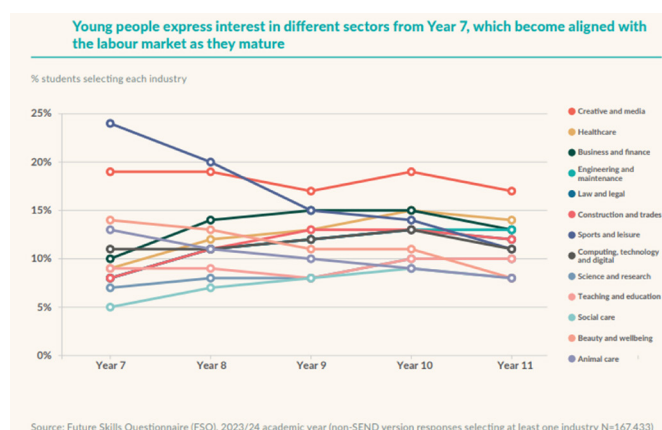


Figure 2

Andrew Hall’s presentation – young people’s career interests over time

His message was:

“We’re not aiming to get every young person into an apprenticeship, but we must remove the preventable barriers that block those who could and should succeed.”

Andrew’s presentation recording and slides can be found at **Annex B**.

PANEL DISCUSSION: INSIGHTS AND TAKEAWAYS

Panel:

- **Anna Morrison CBE** (Amazing Apprenticeships)
- **Andrew Hall** (The Careers and Enterprise Company)
- **Paul Scrivens** (Love Local Jobs Foundation)
- **Michael Ratcliffe** (CXK)

1. How can we help young people believe apprenticeships are for them?

Paul Scrivens explained how confidence-building must begin early. The [Love Local Jobs Foundation](#) starts its work with **Year 9 students**, helping young people, particularly those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), identify their strengths and recognise their potential.

The Foundation builds aspiration by exposing students to role models, mentoring and employer visits in fun, engaging and low-pressure ways.

“It’s not about knowing the end goal, it’s about helping young people recognise what they’re good at and believe in the journey.”

Key message: Confidence, motivation and self-worth need to be nurtured in young people early on, as they are critical foundations for progression.

2. What are the community-rooted barriers to engaging underrepresented groups?

Michael Ratcliffe shared findings from [CXK](#)’s work in Hastings, particularly an 18-month [Connected Futures](#) research project led by local young people, which explored the barriers to employment faced by young adults in the area. They gathered insight from over 4,000 young people aged 14–24, and 80 local employers. Key points included:

- **Young people don’t know what they don’t know** – choices are limited by what they’re shown.
- **Students’ curriculum choices are often made before careers awareness.**
- Few positive careers experiences; **over half lack work experience.**

Other barriers included **lack of parity with the UCAS process, poor awareness** of apprenticeship routes, **low digital access, and limited work experience** for SEND/Looked After Children cohorts. Additionally, apprenticeships are **still perceived as the ‘lesser’ option.**

Key message: We need to tackle systemic barriers and reposition apprenticeships as aspirational, not second tier.

3. How do we better support progression to higher-level apprenticeships?

Anna Morrison emphasised the need to **position degree apprenticeships as the gold standard**, while ensuring that the value of lower-level pathways is not overlooked:

- Young people should be shown how a **step-by-step progression route** can help them reach that goal.
- Employers have a key role to play here: they **often spot potential that the education system may have overlooked**.

“We need to communicate not just the destination but the journey. Starting at Level 2 or 3 is not a failure, it’s the beginning of something brilliant.”

Key message: Promote apprenticeships as pathways, not endpoints, with clear progression routes and visible employer involvement.

4. What role do careers professionals and providers play in embedding social mobility?

Andy Hall highlighted that we must understand the systems around young people and the unintended barriers those systems create.

- The **ATE Transition Framework** provides a structured way to map barriers and supports along the learner journey.
- **Careers guidance must focus on what the young person is good at, what they need, and where they want to go.**

He acknowledged that **current funding and policy levers don’t always incentivise what’s best for the learner**, raising questions about how the system itself needs to evolve.

“It’s not about whether something is an apprenticeship, T Level or A Level; it’s about what gets that young person to their destination.”

Key message: We need to design support around the learner, not the system, and recognise the pivotal role of careers professionals in enabling that shift.

5. What is our shared responsibility as stakeholders in the system?

Audience questions prompted rich reflections from the panel:

- One delegate asked how we move from “watching fish try to climb trees” to **building ladders tailored to their needs**. The panel agreed this was the challenge: designing structures that support every learner to thrive, not just those who already ‘fit’.
- There was recognition that **career frameworks like the Gatsby Benchmarks are working**, but that careers professionals need better resourcing and employer buy-in.
- Anna encouraged attendees to submit case studies to the [Officially Amazing platform](#), so good practice can be recognised and shared.

Cross-Cutting Priorities Identified

- **Elevate awareness and visibility of apprenticeships.**
- **Invest in early, sustained confidence-building.**
- **Use employer voice and lived experience** to reshape perceptions and remove stigma.
- **Support careers professionals and teachers** with frameworks, training and resources.
- **Embed collaboration across the system.**

WORKSHOPS

Workshop Question 1

How can we help learners better understand apprenticeship options, and promote the pathway from Level 2 to Level 7 to support improved social mobility?

Summary

The discussion highlighted major differences in awareness and perceptions of apprenticeships depending on family background, school environment and available careers support. Students are increasingly aware of apprenticeship routes, but this is often not matched by parents' or teachers' understanding, limiting their options. The group identified the need for earlier, more consistent and inclusive careers guidance, with targeted engagement of families, role models and teachers. Examples of good practice included local employer outreach, peer-led advocacy, and structured mapping of routes from Level 2 to 7.

Themes included:

- Parity of esteem between apprenticeships and university remains lacking.
- Schools often prioritise university over alternative pathways.
- Work experience opportunities were cited as essential, but are inconsistently delivered.
- Earlier and better-funded careers interventions are needed in disadvantaged areas.
- Peer and parental influence are critical.
- Good practice examples show success through local employer partnerships, outreach activities and relatable role models, as well as targeted support for SEND learners and peer-to-peer influence.

Key Points

- **Early exposure matters:** primary school pilots are helping challenge stereotypes and widen aspiration.
- **Awareness gaps:** students know more than parents, carers and teachers; schools focus on university and exam targets, not destinations or options like apprenticeships.
- **Work experience is critical:** there is inconsistent access and it is sometimes seen as a logistical burden for schools and employers; needs embedding into the curriculum.
- **Structural barriers and challenges:** disadvantaged young people are less likely to take a perceived risk on apprenticeships; Level 6+ options are poorly understood or promoted; there are support gaps after Apprenticeship Support and Knowledge (ASK) Programme funding withdrawal.
- **Examples of good practice:**
 - Apprenticeship Ambassadors and UTC models with higher progression rates.
 - Employer-school partnerships and peer-led drop-ins.
 - Outreach to SEND and care-experienced learners. (e.g. John Lewis Care Leavers Programme – [Building Happier Futures](#)).
 - Role models and success stories that resonate.

Priority Takeaway

Start earlier and promote apprenticeships as a valued and personalised route. Engage parents and schools and share real stories to inspire informed choices. Build community support and align all stakeholders around a shared, inclusive vision.



Workshop Question 2

How can we increase participation in higher level apprenticeships from underrepresented groups?

Summary

The group explored multiple factors limiting higher-level progression: cultural perceptions, inconsistent pathways, employer barriers, and lack of tailored support. While many learners achieve Level 2 or 3, clear next steps into Levels 4–7 are often missing. Cultural expectations around university can also deter progression. Encouragingly, several initiatives were shared that provide mentoring, employer incentives and sector-based pathways.

Themes included:

- Awareness and access to higher-level apprenticeships are low.
- Employers, especially SMEs, struggle to support progression.
- Routes between apprenticeship levels are not clearly understood.
- Targeted, culturally relevant support is needed.



Key Points

- **Perceptions:** many learners and families don't see Level 6+ apprenticeships as valuable or "for them".
- **Access and progression gaps:** Level 2 and 3 apprenticeships can become a glass ceiling. Progression to Level 4+ is not always clear or supported, and routes vary across sectors (particularly lacking in Construction and Healthcare).
- **Barriers for learners:** many young people lack work experience or necessary qualifications to access higher level routes, or lack support.
- **Employer limitations:** SMEs face funding/admin challenges, and backfilling positions while learners are on training can be a limitation; end point assessment confusion adds to the problem.
- **Good practice and opportunities:**
 - Modular, credit-transferable learning pathways and Level 4+ starting points especially as T Level progression routes.
 - Role models and relatable success stories e.g. care leaver apprentices, neurodivergent learners and peer-led narratives.
 - Talent programmes for underrepresented groups involving employers, alumni and assessment centres.
 - Employer guidance, incentives and peer advocacy networks.

Priority Takeaway

Strengthen progression. Ensure all apprentices have a visible route beyond their current level, supported by mentoring, employer incentives and diverse success stories.



Workshop Question 3

What can we do differently? What are the opportunities for development and collaboration?

Summary

The final question focused on creating joined-up systems to better support apprenticeships and social mobility. Participants called for a shift from isolated interventions to ecosystem-wide collaboration involving schools, providers, employers and policymakers. Solutions proposed ranged from curriculum redesign and employer engagement to funding reform and sector-based workforce planning.

Themes included:

- Systems change is needed to align education, careers guidance and employer needs.
- Careers education remains inconsistent.
- Cultural perceptions and funding issues limit progress.
- Collaboration across stakeholders is essential.



Key Points

- **Inconsistent delivery and funding:** careers education and promotion vary widely by region and school; funding for promotional activity and support services is limited.
- **Awareness:** learners lack visibility of apprenticeship routes and outcomes.
- **Disconnects:** schools don't always have insight into the jobs and skills needed by employers; employers often aren't engaged early enough in curriculum planning or workforce development.
- **Misconceptions:** apprenticeships are still seen as second-best to university.
- **Delivery issues:** employers lack support; regular provider-employer-learner meetings can be burdensome.
- **Good practice and opportunities:**
 - Drip-feed apprenticeship content through curriculum from a young age.
 - Engage parents early and creatively to engage young people (e.g. social media channels, "teenage soap").
 - Introduce bridging courses such as apprenticeship preparation courses and peer buddy systems.
 - Map sector roles and co-design progression pathways.
 - Advocate for funding linked to skills gaps (e.g. green jobs and construction).

Priority Takeaway

Think system wide. Build collaborative, inclusive and coherent systems across education and employment that genuinely support progression through apprenticeships.

EVENT PLEDGES

At the close of the event, delegates were invited to reflect on the discussions and insights shared and make a pledge to support social mobility through their own work. Using Mentimeter, they responded to the question: **“What actions will you take forward in your own work to support social mobility within apprenticeships?”**

The pledges revealed a strong commitment to practical, immediate action, with three key themes from the responses:

- **Awareness-Raising and Information Sharing:**
many attendees committed to actively promoting apprenticeships as a credible and accessible option to students, parents and colleagues. This included actions such as updating careers resources, embedding apprenticeship awareness into regular guidance sessions, and ensuring opportunities are better signposted within schools, colleges and outreach programmes.
- **Embedding Social Mobility in Careers Practice:**
respondents noted the importance of embedding equity and progression into existing careers and CEIAG work. Pledges included reviewing internal practices through a social mobility lens, advocating for the promotion of Level 2 to Level 6 pathways, and strengthening partnerships with providers to support underrepresented groups more effectively.
- **Collaboration and Advocacy:**
several delegates planned to engage others in the conversation, whether by sharing the day's learning with colleagues, speaking to senior leaders, or identifying new opportunities for partnership working. This collaborative approach extended to engaging employers and local stakeholders to raise aspirations and diversify access routes into apprenticeships.



Other individual actions included reviewing websites and marketing materials, improving the clarity of apprenticeship information, and offering support to learners who may not have previously considered apprenticeships as a viable route.

Together, these pledges demonstrate a clear willingness to champion social mobility in tangible ways, and a collective recognition that even small changes can contribute to a more inclusive apprenticeship system.

SESSION

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been developed from the combined insights of keynote presentations, expert panel contributions and workshop discussions. They respond to the need for earlier and more inclusive awareness of apprenticeships, clearer progression pathways, and better support for families, schools and careers professionals.

These recommendations aim to help break down cultural and structural barriers that limit access to high-quality apprenticeship routes.

A full set of recommendations, including example activities and intended impact, can be found in the **Comprehensive Recommendations** report that sits alongside this document.

- **Embed earlier, inclusive apprenticeship awareness and careers preparation** – introduce apprenticeship content from primary school onwards, using role models and CPD for teachers to normalise the route and build confidence.
Impact: raised aspiration and earlier engagement.
- **Promote clear progression pathways with targeted support** – use visual maps and alumni case studies to help learners and educators understand transitions from Level 2–7.
Impact: stronger progression and more informed decisions.
- **Involve families and communities** – develop and promote accessible resources for parents/carers, including events with apprentices and employers.
Impact: trusted family support and reduced misinformation.
- **Improve work experience and application readiness** – expand structured work placements and embed job-search skills in the curriculum.
Impact: improved confidence and application outcomes.
- **Address structural and financial barriers** – create toolkits signposting financial and travel support and explore use of hardship funds.
Impact: more equitable access and reduced drop-out.
- **Address cultural barriers and challenge stereotypes** – tackle stigma through myth-busting campaigns and inclusive messaging in schools.
Impact: improved perceptions and broader participation.



CHAPTER 2

RETENTION, ACHIEVEMENT

AND SUPPORTING LEARNERS TO SUCCEED

Audience: Training providers and learner support organisations

Event Summary

The second event was designed for training providers and support organisations, with a focus on improving retention and achievement for apprentices from underrepresented backgrounds. Keynote speakers Anna Morrison CBE and Dr Emma Jenks presented on learner wellbeing and the inclusive practice of Universal Design for Learning.

The panel discussion and workshops explored the range of challenges apprentices face during their programme, including unrecognised support needs, and how providers can improve initial assessments, ongoing support and pastoral care.

The event highlighted the critical importance of responsive, inclusive provision in enabling apprentices to succeed and progress through the levels.



PRESENTATIONS

Supporting Learners to Succeed – Anna Morrison CBE, Director, Amazing Apprenticeships

Anna Morrison opened the session with a data-led presentation exploring the **systemic and personal barriers** affecting apprenticeship retention and achievement – particularly for learners from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds. She highlighted findings from DfE research and employer engagement to prompt reflection on how the sector can respond.

Insights included:

- **Lower-level apprenticeships** have significantly higher non-completion rates.
- **66% of all non-completers were existing employees** before starting.
- **65% of non-completers leave within the first 12 months.**
- **Learners from deprived backgrounds** are more likely to cite difficulty, daunting assessments or low expectations from providers/employers.
- **Online learning can isolate learners** where peer support is lacking.

Anna urged the audience to recognise the shared responsibilities of **employer, apprentice and provider** in enabling success. She highlighted good practice under three themes:

- 1. Onboarding** – bias training for recruiters and managers, transparent recruitment, clear expectations and early, sensitive identification of support needs.
- 2. On-programme Support** – line manager training, accessible mental health/financial help, reinvesting incentives into learner support, and ensuring adjustments and advocacy.
- 3. Continuous Improvement** – feedback loops between stakeholders and apprentice/employer networks, and regular programme reviews informed by data and lived experience.

Anna closed by reminding delegates that there is no “one size fits all” approach, but collaboration, transparency, and learner-centred design can dramatically improve outcomes.

Anna’s presentation recording and slides can be found at **Annex C**.



Universal Design for Learning – An Inclusive Approach to Learner Support – Dr Emma Jenks, Lecturer in Psychology of Education, University of Bristol

Dr Emma Jenks introduced [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#), a flexible, evidence-based framework rooted in neuroscience and psychology to improve and optimise teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn. UDL encourages the design of education and training that **anticipates learner diversity** and builds in multiple pathways for engagement, understanding and expression from the outset.

She explained how UDL applies to apprenticeships, which often involve learners with a wide range of experiences, abilities and learning contexts, from the classroom to the workplace and online. UDL promotes equity by **embedding accessibility, choice and clarity into programme design**.

The UDL framework is built around three principles:

- 1. Engagement (why)** – make learning relevant, reduce overload, and build belonging through collaboration.
- 2. Representation (what)** – build on prior knowledge, use varied learning formats, and clarify content for all learners.
- 3. Action and Expression (how)** – offer flexible ways to demonstrate learning, ensure access to assistive tools, and involve learners in setting goals.

Dr Jenks offered **practical tips** for integrating UDL into training and workplace environments - see **Figure 3** above.

She closed by emphasising that UDL is a flexible approach to inclusion that can transform retention, progression and social mobility for apprentices from all backgrounds.

Emma's presentation recording and slides can be found at **Annex D**.

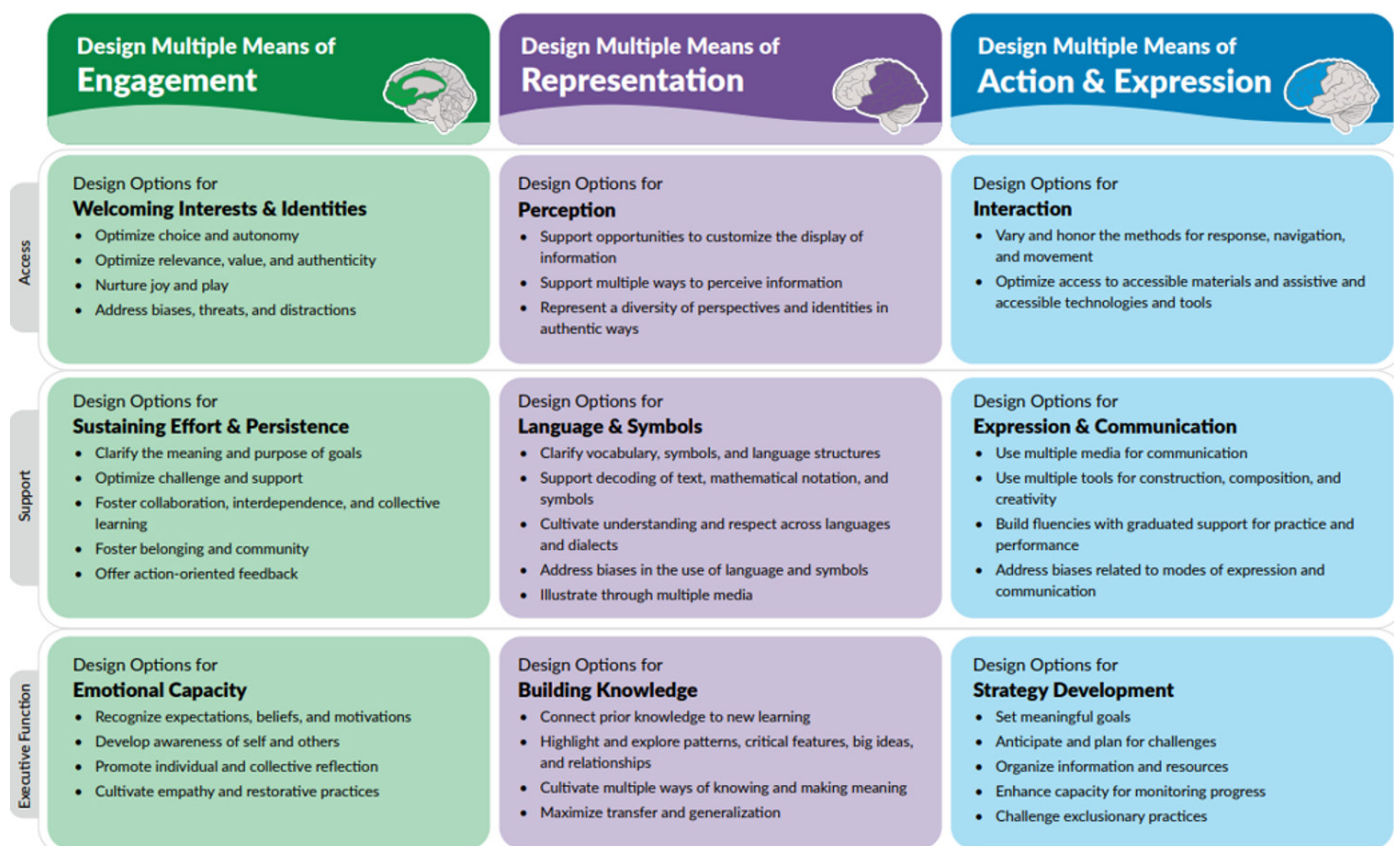


Figure 3 Dr. Emma Jenks' presentation – UDL suggestions for practical steps to take

PANEL DISCUSSION: INSIGHTS AND TAKEAWAYS

Panel:

- **Anna Morrison CBE** (Amazing Apprenticeships)
- **Dr Emma Jenks** (University of Bristol)
- **Dr Becky Quew-Jones** (University of Portsmouth)
- **Katie Akerman** (University of Chichester)

1. How can we strengthen learner support when apprenticeships are 'jobs first, courses second'?

A key challenge discussed by the panel and echoed in audience questions was how to reconcile the dual identity of an apprenticeship as both a job and a learning programme. The panel agreed that support improves when learning is clearly connected to the workplace. Employers need help to understand work-based learning and how aligning tasks with business goals benefits both learner and organisation.

“I didn't realise the assignment could have been relevant to our business, if I'd known earlier, me and the apprentice would have got much more from it.”

Key message: Support must align learning with business value and ensure all stakeholders, particularly line managers, understand their role in apprenticeship success.

2. What works in building a strong tripartite relationship between learner, provider and employer?

The panel reinforced that **line manager engagement is critical** yet often underdeveloped. Examples of good practice included University of Portsmouth's [Line Manager Toolkit](#), embedding tutors within academic teams, curriculum design and peer support network.

“Mentors often benefit as much as the apprentices. That upward coaching helps shift mindsets and improve workplace culture.”

Key message: Equip line managers and mentors with accessible training and resources to foster a consistent, supportive learning environment.

3. How can we better support learners with additional needs, especially at higher levels?

Katie Akerman shared that **25% of apprentices at the University of Chichester declare a disability**. The institution's support offer includes pre-application meetings, early skills scans, flexible assessments, and access to advisers and peer mentors. She highlighted limitations of current SEN funding, particularly Disabled Students' Allowance.



Key message: Tailored, upfront planning and a proactive, flexible support model are essential to ensuring success for learners with additional needs.

4. How can providers adopt inclusive learning design in a practical, phased way?

Emma Jenks encouraged providers to **start small but act deliberately** when integrating UDL, with small tweaks such as flexible assessments or alternative formats. She stressed that **“learners are the experts in what works for them”** and that providers must listen, co-create and adapt.

Key message: Start where you can, build inclusion into what already exists, and use learner voice to guide practical adjustments.

5. What emerging trends are we seeing in learner needs, and what are the most effective responses?

Anna Morrison explored how data can provide early insights into learner needs, but stressed the importance of **balancing data with lived experience**. She encouraged a dual approach of “quick wins and long-term change” to tackle issues as they arise while planning sustainable improvements. Flexibility in delivery was highlighted as increasingly important, with examples such as Tesco's varied contracts showing how apprenticeships can adapt to different learner circumstances.

Key message: Combine data and lived experience, act on quick wins while planning long-term change, and build flexibility into delivery so the system adapts around the learner.

6. What can we learn from other institutions?

Examples included Kingston University's detail tracking system, Teesside University's “you said, we did” feedback model, University of Staffordshire's integration of tutors into curriculum design, and peer-networks in companies.

Key message: Structured tracking, collaborative feedback, and peer-supported mentoring create more joined-up, inclusive journeys where learners don't fall through the gaps.

Cross-Cutting Priorities Identified

- **Strengthen line manager and employer engagement** with training, mentoring tools and structured feedback loops.
- **Embed learner wellbeing into formal processes**, ensuring reviews are holistic, not just compliance driven.
- **Design peer support structures** and learning sets to build resilience and community.
- **Promote flexibility** in apprenticeship delivery and funding models to meet diverse learner needs.
- **Share and adopt best practice** from learning design and tracking systems to inclusive assessment options.

WORKSHOPS

Workshop Question 1

What are the key support needs being presented by learners in programme?

Summary

This discussion explored the lived experience of apprentices and the complexity of their support needs. Many learners, particularly at Level 2 and 3 or those navigating new environments, struggle to recognise or disclose their needs. Challenges stem from a lack of psychological safety, inconsistent language and systems across employers and providers, and unclear processes for accessing help. Participants emphasised that learners' support needs can emerge at any point during the programme, not just at the start, and that proactive, ongoing support is essential.

Themes included:

- Disclosure of learners' needs can be hindered by fear, stigma, or lack of clarity about available support.
- Challenges learners face in navigating different cultural expectations in both academic and workplace settings.
- Academic structures and rigid timetables don't always suit apprenticeships.
- Bureaucracy and administrative burden around apprenticeships delivery can reduce the capacity for high-quality support.
- Line managers need training and support to mentor effectively.
- Support for learners with needs should be built in as a matter of course, not dependent on diagnosis or disclosure.
- Collaborative working across providers can improve problem-solving and outcomes.

Key Points

- **System rigidity** doesn't reflect the flexibility that apprenticeships require. Additionally, the administrative burdens on delivery of apprenticeships (e.g. compliance, documentation) consume valuable time and resource.
- **Learners may begin programmes unaware they have a learning need**, and support requirements often emerge later, not just at entry.
- **Learners with support needs are less likely to ask for help** if they don't feel safe, supported and free from judgement, especially in the workplace.
- **Application forms and enrolment language** can be off-putting or unclear, leading learners to opt out of support they may actually need.
- **Workplace expectations are often implicit**, and apprentices may struggle with unspoken norms, such as professional communication, hierarchy or self-management.
- **Accessing support like Access to Work can be confusing**, with long wait times, unclear responsibilities, and differing eligibility criteria compared to university-based support.
- **Traditional teaching methods may alienate some learners**. Coaching-style delivery, check-ins and informal support are often more effective for building trust and engagement.

Priority Takeaway

Build trust, simplify systems, and value relationships. Apprenticeships succeed when providers, employers and mentors work together to create flexible, inclusive environments that encourage progression and enable all learners to succeed.



Workshop Question 2

How can on-programme support be effectively facilitated and managed to meet learning and wellbeing needs?

(What processes can be introduced to identify learners with support needs at initial assessment? How can we review learners' ongoing needs, particularly if not recognised at the start?)

Summary

The question focused on how to ensure consistent and effective learner support across the duration of the apprenticeship. While diagnostic assessments are important, many needs emerge once learners are embedded in their programme. Building relationships, creating space for honest dialogue, and sustaining regular reviews were all seen as essential. Attendees stressed the importance of a shared approach between employers, providers and impartial skills coaches. They also raised concerns about systemic barriers to doing this well.

Themes included:

- Initial diagnostics are only the beginning. Support must be embedded throughout the learner journey.
- Many learners do not disclose needs at enrolment but may do so later.
- Trusted relationships (e.g. with coaches or mentors) are critical to success.
- Employers need training and systems to support their apprentices' learning and wellbeing.
- Strong partnerships enable timely, flexible support tailored to the learner.

Key Points

- **Diagnostics and skills assessments** must be backed up with regular, ongoing reviews.
- **Support should be built into the programme culture**, not just available "if asked for."
- **Skills coaches** are vital neutral links between employer, provider and apprentice.
- **Study skills support is critical** as unfamiliarity with academic expectations can disadvantage learners.
- **Employers need tools and training** to uphold protected learning time and mentor effectively.
- **Peer mentoring** boosts learner confidence and sense of belonging.
- **Examples of good practice** include:
 - Pre-meets with learners before tripartite reviews.
 - Employer apprenticeship advisory groups.
 - Embedding soft skills development into programme design.
 - Applying UDL principles to make learning accessible.

Priority Takeaway

Effective support is built on trust and consistency. Go beyond one-off assessments and invest in relationships, coaching, and regular review processes that empower learners to access help when they need it.



Workshop Question 3

What can we do differently? What are the opportunities for development and collaboration?

Summary

This question encouraged attendees to take a step back and consider the wider system changes needed to better support social mobility and learner progression. It revealed a desire to rebalance apprenticeship delivery toward more inclusive, relationship-focused approaches. Participants called for simplification of bureaucracy, better employer education and stronger peer networks. While structural barriers remain, attendees shared a range of practical ideas focused on better communication, simplification and collaboration.

Themes included:

- Academic structures and rigid timetables don't always suit apprenticeships.
- Excessive bureaucracy is a barrier to meaningful collaboration and support.
- There's a need to rebuild trust between employers, providers and learners.
- End Point Assessment needs to be reframed as part of a holistic development process.
- Line manager mentoring, peer support, and employer "keep warm" activities reduce drop-out risk.
- Small, low-cost changes when focused on relationships and inclusion can make a big impact.

Key Points

- **Academic rigidity** doesn't align well with apprenticeship and employer needs.
- **Administrative burden** on universities reduces capacity to provide good support; simplification is needed.
- **Trust has eroded** in parts of the system; there's a need to return to more flexible, trusted models.
- **Mentoring the mentors** is essential, with training and support required for line managers.
- **End Point Assessment reform** – EPA reframed as part of a broader developmental process to improve learner experience.
- **Ideas for improvement** included:
 - More employer-facing resources and onboarding.
 - Sharing toolkits and resources such as the Education Training Foundation's Apprenticeship [Workforce Development \(AWD\) Programme](#).
 - Expanding peer and alumni mentoring.
 - Standardising expectations while allowing local flexibility.

Priority Takeaway

Build trust, simplify systems and value relationships. Apprenticeships succeed when employers, mentors and providers collaborate to create flexible, inclusive environments where progression is encouraged and supported.

EVENT PLEDGES

As the event drew to a close, attendees were asked to reflect on the insights shared and consider how they could translate learning into action. Using Mentimeter, they responded to the question **“What actions will you take forward in your own work to support social mobility within apprenticeships?”**

The responses reflected a strong focus on enhancing support, improving inclusion and enabling progression. Four core themes emerged:

- **Strengthening Learner Support and Wellbeing:** pledges included commitments to review and enhance the support for apprentice wellbeing, mental health and additional learning needs. This would ensure that all learners receive the wraparound support needed to stay on programme and succeed.
- **Inclusive Practice and Accessibility:** several pledges focused on adopting more inclusive approaches to teaching and programme delivery, influenced by the Universal Design for Learning framework introduced at the event. This would better meet diverse learner needs and improve accessibility.
- **Progression and Equity of Opportunity:** several attendees emphasised the need to better support learner progression from Level 2 to Level 6, reviewing both the clarity of progression routes and the support structures that enable them.
- **Collaboration and Internal Advocacy:** some planned to share key insights with colleagues, review internal processes, or strengthen support systems and learner voice mechanisms within their organisations.



Together, these actions demonstrate a clear commitment to ensuring that apprenticeship delivery is **inclusive, responsive, and designed to help all learners reach their full potential.**

SESSION

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawn from the event insights and findings, the following recommendations focus on supporting apprentices to stay, succeed and thrive. Key areas include inclusive programme design, proactive learner support, and strengthening the partnership between employers, providers and learners. The recommendations reflect both systemic challenges and practical solutions that surfaced throughout the event.

A full set of recommendations, including example activities and intended impact, can be found in the **Comprehensive Recommendations** report that sits alongside this document.

Recommendations Overview:

- **Design inclusive, learner-centred onboarding and programme delivery** – apply Universal Design for Learning and flexible assessment models from the start.
Impact: higher engagement and reduced early withdrawals.
- **Embed continuous, proactive learner needs assessment and support** – move beyond one-off diagnostics to ongoing wellbeing reviews and early risk alerts.
Impact: timely intervention and stronger retention.
- **Strengthen systems of learner support and employer collaboration** – define clear roles across the learner–employer–provider relationship and embed structured review points.
Impact: shared accountability and improved support.
- **Promote peer support and learning communities** – establish buddy systems and learner-led communities to reduce isolation.
Impact: improved belonging, confidence and progression.
- **Collaborative simplification of systems and reduced burden** – audit and streamline admin across universities to remove duplication and share resources.
Impact: improved efficiency and better learner experiences.



CHAPTER 3

ENGAGING EMPLOYERS IN THE CONVERSATION

**Audience: Employers, business support organisations,
apprenticeship business development teams**

Event Summary

The final event in the series shifted the focus to employers, examining how they **perceive apprenticeships** and what support is needed to **increase engagement**, particularly with **degree apprenticeships**.

Delegates heard **evidence from national and local research**, including presentations by Dr Andrea Laczik (Edge Foundation), Steve Sefton (University of Brighton), and Geraldine Turton (University of Sussex).

The panel featured employer and provider voices, **exploring how apprenticeships can** advance diversity, improve retention, **and contribute** to social value.

Workshops invited employers and stakeholders to **share experiences and identify practical steps for enhancing employer participation** in apprenticeship programmes that support **social mobility**.



PRESENTATIONS

Degree Apprenticeships – Employer Experience and Social Mobility – Dr Andrea Laczik, Director of Research, The Edge Foundation

Dr Andrea Laczik opened her presentation by setting the **strategic context** for degree apprenticeships, outlining how they have evolved within the skills system and the **high expectations** placed on them by policymakers. These include contributing to national productivity, addressing higher-level skills gaps, widening participation in higher education, and promoting social mobility.

She highlighted that **Level 6 and 7 apprenticeship starts increased by 7.1% in 2023/24**, yet under-19s still account for only 23% of all apprenticeship starts, underlining ongoing barriers to early access.

She shared findings from [The Edge Foundation's](#) research, [Degree Apprenticeships in England](#), based on interviews with employers, apprentices, policymakers and providers. This explored employer motivations, challenges, and the role of degree apprenticeships in advancing workforce diversity and social mobility.

Key Insights:

- **Employer motivations** – develop skills and internal talent, diversify the workforce, support disadvantaged groups, maximise Levy use and “grow their own” workforce.
- **Skills and productivity gains** – degree apprenticeships blend theory and practice, strengthening workplace learning.
- **Barriers to participation** - SMEs face admin barriers, funding complexities, and recruitment challenges particularly for niche roles or sectors.

Motivations of Employers: Using DAs to diversify

- **May support employers' diversity agenda** – e.g. gender gap, social mobility

'They've got this huge gender gap to fill in their middle management and into their senior leadership team. So they're really looking at ways of growing that pipeline.' (Employer Bo6)

'[DAs] capture a demographic that might otherwise not enter our company. So often I interview people who say, "I just knew university wasn't right for me, that's not the way I learn. I'm a practical learner[...]. So, I think it captures people that learn via different routes to maybe traditional options [...] as a result, it brings in diverse talent to the organisation' (Large Employer 14)

Motivations of Employers

- **'Moulded' with the skills set that the company requires**

'You've grown your own talent and, you know, they work to your values, they know your environment, they know your beliefs, and they know your sort of plans for the future.' (Employer Do6)

- **The best of the two worlds: Linking theory and practice**

One of the strengths of the model is that you do combine that, those vocational and behavioural skills, as well as the undergraduate knowledge component (Employer (Large) 02)

Figure 5

Dr Andrea Laczik presentation – example of motivations of employers

Takeaway Message: Degree apprenticeships can address skills needs, unlock talent and drive inclusive economic growth. But this is only possible if employers are **actively supported to engage inclusively, navigate complexity, and build strong partnerships providers.**

Andrea's presentation recording and slides can be found at **Annex E**.



Higher and Degree Apprenticeships – Perspectives from Sussex SMEs – Steve Sefton, Business Development Advisor (Apprenticeships), University of Brighton

Steve Sefton shared findings from recent research commissioned by the University of Brighton in collaboration with Sussex Chamber of Commerce as part of the [Future Skills Sussex](#) LSIP. The study provided a detailed picture of how SMEs across the region are engaging with higher and degree apprenticeships (HDAs), highlighting levels of awareness, motivations, preferred delivery models and emerging sector opportunities.

Insights:

- **Awareness and Attitudes** – over half of SMEs are engaged or open, but a third remain unsure. Confusion persists around systems, funding and standards.
- **Employer Motivations** – productivity, staff development, retention and succession planning.
- **Persistent Barriers** – time and capacity constraints, costs and funding uncertainty (especially non-levy payers), and administrative complexity with the Digital Apprenticeship Service.

- **Preferred Delivery Models** – strong preference (86%) for blended learning over day-release or fully online. See figure 7.
- **Human Skills Priority** – employers prioritise communication, teamwork, problem-solving and digital literacy, with demand for bolt-on CPD modules.
- **Sector-Specific Development Areas** – growth opportunities in construction and green skills, digital and technology (AI, cyber, data science), creative industries, engineering and manufacturing and land-based sectors. These gaps signal opportunities for providers and universities to co-design new standards and expand local delivery in line with regional economic need.

Takeaway Message: Unlocking SME engagement in apprenticeships requires **simplifying the system, tailoring delivery to business needs, embedding human skills, and co-designing flexible, local solutions** in priority growth sectors.

Steve's presentation recording and slides can be found at **Annex F**.

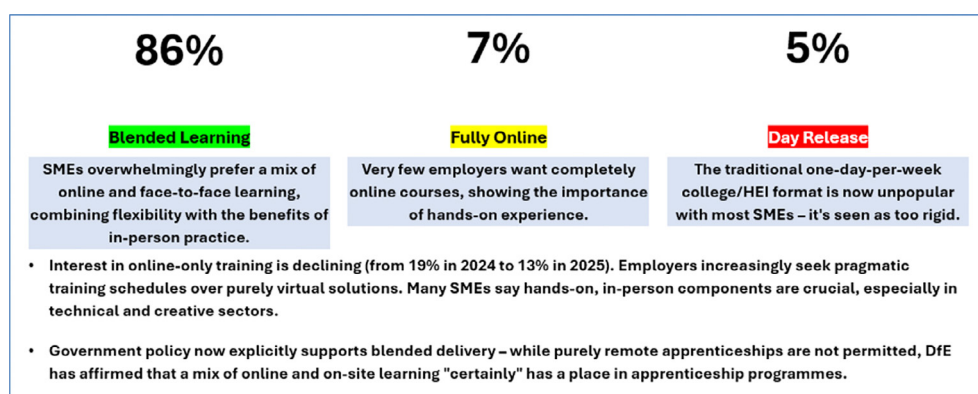


Figure 6
Steve Sefton's presentation
– Preferred Delivery Models
– Flexibility & Blended Learning



Apprenticeships that Work for All – Geraldine Turton, Head of Apprenticeships, University of Sussex

Geraldine Turton closed the presentations with a reflective contribution drawing on data, provider practice and learner voice. Her session focused on the systemic and cultural changes needed to make degree apprenticeships truly accessible and inclusive, particularly for existing employees, career returners, and individuals from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds.

Insights:

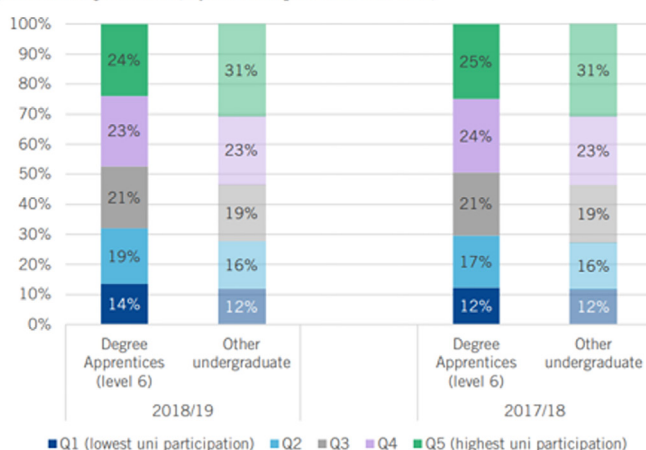
- **Widening Participation vs Reality** – learners from the most deprived areas now enter degree apprenticeships at similar rates to traditional degrees, but remain underrepresented overall. **See figure 8**
- **Untapped Workforce Potential** – many employees are interested in further study (45%) but had not previously considered themselves suitable for higher education.

- **Barriers for Upskillers** – workload and personal responsibilities, financial concerns about cost, lack of academic confidence and limited encouragement from line managers.
- **Employer Role as Gatekeepers** – employer decision-making plays a crucial role in shaping access and progression.
- **Programme Design and Success Factors** – flexible design, onboarding, mentoring, pastoral care and academic preparation are all vital to creating conditions where learners can thrive.
- **Enabling Employers** – clear guidance, levy transfer support and line manager toolkits are needed to help employers engage effectively.

Takeaway Message: Degree apprenticeships have the potential to **unlock opportunity** for underrepresented groups and existing workers. However, **inclusivity must be built into every stage**, and **employers must be supported** to act as enablers.

Geraldine's presentation recording and slides can be found at **Annex G**.

Figure 13. Young degree apprenticeship in university starts (level 6) compared to undergraduate degree starts, by POLAR quintiles 2017-2019



Source: HESA extract

Figure 8

Geraldine Turton's presentation - Apprenticeships that Work for All.

PANEL DISCUSSION: INSIGHTS AND TAKEAWAYS

Panel:

- **Dr Andrea Laczik** (Edge Foundation)
- **Steve Sefton** (University of Brighton)
- **Geraldine Turton** (University of Sussex)
- **Rob Reeve** (CEO, LexTego Ltd)

1. What are employers saying about apprenticeship engagement and what's getting in the way?

Employers value apprenticeships but are **frustrated by the complexity of levels, funding and paperwork** and would benefit from **better communications about pathways, progression and expectations**. Many also miss the opportunity to **link apprenticeships to EDI and social value** aims. As Andrea Laczik observed:

“Employers have so much on their hands but often they don't know what the opportunities are.”

Key message: Simplify the system and show employers how apprenticeships meet their business and social goals.

2. How can universities and providers better support employers to deliver meaningful apprenticeships?

Geraldine Turton described how the University of Sussex is **widening participation by proactively engaging underrepresented communities**. It offers both campus and workplace support, providing mentoring and structured transitions for learners who might otherwise miss out. She stressed the **importance of supporting individuals realistically**, ensuring apprentices are able to succeed in both their job and their studies.

Steve Sefton added that employers can be more strategic by **tapping into existing student cohorts**:

“If a degree student is rethinking their path, the degree apprenticeship route can be a brilliant pivot.”

Key message: Universities have a responsibility – and an opportunity – to facilitate access and support success for learners and employers alike.

3. What does it look like for an SME to embed apprenticeships as part of business culture?

Rob Reeve shared a candid employer perspective and explained that SMEs must treat apprenticeships as a long-term investment, not a quick fix. He praised the personalised support his own apprentice son, who has dyslexia, received.

“It’s a great apprentice recruitment line: do you want to get a degree or get one while you’re earning?”

Key message: SMEs can unlock real value but it takes long-term thinking and a commitment to development.

4. Are employers making the link between apprenticeships and social mobility?

Dr Andrea Laczik highlighted growing interest in apprenticeships for EDI and CSR goals, but said **employers need clearer narrative and tools** to understand expectations and responsibilities.

From a provider lens, Geraldine noted that **apprentices bring diversity to campus and into the workforce**, which enriches the whole learning environment.

Key message: Apprenticeships should be positioned as a key strategy for social value, not just a training product.

5. What changes are needed to improve the employer experience?

Steve Sefton highlighted that **occupational maps and frameworks** are helpful but **too complex and jargon heavy**. Providers and support bodies must **simplify language, demystify processes**, and help employers map clear routes from Level 2–7. Where gaps exist, **employers and providers can co-create new standards**.

“Clarity and confidence are everything. If employers understand it, they’re much more likely to commit.”

Key message: Better signposting, language and collaborative Apprenticeship Standard development can break down access barriers.

Additional Insights from the Floor

- A large Sussex employer raised concerns about the **uneven quality of information in schools**, and the need to **equip teachers and advisers with up-to-date knowledge about apprenticeships**.
- Several panellists emphasised the role of **parents and aspiration-shaping** early in a young person’s journey, particularly from Year 9 onwards.
- A training provider raised concerns about the **sharp increase in additional learning support needs among apprentices**, particularly neurodivergent learners. The need for **specialist pastoral and academic support** was described as both urgent and underfunded.

Cross-Cutting Priorities Identified

- **Simplify and demystify** apprenticeship pathways for employers, especially smaller businesses.
- **Embed social mobility objectives** into employer support, widening participation, and messaging strategies.
- **Invest in early engagement**, particularly with schools, parents and underrepresented communities.
- **Enhance the pastoral infrastructure** to support apprentices with additional learning needs, in both education and workplace settings.
- **Foster collaborative innovation** where employers, providers and stakeholders shape new pathways and solutions together.

WORKSHOPS

Workshop Question 1

What are the key benefits and what are the key challenges that employers face when engaging with apprenticeships?

Summary

This discussion explored the incentives and frustrations employers experience when engaging with apprenticeships. Most recognised apprenticeships as a valuable long-term investment in workforce development. However they also expressed concern about the complexity of systems, a lack of operational support, and ongoing barriers to access and progression, particularly for SMEs and those supporting learners with additional needs.

Themes included:

- Employers value apprenticeships for staff retention, workforce planning and talent pipelines.
- System navigation is difficult, especially for smaller employers.
- Administrative burden, funding gaps, and lack of practical support are major barriers.
- Access to local talent and wraparound support is often limited.
- Stigma around apprenticeships still exists and can affect recruitment.

Key Points

- **Benefits:** future talent development, better retention, skills alignment, inclusion, enables future business and succession planning and community engagement.

Barriers:

- **Disjointed information:** employers struggle to find clear joined-up guidance on providers, how to access providers and provider roles, and systems like the Digital Apprenticeship Service (DAS).
- **Financial burden:** employers face costs for wages, backfill, and off-the-job training without direct support; calls for more help through tax relief or financial aid.
- **Admin complexity:** PAYE, levy processes, EPA setup and ongoing compliance are hard to navigate, especially for smaller employers.
- **Geographical constraints:** transport and local talent availability limit access to suitable apprentices.
- **SEND/Neurodivergence:** long waits for Access to Work; employers need help understanding and managing additional learner needs
- **Cultural stigma:** apprenticeships still seen as “second-tier” by some.
- **Retention difficulties:** challenges with progression, support and team integration can impact apprentice experience and outcomes.

Priority Takeaway

Employers see real value in apprenticeships, but the system is too hard to navigate alone.

We need streamlined guidance, practical support, and cultural change to boost confidence and participation.



Workshop Question 2

What support can be offered to help more employers engage with apprenticeships to support their workforce needs? Are there examples of existing good practice and approaches?

Summary

This question focused on the tools, partnerships and interventions needed to help employers, especially SMEs, navigate and benefit from apprenticeships. Participants shared examples of effective practice and highlighted the importance of localised support, simple guidance and continued engagement well beyond the initial sign-up.

Themes included:

- Employers want hands-on, local and tailored information and support.
- SMEs especially benefit from 1:1 guidance and peer examples.
- Provider support often stops after sign-up but needs to continue.
- Careers advice and school-level engagement are crucial upstream enablers.
- Devolved models show promise in offering more responsive employer support.

Key Points

• What employers need:

- Clear, consistent guidance, especially localised.
- Clear, centralised information on available provision and how to recruit apprentices.
- Employer-focused training on funding, workforce planning, AI.
- Ongoing support from providers, not just up to sign-up.
- Peer networks and practical toolkits to demystify the process.
- Meaningful incentives to offset the costs of apprenticeships, including wage contributions, backfill support and time off for training.

• Good practice examples:

- “Try-before-you-buy” short placements.
- Local “dating service” to match employers with apprenticeship-ready talent.
- Joint delivery models (e.g. NHS and University of Brighton).
- ESCC’s [Transform Service](#) providing 1:1 business support.

• System enablers:

- Stronger enterprise and careers guidance in schools.
- Employer panels and myth-busting events.
- Simplified recruitment and reduced bureaucracy.

Priority Takeaway

Employers don’t need persuading, they need support. Proactive advice, local coordination, financial incentives and simplified systems will drive greater engagement, particularly from smaller employers.



Workshop Question 3

How are employers currently supporting greater diversity and social mobility through apprenticeships, and are there examples of existing good practice and approaches?

Summary

This session explored how employers are embedding inclusive practices within their apprenticeship programmes. While some strong examples were shared, particularly from larger employers, there was recognition that inclusion efforts are still inconsistent. Participants called for more intentional design of recruitment, onboarding and support to widen access and improve outcomes for underrepresented groups.

Themes included:

- Inclusion work is growing but remains patchy and team-dependent.
- Traditional recruitment often excludes those from disadvantaged or neurodivergent backgrounds.
- Cultural respect for apprentices needs to be stronger across sectors.
- Early interventions (e.g. insight placements) help level the playing field.
- Structured EDI support and partnerships are critical to scale up impact.

Key Points

- **Inclusive recruitment adaptations** are being used by some employers:
 - Value-based interview questions to reduce bias.
 - Providing interview questions in advance.
 - Using practical, workshop-style assessments instead of formal interviews.

- Alternative assessment centre days for Level 3 applicants.
- **Targeted progression support:**
 - Mentorship programmes specifically for BAME staff.
 - Functional skills support and flexibility around qualification requirements.
 - Involvement of EDI teams in shaping inclusive hiring practices.
 - Inclusion of diverse representatives on interview panels.
- **Early exposure opportunities** are helping to widen access:
 - One-week taster placements or insight visits.
 - Structured work experience to level the playing field before recruitment.
- **Systemic and cultural challenges remain:**
 - Recruitment practices still often favour polished applicants over potential.
 - Traditional graduate pathways are still perceived as more prestigious.
 - Degree-holding candidates are applying for Level 3 roles, narrowing access for others.
- **Cross-sector collaboration is needed** to embed inclusive practice at scale and ensure apprenticeships are seen as respected, long-term career routes.

Priority Takeaway

Inclusion in apprenticeships must be actively designed, not left to chance. Employers should embed inclusive recruitment and onboarding practices that proactively remove barriers for underrepresented groups. Cross-sector collaboration and consistent support structures are essential to ensure equity of access, progression and long-term success.

Workshop Question 4

What are the opportunities for development and collaboration?

Summary

The final discussion turned to collaboration and how employers, universities, providers and stakeholders can work together to improve access, visibility and outcomes for apprenticeships across Sussex. Participants identified specific opportunities for joint working, process standardisation and better regional coordination, particularly through a unified Sussex approach.

Themes included:

- The system is fragmented and greater regional coordination is needed.
- Employers want consistency across providers and easier navigation.
- Collaborative open days and matchmaking platforms could reduce barriers.
- Devolution and regional strategy alignment are key enablers.
- SMEs remain underrepresented and need targeted outreach.



Key Points

- **Sussex-wide coordination and standardised processes:** a joined-up approach across the three universities to streamline employer communication, support and apprenticeship delivery to reduce duplication and improve employer access.
- **Matching service:** explore a regional “dating service” that is led by the three universities to link apprenticeship-ready candidates with employers, especially SMEs, more effectively.
- **Collaborative events:** co-hosted open days, panels and outreach activities can boost visibility and strengthen provider-employer relationships.
- **Leadership and resource:** regional collaboration needs dedicated leadership, time and capacity to succeed.
- **SME inclusion:** targeted, practical engagement is needed to bring smaller employers into the conversation.
- **Outcome-focused collaboration:** joint working must lead to tangible results (e.g. smoother recruitment, clearer support pathways) to maintain employer interest.
- **Anchor employer models:** public sector bodies such as local authorities and the NHS offer strong examples of inclusive, collaborative apprenticeship delivery.

Priority Takeaway

Cross-sector collaboration is essential.

A coordinated regional approach can streamline systems, boost employer confidence, and unlock greater equity and reach in apprenticeship delivery. This will provide meaningful, system-wide impact.

EVENT PLEDGES

Attendees were asked to consider what actions they could take forward to support social mobility within apprenticeships. Through Mentimeter, they shared personal pledges focused on driving change within their own organisations and spheres of influence.

The responses revealed a proactive and outward-facing commitment to **raising awareness, strengthening employer engagement, and improving internal processes**. Key themes included:

- **Raising Awareness and Promoting Opportunities:** several participants committed to promoting apprenticeships more widely within their organisations and networks, with a focus on highlighting progression routes and positioning apprenticeships as a tool for inclusive recruitment and workforce development.
- **Championing Employer Engagement and Inclusion:** pledges from apprenticeship providers reflected a desire to encourage more employers to engage with apprenticeships. This included plans to initiate conversations around inclusive hiring, improve internal advocacy, and align apprenticeship strategies with broader equality and diversity goals.
- **Reviewing Practice and Internal Collaboration:** a number of employers planned to review recruitment, onboarding or programme design processes, ensuring they are inclusive and accessible, particularly for underrepresented groups.
- **Connecting with New Partners:** some responses focused on building new partnerships with providers, universities or peer employers, to share good practice and support more joined-up efforts to widen participation and progression.



These pledges reflect a clear intent to **embed social mobility considerations into employer practice**, using internal levers and external collaboration to create a more inclusive apprenticeship landscape.

SESSION

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations were shaped by the themes and ideas shared across presentations, panel discussion and delegate workshops during event 3. They capture employer perspectives on the barriers to engaging with apprenticeships, and propose actionable ways to simplify processes, demonstrate value, and build supportive infrastructure. Focus is given to SME needs, inclusive recruitment and collaborative working.

A full set of recommendations, including example activities and intended impact, can be found in the **Comprehensive Recommendations** report that sits alongside this document.

- **Streamline employer engagement with tailored support for SMEs:** create SME-friendly guides, events and brokerage services to simplify the process.
Impact: increased SME participation and confidence.
- **Make apprenticeships a core tool for diversity and social value strategies:** align apprenticeships to employers' EDI goals and social impact metrics using inclusive recruitment and impact tracking.
Impact: greater workforce equity and retention.
- **Encourage cultural change through peer influence:** use employer-led storytelling and forums to normalise apprenticeships and spread good practice.
Impact: cultural shift and sustained engagement.
- **Foster cross-sector collaboration to widen access and simplify pathways:** build a Sussex-wide apprenticeship access framework with a joint employer offer and engagement strategy.
Impact: streamlined engagement and greater access for learners.
- **Integrate apprenticeships into workforce planning and succession strategies:** support employers to map apprenticeships into L&D and talent pipelines.
Impact: sustainable, strategic workforce development.
- **Foster regional collaboration and infrastructure:** coordinate a pan-Sussex provider-employer forum, open days and standardised promotion materials.
Impact: more joined-up support and reduced duplication.



PLENARY

JOINING THE DOTS

Across three thought-provoking events, stakeholders came together with a shared purpose: to explore how we can strengthen social mobility through apprenticeships. From careers professionals to training providers and employers, attendees brought their insights, experiences and ambitions to the conversation - highlighting the barriers, celebrating good practice, and identifying new opportunities for action.

A Shared Vision for Social Mobility

At the heart of these events was a collective belief: that **social mobility is about fairness, aspiration, and the freedom to progress regardless of background or starting point**. Apprenticeships offer a powerful route to equity, providing practical, supported pathways into meaningful work and higher education, especially for those who may not take a traditional academic route.

“**Social mobility doesn't happen by accident. It requires intention and systems that recognise potential, remove barriers, and ensure that everyone, regardless of where they live, prior attainment, or personal circumstance, has the chance to thrive**”

[The Sutton Trust](#)

The shared goal is clear: a **Sussex apprenticeship ecosystem that champions equity, supports potential, and enables all individuals to access, progress and succeed.**





Cross-Cutting Insights: What We Learned

Despite different event audiences, several themes emerged consistently across the series, each with direct implications for improving social mobility through apprenticeships:

- **Awareness and aspiration must be nurtured early:** many young people from underrepresented groups still don't see apprenticeships as "for them." By starting early, using relatable role models, and embedding real stories, we can **widen participation and raise ambition in communities where aspiration is too often suppressed.**
- **Progression pathways are unclear and uneven:** while more learners now enter at Level 2 or 3 apprenticeships, few, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, progress to higher levels. Creating visible, supported routes to Level 6 helps **break cycles of low progression and opens doors to higher education and skilled employment.**
- **Learners need inclusive, responsive support:** apprentices with additional needs, caring responsibilities or limited prior attainment are more likely to drop out. Embedding flexible support across the whole journey ensures more learners **stay, achieve and progress.**

- **Employers are critical enablers but need help to play their part:** without intentional outreach and simplified systems, smaller businesses in particular may not engage. Supporting employers to open up access, adapt recruitment, and mentor inclusively is vital to **widening access and tackling inequality in the workplace.**
- **System complexity is a barrier to mobility:** complexity often excludes those without networks or insider knowledge. A simpler, more navigable system makes apprenticeships **more accessible to those who need them most.**
- **Collaboration drives impact:** a joined-up approach between FE, HE, employers and careers networks is essential to **ensure no learner falls through the cracks and every opportunity is visible and supported.**

Inspiring Actions and Pledges

At each event, delegates made pledges to embed what they'd learned into practice, whether through redesigning onboarding, increasing support and awareness, reviewing careers and outreach strategies, or advocating for new employer partnerships.

These pledges reflect **the belief that change begins with action** and that everyone, regardless of role, has a part to play in advancing social mobility. From revising marketing materials to strengthening peer mentoring, each pledge helps create **a more equitable, supportive and aspirational apprenticeship system.**

Overarching Priorities for a More Equitable System

Drawing from the evidence and reflections gathered across the three events, **six priorities stand out for the Sussex apprenticeship ecosystem**. Each is designed to remove barriers, build bridges, and **unlock the transformative potential of apprenticeships for social mobility**:

1. Start early and build inclusive awareness

Promote apprenticeships from primary school onwards, using relatable role models and inclusive language to spark ambition and challenge stereotypes.

- Supports social mobility by raising aspirations and broadening horizons in communities where opportunity is often limited.

2. Strengthen progression from Level 2 to Level 6

Map clear routes, celebrate stepping-stone journeys, and support learners to continue through the levels.

- Prevents early exit and ensures learners, especially those from low-income backgrounds, can access the full ladder of opportunity.

3. Design support around the learner, not the system

Embed proactive wellbeing, coaching, and inclusive delivery into every programme.

- Enables those with hidden or emerging needs to stay engaged, succeed and progress.

4. Simplify systems and processes for employers

Remove complexity, provide hands-on support, and demystify the apprenticeship journey, especially for SMEs.

- Opens up access to new employers and ensures apprenticeships reach all parts of the labour market.

5. Align apprenticeships with workforce planning and social value

Position apprenticeships as strategic tools for diversity, inclusion and talent development.

- Links individual opportunity to organisational impact, embedding equity into long-term planning.

6. Foster collaborative infrastructure across Sussex universities and training providers

Develop shared tools, events and engagement strategies across providers and employers.

- Reduces duplication and creates a seamless system where learners can navigate pathways with clarity and support.



RESOURCES AND LINKS

Supporting Documents

Organisation	Resource Title / Description	Link
University of Sussex/ Sussex Council of Training Providers	Social Mobility and Apprenticeships Resource Executive Summary	www.sctp.org.uk/social-mobility-and-apprenticeships-resource
University of Sussex/ Sussex Council of Training Providers	Social Mobility and Apprenticeships Comprehensive Recommendations Report	www.sctp.org.uk/social-mobility-and-apprenticeships-resource

General Links

Organisation	Resource Title / Description	Link
Social Mobility Commission	Apprenticeships and social mobility: fulfilling potential (research report)	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeships-and-social-mobility-fulfilling-potential
Social Mobility Commission	Tool: Apprenticeships that work for all (practical toolkit)	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/toolkit-apprenticeships-that-work-for-all

Event 1: Careers Support, Raising Awareness and Reaching Potential

Organisation	Resource Title / Description	Link
Amazing Apprenticeships	Home site with resources and guidance for careers professionals	https://www.amazingapprenticeships.com
Careers & Enterprise Company	Apprenticeship and Technical Education (ATE) framework overview and reports	https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/evidence-and-reports/conditions-for-transition-supporting-young-people-onto-apprenticeships-and-technical-pathways-a-regional-analysis
Careers & Enterprise Company	Make Apprenticeships and Technical Education part of the conversation (guide for parent/carer engagement)	https://resources.careersandenterprise.co.uk/resources/make-apprenticeships-and-technical-education-part-conversation
Careers & Enterprise Company	Future Skills Questionnaire insights 2023/24	https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/media/mntpow1/fsq-insight-briefing-2023-24.pdf
Amazing Apprenticeships	Official Amazing platform for sharing good practice	https://www.amazingapprenticeships.com/share-your-best-practice/
Gatsby Foundation	Gatsby Benchmarks	https://www.gatsbybenchmarks.org.uk/
Skills England (Previously Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education (IfATE))	Occupational Maps overview	https://occupational-maps.skillsengland.education.gov.uk/
Love Local Jobs Foundation	Website	https://www.lovelocaljobsfoundation.org.uk/
CXK	Connected Futures	https://www.cxk.org/services/connected-futures/
John Lewis & Partners	Building Happier Futures	https://www.johnlewis.com/content/happier-futures

Event 2: Retention, Achievement and Supporting Learners to Succeed

Organisation	Resource Title / Description	Link
Amazing Apprenticeships	Resource section with tools for learner support	https://www.amazingapprenticeships.com/resources/
CAST	Universal Design for Learning Guidelines	https://udlguidelines.cast.org
University of Portsmouth	Line Manager Toolkit	https://rise.articulate.com/share/Rk4UMpw3rJbQY0aC7-obJ2U81xQPmv-jY#/?
Education and Training Foundation (ETF)	Apprenticeship Workforce Development (AWD) Programme	https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/professional-development/apprenticeships/

Event 3: Engaging Employers in the Conversation

Organisation	Resource Title / Description	Link
Edge Foundation	Degree Apprenticeships in England: What can we learn from the experience of apprentices, employers and education and training providers? (2025 report)	https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/research-reports/degree-apprenticeships-in-england/
Edge Foundation	Widening Participation and Degree Apprenticeships report	https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/research-reports/widening-participation-and-degree-apprenticeships/
East Sussex County Council	TRANSFORM Service	https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/business/support/employment-skills-training/skills-east-sussex/transform
The Sutton Trust	What is Social Mobility? report	https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/what-is-social-mobility/

Supporting Appendices:

- Annex A** Engaging Underrepresented Groups – Anna Morrison CBE, Director, Amazing Apprenticeships: [Presentation Slides](#) and [Presentation Recording](#)
- Annex B** Transitions to Vocational Pathways and Careers – Strengths, Challenges & Opportunities – Andrew Hall, Skills and Technical Education Senior Manager, The Careers and Enterprise Company: [Presentation Slides](#) and [Presentation Recording](#)
- Annex C** Supporting Learners to Succeed – Anna Morrison CBE, Director, Amazing Apprenticeships: [Presentation Slides](#) and [Presentation Recording](#)
- Annex D** Universal Design for Learning – An Inclusive Approach to Learner Support – Dr Emma Jenks, Lecturer in Psychology of Education, University of Bristol: [Presentation Slides](#) and [Presentation Recording](#)
- Annex E** Degree Apprenticeships – Employer Experience and Social Mobility – Dr Andrea Laczik, Director of Research, The Edge Foundation: [Presentation Slides](#) and [Presentation Recording](#)
- Annex F** Higher and Degree Apprenticeships – Perspectives from Sussex SMEs – Steve Sefton, Business Development (Apprenticeships), University of Brighton: [Presentation Slides](#) and [Presentation Recording](#)
- Annex G** Apprenticeships that Work for All – Geraldine Turton, Head of Apprenticeships, University of Sussex: [Presentation Slides](#) and [Presentation Recording](#)