

Understanding Employer Experiences in Supporting Apprentices

BACKGROUND CONTEXT FOR THE RESEARCH:

Numbers of young people aged 16 – 25 not in employment, education or training are increasing and currently stand just short of 1 million.

The numbers of apprentices starting level 2 and 3 apprenticeships is decreasing year on year.

Coach Core Foundation (CCF) has been hearing anecdotal feedback from employers that they are facing significant challenges.



CCF decided to commission research to listen to employers and understand the challenges they are facing. By collating this clear evidence, CCF programmes can be improved and CCF can advocate for changes to how apprenticeships are designed and run.

Researchers from the Centre for Social Justice in Sport and Society at Leeds Beckett University were commissioned by Coach Core Foundation (CCF) to investigate how micro and small employers navigate the recruitment and retention of young apprentices.

The study addressed three research questions:

- 01** What challenges do small employers face in recruiting and retaining apprentices?
- 02** What enables small employers to overcome these challenges?
- 03** What resources are needed to support under-represented or high-need groups?

31 individuals
were interviewed

24 staff
from 16 employer organisations

3 Learning Coaches (LCs)
from the training provider Lifetime

4 CCF staff

The interviews were in-depth, and approx. 60 mins on average. The employers were spread across the country from the North East to the South West.



RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY



LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY
CARNEGIE SCHOOL OF SPORT
**CENTRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE
IN SPORT AND SOCIETY**

Key Findings

Challenges to Recruitment and Retention

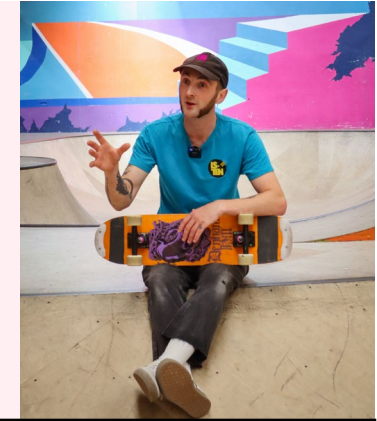
- Low pay and the cost-of-living crisis
- Lack of work readiness among apprentices
- Cases of unrealistic expectations from both employers and apprentices
- Travel and transport barriers
- Limited diversity in some local contexts
- Varying job security post-apprenticeship

I think we learned a lot on the first year and it was a massive learning curve for us as an organisation.”

(Employer 2)

“Realistically, we don’t want to set them up to fail ... is it realistic to ask them to travel an hour to get to a setting you know, is that fair on them? Is it going to work?” (Employer 7)

“Being able to afford to buy clothes to wear to be a coach, being able to afford to wash clothes, afford lunches.” (Employer 1)



Enablers of Success

- Identifying the right mentor
- Understanding the apprentice beyond work
- Clear expectations and regular check-ins
- Opportunities for varied, meaningful tasks
- Mental health and wellbeing support
- Strong partnership working across employers, CCF, and LCs

We want our workforce to be representative of the communities that we’re serving...”

(Employer 14)

“What did we want an apprentice to look like at the end of that experience? What skills would we expect them to have after 15 months? ... A good mentor needs to understand all of this. And put a layer of wraparound support with those guys in terms of upskilling them on emotional intelligence, active listening, those softer skills.” (Employer 11)

“We’ve found out he’s got lots more skills than what the apprenticeship gives him, but we can use them.” (Employer 13)

“That he [LC] is willing to drive an hour and a half... no other organisation will do that.” (Employer 5)

Considerations for Under-Represented Groups

- Acknowledging and supporting intersectional needs
- Travel subsidies and ‘Start-up budget’
- Accessible recruitment formats (e.g., video applications)
- Sensitively matched mentors with cultural awareness

They have a life outside work... appreciate any barriers and try to bring those down.”

(CCF Staff)

“We should really be offering them some sort of pot of money or kitty to help them get to work for that first month.” (Employer 8)

“We offered apply via a video rather than having to write something.... people who perhaps wouldn’t have reading or writing as their primary skill set, but might have, yeah, the confidence to be able to put themselves behind a camera.” (Employer 16)

“Provide an opportunity for development, for young people who’ve got lived experience of some of the trauma or challenges and vulnerabilities that our young people experience, so it can be a route to employment for young people who have been participants “ (Employer 3)

Employers value apprenticeships for:



Providing access to untapped talent and energy



Supporting under-served young people into employment



Increasing workforce diversity and innovation



Recommendations from the research

STRATEGIC STAKEHOLDERS SHOULD:

- Review and increase apprentice wages, especially in high-cost areas
- Provide financial and logistical support for travel
- Develop guidance on preparing apprentices for work
- Promote apprenticeships as valuable career routes
- Strengthen mentor training and understanding of lived experience

COACH CORE AND TRAINING ORGANISATIONS SHOULD:

- Offer structured onboarding support including work-readiness training
- Develop start-up support packages (e.g., transport, clothing)
- Partner with National Governing Bodies to diversify the sector
- Celebrate apprentice success stories, especially from marginalised groups

EMPLOYERS SHOULD:

- Assess workforce diversity and tailor recruitment accordingly
- Support apprentices holistically – financial, emotional, educational
- Network with other employers and share good practices
- Try diverse recruitment strategies
- Recognise apprentices as valuable assets

“We want to, not only I suppose support and educate these young people, we want to keep them in the business as well ... we want to offer that sustainability of employment at the end of the provision.” (Employer 9)

“That diversity of thought really is one of the biggest examples ... We’ve had apprentices that have started off with us, like literally 16th birthday, started with us, and then we’ve got older participants, so I think they’re early 40s ... you get the real diversity of thought.” (Employer 6)

“I’m a really big advocate of the Coach Core programme and how it works.” (Employer 11)

WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?

Coach Core intends to use the research findings to:

- provide stronger support to apprentices and employers, initially by developing training and resources;
- identify areas that require deeper understanding and further evaluation;
- collaborate with other apprenticeship stakeholders and employability organisations to tackle the challenges highlighted; and
- advocate for improvements to financial support for both apprentice and employers, and wellbeing and pastoral care for young people.

For more details the full report can be found on the **CCF website**.

To contact CCF about the research or to find out more about the apprenticeship programmes available please email info@coachcore.org.uk