National Youth Agency

Growing capability, strengthening consistency

An evaluation of youth worker apprenticeships

July 2026



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Key findings

Overall, findings from this report demonstrate that youth worker apprenticeships have become an increasingly vital part of the youth sector workforce. Their introduction, uptake and successful completion have grown consistently, contributing to a strong pipeline of newly qualified youth workers. Apprenticeships enable staff to build their skills, strengthen their professional practice and deliver improved outcomes for both their organisations and the young people they support. In particular:

- apprentices build confidence, strengthen professional knowledge and develop effective communication skills so practice can better respond to the needs of young people. Apprentices gain meaningful opportunities to apply their learning in real work settings, ensuring their apprenticeship directly enhances and informs day-to-day practice.
- youth worker apprentices report consistently high satisfaction with the programme, with the majority feeling valued, well-supported and actively listened to throughout their learning journey.
- employers and providers similarly identify improvements in practice, including enhanced quality of delivery, the introduction of new ideas and the development of a more sustainable internal workforce pipeline.

The report acknowledges that there is potential for development, ensuring that all apprentices are getting access to the best opportunities consistency of practice and experience. In particular:

- an opportunity to bring together good practices in delivering apprenticeships across providers, considering appropriate cohort sizes and learning environments for the best learner experiences
- protecting time for apprentices to ensure they can balance academic demands with the day-to-day role of youth work to enhance learner experience
- development of a level 2 route for apprentices to support and encourage early career youth workers to take up higher qualifications



1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Youth workforce challenges and environment

The youth work sector continues to face significant workforce challenges, including recruitment shortages, retention pressures and concerns about long-term sufficiency of a suitably qualified workforce.[1] In response, the National Youth Agency (NYA) has set out a 10 year Workforce Transformation Plan to address these issues by strengthening pathways into the profession, supporting skills development and ensuring the sector can meet the evolving needs of young people.

Youth worker apprenticeships have emerged as an important part of this response. They provide a paid, practice-based route into the profession that supports professional identity, skills development and progression. However, apprenticeships alone cannot resolve the wider workforce challenges facing the sector. They represent one component of broader workforce transformation that must also include other qualification routes with funding opportunities, professional development opportunities and sustained investment.

This report presents the findings of an evaluation conducted by the NYA between May 2025 and March 2026. The evaluation examined the Level 3 and Level 6 Youth Worker Apprenticeship programmes, with a particular focus on their contribution to workforce development within the youth sector.

Current provision

Apprenticeships have become a key component of the training and employment landscape for post- 16-year-olds in England and have been identified as one of the key pillars of the current government's economic and employability plans.[2] They combine paid work with structured on and off-the-job training, leading to a recognised qualification. Within youth work specifically, apprenticeships provide an important pathway into youth support worker and youth worker roles.

Youth work apprenticeships are currently delivered at two levels:

- Level 3: Youth Support Worker Apprenticeship
- Level 6: Youth Worker Apprenticeship

The current Level 3 Youth Support Worker Apprenticeship focuses on developing foundational skills required to support young people and requires around 18 months of study.[3] In contrast, **the current Level 6 Youth Worker Apprenticeship is 3 years long, and prepares apprentices for more advanced youth work practice**,[4] emphasising theory, ethical decision-making and leadership and leading to professional youth worker status. Level 6 apprentices are expected to take greater responsibility for planning, delivering and evaluating youth work, as well as contributing to organisational development and multi-agency working.

Delivery infrastructure

The current delivery infrastructure for the Level 3 and Level 6 apprenticeships is shaped by a network of approved training providers. Training providers include further education (FE) colleges, higher education institutions (HEI), and independent training organisations delivering training through face-to-face, blended or online provision. Currently, delivery infrastructure across the sector remains uneven, with choice of provider type dependent on location.

Although 18 providers have been approved to deliver the Level 3 Youth Support Worker Apprenticeship since 2021, only nine are currently listed as active providers on the 'Find Apprenticeship Training' website. This suggests a gap between approved capacity and live delivery, with potential implications for regional access and apprentice choice.

Delivery volumes also vary significantly between providers. Some support only small, localised cohorts of apprentices, while others operate at national scale, delivering provision across more than 50 locations.

Realising the ambitions of the National Youth Strategy

The government's 'Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy' (December 2025) provides important policy context for youth worker apprenticeships. The strategy positions youth workers as central to improving outcomes for young people, particularly through its focus on access to trusted adults, high-quality local youth services and long-term workforce sustainability.

The strategy commits £15 million over three years to recruit, train and retain youth workers, volunteers and other trusted adults, recognising ongoing workforce shortages and skills pressures across the sector. While it does not introduce youth work specific apprenticeship reforms, it explicitly frames work-based training routes, including apprenticeships, as part of the wider solution to strengthening the youth workforce and supporting progression into trusted adult roles.

The strategy's emphasis on place-based delivery and long-term relationships reinforces the relevance of apprenticeships as a mechanism to develop local workforces, support young people's social and emotional wellbeing, and strengthen professional development.

The positioning of youth work within wider government skills priorities

While youth work is recognised in the National Youth Strategy as important to delivering government priorities for young people, it is not currently identified as a priority sector within the government's Industrial Strategy or related workforce investment frameworks. This limits its visibility in national skills planning.

Yet a skilled and qualified youth workforce is essential to delivering key government initiatives, including Young Futures Hubs, Prevention Partnerships, Local Youth Transformation Partnerships, Youth Guarantee Trailblazers, the freedom from violence against women and girls strategy and the National Youth Strategy. Strengthening youth work apprenticeship pathways would support workforce development while improving the effectiveness and consistency of these programmes, which rely on trusted relationships and early intervention at a local level.

Apprenticeship delivery is **further shaped by the 'Apprenticeship Levy'**, a tax introduced in 2017 and paid by employers with a pay bill (the total gross pay an organisation pays to employees) of over £3 million.[5] In its current form, levy funds can be used only for apprenticeship training costs.

Key features of the Level 3 Youth Support Worker Apprenticeship include:

- must be employed for a minimum of 16 hours per week
- required to provide 20% off-the-job training time
- must be taken during paid working hours and used for structured learning activities linked to the apprenticeship standard

Key features of the Level 6 Youth Worker Apprenticeship include:

- must be employed for a minimum of 30 hours per week
- expected to have approximately one working day per week allocated to off-the-job training, again accounting for at least 20% of paid working time

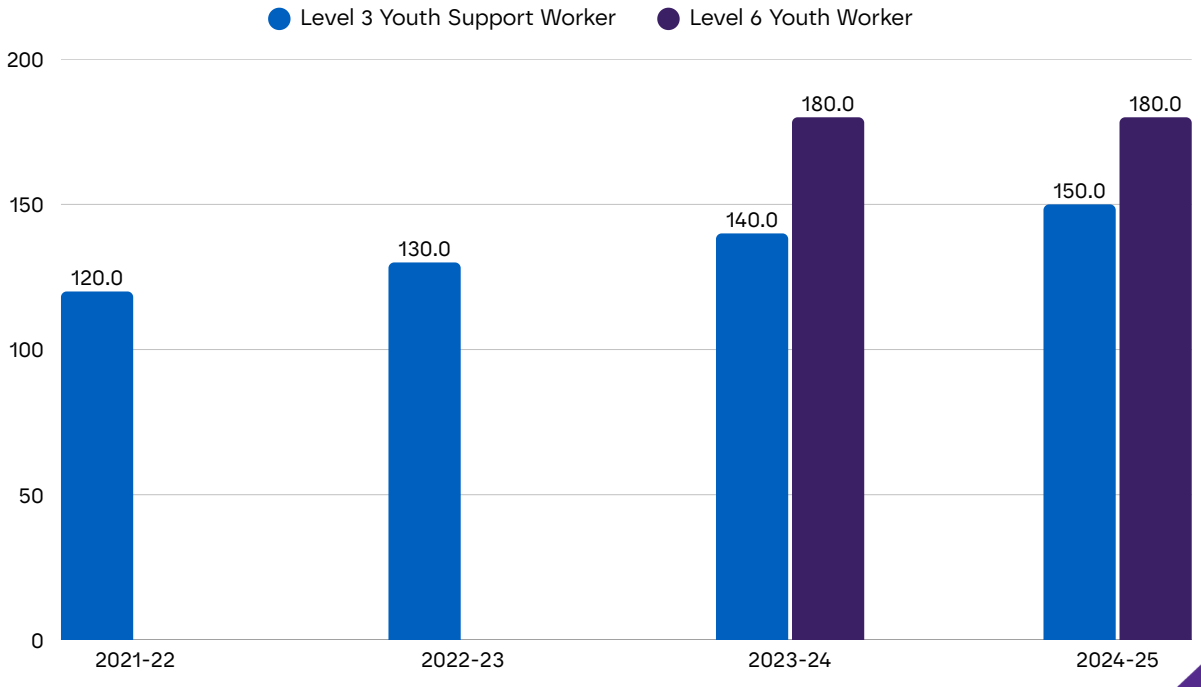
The NYA has administered Apprenticeship Levy funding through its Thrive partnership with NatWest that aims to improve young people's money management skills, confidence, wellbeing and resilience.[6] Through this programme, the NYA manages £3 million of levy-funded training budget for a targeted 220 apprentices. Apprentices can be connected to providers delivering the Level 3 Diploma (18 months; £4,500 per apprenticeship) and the Level 6 Degree Apprenticeship (36 months; £20,000 per apprenticeship).

At the last time of analysis (December 2025), 156 apprentices had started through the programme:

- 71 undertaking the Level 3 Youth Support Worker Apprenticeship
- 85 undertaking the Level 6 Youth Support Worker Apprenticeship

Current take-up of youth worker apprenticeships

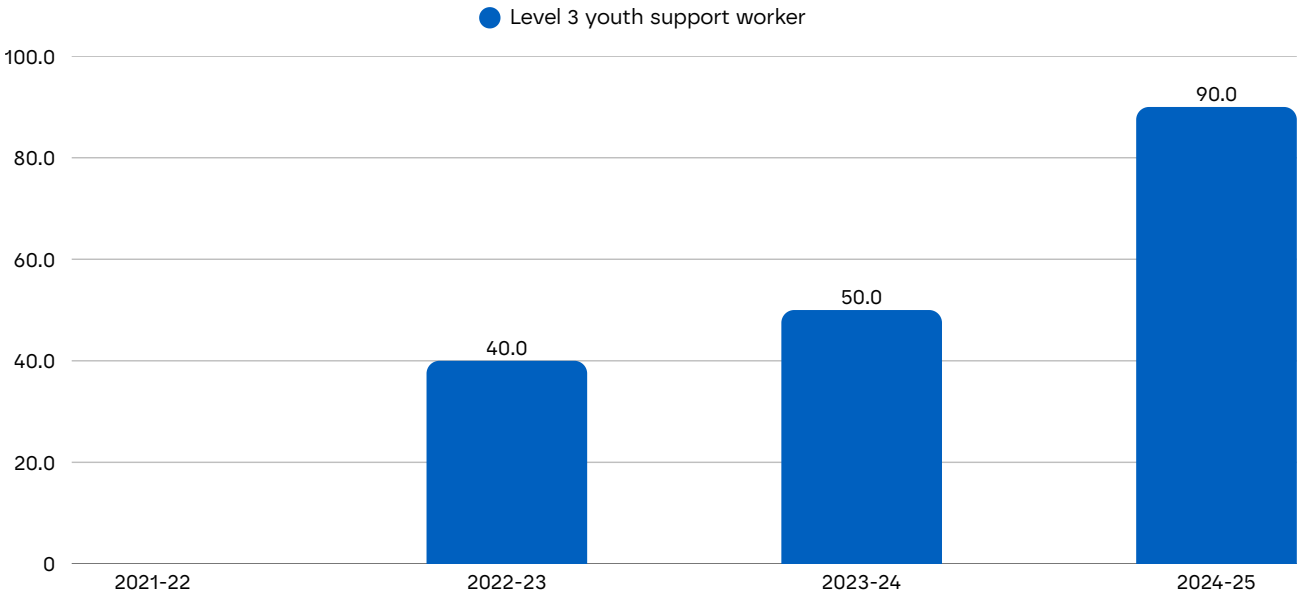
Figure 1: No. of apprenticeship starts by Level 3 and Level 6



Based on data provided by the Department for Education,[7] in 2024-25 the number of youth sector staff taking up Level 3 Youth Support Worker Apprenticeships was 150, up from 140 in 2023-24. The number of youth sector staff taking up Level 6 Youth Worker Apprenticeships has also increased, with 180 in 2024-25 (see figure 1).

Completions of apprenticeships have steadily increased since they were first introduced (see figure 2). Although there have been no completing Level 6 youth workers yet, the first group of apprentices are due to qualify in 2027.

Figure 2: No. of apprenticeship completions by Level 3



1.2 Scope of the report

This report presents learning on the effectiveness of youth work apprenticeships for developing future youth workers. In particular, it explores:

- the current efficiency of the outcomes and outputs for apprenticeship learning pathways
- whether apprenticeship learning pathways meet the needs of apprentices and training providers, identifying barriers, challenges and opportunities for the future development of the apprenticeship qualification framework
- provide a body of evidence for delivery leads and policymakers on current apprenticeship pathway options, including recommendations for future improvement

This evaluation was undertaken between August 2025 and March 2026 and used a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data. An online survey was targeted towards Level 3 and Level 6 apprentices to provide indicative insights into apprentice confidence, skills development, satisfaction and future intentions. In-depth interviews and focus groups with apprentices, employers and training providers also offered a richer understanding of how the apprenticeship model is currently operating. Additional contextual information was drawn from available programme monitoring data and HEI monitoring reports produced by the NYA.

In summary:

- 47 surveys were completed
- 10 interviews were conducted with current apprentices, nine were Level 6 youth worker apprentices and one was a Level 3 apprentice
- eight interviews were conducted with HE providers and five interviews with employers

> “There’s space to talk, to ask questions right there and then, and to learn from each other.”
>
> — Level 6 apprentice



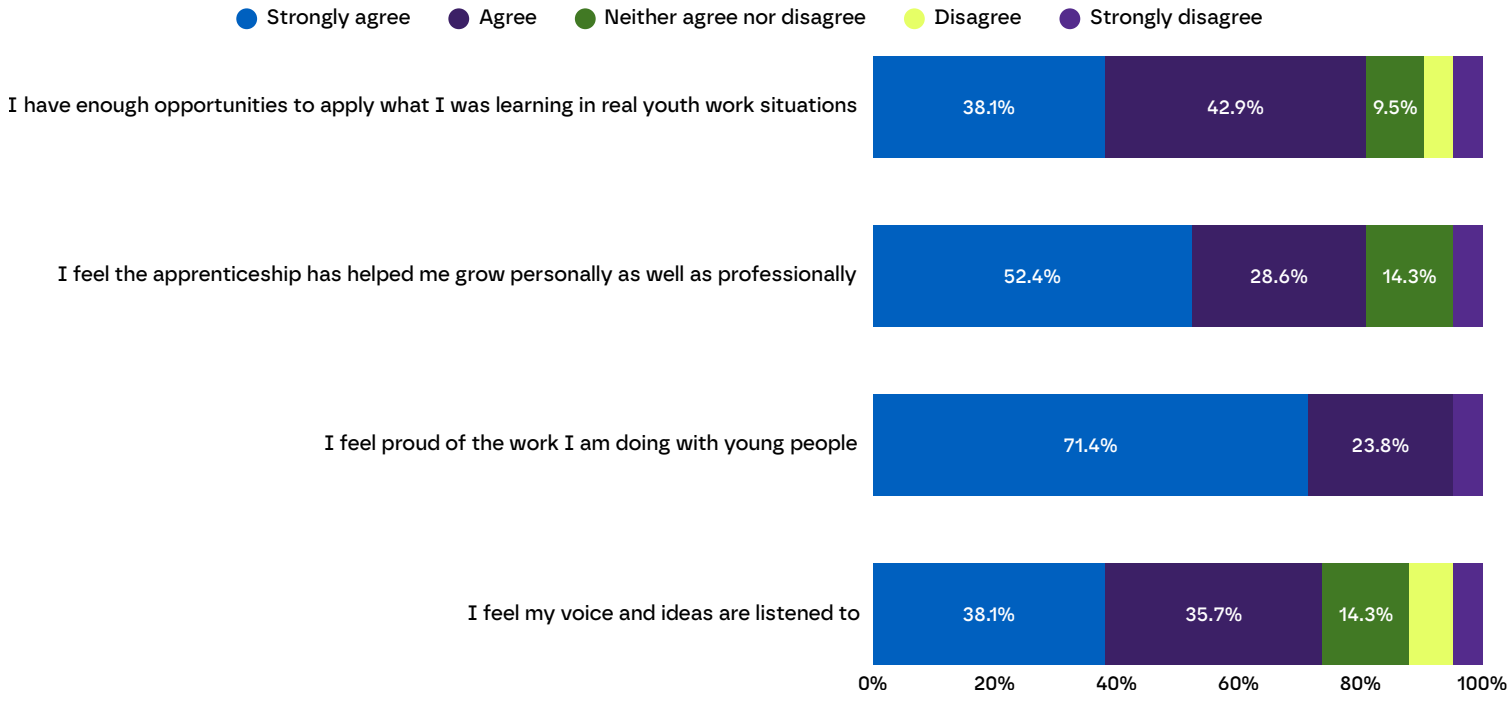
2. Findings

The 47 Survey responses show strong support for the apprenticeship programme among apprentices themselves. Most apprentices were very positive about the programme: around **two-thirds (25 participants) rated their likelihood of recommending it at 8–10.**

In addition:

- apprentices **report consistently positive experiences** across most aspects of the apprenticeship (see figure 3)
- a **majority of respondents (21) agree or strongly agree that their voice and ideas are listened to**, though responses show slightly more variation, suggesting some differences in individual experience
- **feelings of pride in their work with young people are particularly strong**, with almost all respondents (40) agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement
- most apprentices feel the apprenticeship supports both personal and professional development, including gains in confidence, reflective skills and ability to articulate practice
- apprentices largely agree they have meaningful opportunities to apply learning in real work contexts, highlighting the apprenticeship's relevance to day-to-day youth work practice.

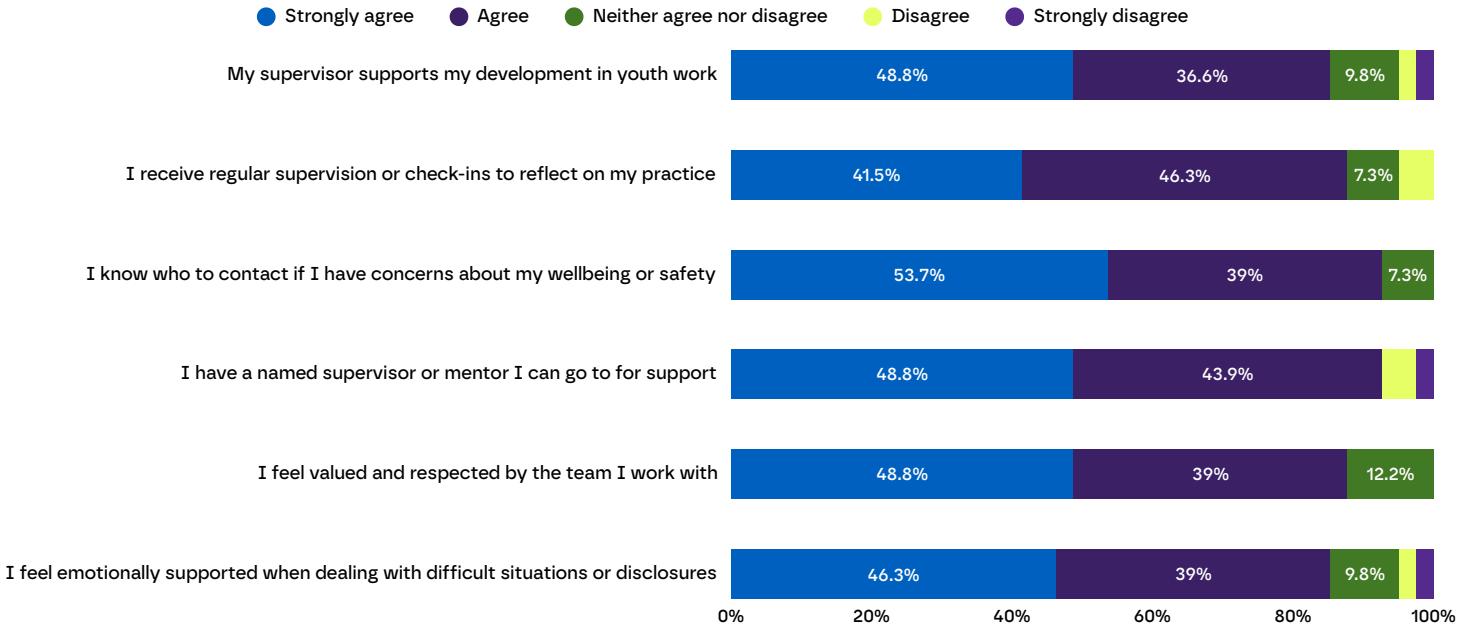
Figure 3: Apprentices' experiences of the programme



1.2 Apprentice support

Survey responses indicate that most apprentices feel well supported by their employers across a range of practical, pastoral and developmental measures. **Apprentices report particularly strong agreement to emotional support, feeling valued and respected within their teams, and having access to a named supervisor or mentor** they could approach for support. For each of these areas, a clear majority of respondents selected either "strongly agree" or "agree", suggesting that employer support is currently both accessible and meaningful.

Figure 4: Apprentices' experiences of support on the programme



Regular supervision is common amongst apprentices, providing opportunities for reflection, with supervisors actively supporting both their practice and professional development.

2.1.1 Support from learning providers

Training providers describe supporting apprentices through dedicated coaches or supervisors, meeting the requirements for oversight by qualified youth workers. This approach provides consistent, high-quality support that strengthens reflective practice and professional development. The professional background of tutors is viewed as enhancing the credibility, relevance and practical usefulness of the support offered to apprentices.

> "All the tutors that we have and the coaches that work with them, they're all from obviously a youth support background."
>
> **— Learning provider**

HEI providers highlight benefits of being in a university environment including access to diagnostic assessments, libraries and wider academic support. Non-HEI providers were more likely to emphasise more holistic support, including special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision, help with maths and English, and life-skills development.

Some providers describe tailoring their support to regional contexts, ensuring that learning materials and discussions reflect the particular issues faced by young people in different local areas. One provider explains:

> "We drill down into certain key areas as well. So we'll look at what's happening in Liverpool compared to Teesside. Teesside, compared to Cumbria, we'll always look at different areas to see what they're dealing with."
>
> **— Learning provider**

Feedback from apprentices

Apprentices frequently describe their providers as responsive, approachable and attentive to their development. Supervisions are viewed as particularly valuable, helping apprentices to reflect critically on their work and consider how their practice aligned with youth work values. One apprentice explains how reflective questioning helps shape their approach.

> "They're always questioning. OK, why is it? What is it? How come you're doing that? And then I bring it back to my workplace and I make sure that it aligns with the youth work values that we are being taught at that time."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

However, support is not being experienced consistently by all apprentices. Some report that supervisions have become more procedural over time, feeling increasingly scripted rather than tailored to their development needs. One apprentice described this shift as feeling like a "tickbox" exercise.

> "The conversations were usually pretty flexible, although it does feel like now they're starting to move to where it's a bit more scripted, which is probably not as beneficial but yeah, I think it feels like they've probably got their own tick lists they've got to do themselves."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

These findings point to an opportunity for learning providers to strengthen their understanding of apprentice experiences through more systematic feedback, helping to ensure that support arrangements are working as intended for all apprentices.

Variations between training providers

The findings reveal differences in delivery between training providers, leading to uneven experiences. Across interviews with apprentices, employers and training providers there are noted differences between HEI and non-HEI delivery models, particularly in relation to cohort size, delivery format, professional mix within groups, and the nature of support offered.

For apprentices studying with non-HEI providers, large online teaching groups are being reported as a challenge by some apprentices. Sometimes this restricts opportunities for interaction and limited meaningful dialogue, if this is what the apprentice needs. One apprentice reflected that sessions felt **"like you couldn't really jump in or ask anything without interrupting the flow of a hundred other people"**. This could potentially make reflective engagement difficult.

In contrast, HEI apprentices consistently report much smaller group sizes, typically between six and ten. This scale gives opportunity to create a more discursive learning environment. As one apprentice explains:

> "There's space to talk, to ask questions right there and then, and to learn from each other."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

These smaller groups are viewed as particularly valuable for fostering peer learning, reflective discussion, and stronger relationships with tutors and fellow apprentices.

Another key point of difference between providers is the professional mix of apprentices within cohorts. Non-HEI providers often recruit across multiple sectors, including teaching, support work, pastoral roles, and youth work, resulting in highly mixed professional groups. Providers frame this as a strength, highlighting opportunities for cross-sector learning and their ability to "**adapt content to mixed professional groups and encourage cross-sector learning."**

However, apprentices and employers do not always share this perspective. Some employers express concern about the dominance of school-based professionals, which they feel reduces the relevance of discussion for youth work apprentices. As one employer comments:

> "It's quite filled with teachers... we want them to learn from other youth workers. That's a challenge."
>
> **— Employer**

Several apprentices similarly report that group discussions often drift toward classroom-based scenarios, limiting opportunities to explore youth work practice and values in depth.

Providers recognise this tension, acknowledging the difficulty of designing content that resonates with such a diverse set of roles and organisational contexts.

> "Our apprentices and employers come from such a variety of services... encapsulating all those different shifts and needs is a challenge."
>
> **— Independent learning provider**

Despite these challenges, some non-HEI providers demonstrate a level of flexibility that employers particularly value. This includes travelling to organisational sites, adapting delivery around shift patterns and staffing rotas, and tailoring content to local issues affecting young people, such as e-scooter safety, substance misuse or domestic abuse. This flexibility is seen as a practical strength and an important factor in supporting employers with limited capacity.

From these findings we can see that variation in delivery between training providers can present both strengths and challenges to apprentices. The key lesson is that apprentices need to have access to courses that are right for their learning needs, depending upon what they are looking for, while also ensuring that they are developing the right skills and knowledge to be effective youth workers and support workers.

2.1.2 Support from employers

Employers support apprentices through a combination of structured supervision, developmental opportunities and collaboration with training providers. Many employers also encourage individual development by sourcing training or specialist input in response to apprentices' interests. In some organisations, dedicated staff or named leads provide consistent support around off-the-job training and pastoral needs. Tripartite meetings (between employers, apprentices and training providers) further supported alignment and progress.

Additionally, apprentices describe a range of support mechanisms that aim to nurture apprentices' development, build their confidence, and ensure they could balance their learning with the demands of practice.

> "I can say to my manager, like, I really want to learn how to do this thing, and she'll say, cool, let me find a little course to sign you on or let me, you know, bring someone in to kind of like teach the workforce about how to do this."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

While these approaches are valued by apprentices, employers identify the intensity of support required can also generate additional capacity and financial pressures. For example, several employers describe providing dedicated support for apprentices to complete off-the-job training hours.

While apprentices clearly benefit from structured and responsive supervision, for some this represents a significant financial consideration when deciding whether to take on new apprentices and can act as a barrier to expanding apprenticeship opportunities even when their long-term value is recognised.

Balancing employment and academic workload

Balancing work and academic demands is a consistent challenge, driven by the unpredictable nature of youth work rather than individual shortcomings. Apprentices report that frontline responsibilities often disrupt planned study time, creating ongoing pressure and conflict between work and learning.

Many apprentices emphasise that although employers are generally supportive in principle, the realities of service delivery often make flexibility difficult to achieve in practice. One apprentice summarises the dilemma clearly:

> "I've tried to make things decrease, but in youth work there's no end date... you can't just hand another young person over that easily."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

This reflects the reality of youth work, where continuity and trust are central and where crises or needs cannot be neatly postponed protecting academic study hours. Several apprentices describe being pulled away from university work to respond to safeguarding issues or unexpected demands.

> "People forget you're doing stuff... you get 50 questions, then suddenly someone says 'I've got a safeguarding issue', and everything has to stop."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

Some apprentices acknowledge that employers are supportive when challenges are raised but feel that the day-to-day pressure of the work environment make these conversations difficult to initiate.

> "There is support if I cancelled all my appointments tomorrow... but realistically, that's not going to happen."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

Workload pressures are also experienced differently depending on apprentices' roles and levels of responsibility. Apprentices in management positions report feeling unable to redistribute tasks or step back from caseloads, describing a sense of responsibility that make protected study time difficult.

> "There's no one to pass things to... if something happens, I'm the one who has to deal with it."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

Taken together, the evidence highlights some structural challenges between apprenticeship requirements and the operational realities of youth work practice, particularly in relation to protecting study time. Although apprenticeships offer valuable opportunities for integrated learning, the relationship-based nature of youth work can undermine the feasibility of meeting academic commitments consistently.

This highlights the need for better organisational planning, clearer expectations and possibly sector-wide guidance so apprentices have the time and support to fully engage with their studies without impacting the quality of youth work.

2.2 What is working well

Figure 4 shows very high overall satisfaction with the apprenticeship, with a majority (36) of respondents reporting a positive experience. Most apprentices describe themselves as either satisfied or very satisfied, with both categories accounting for just over two-fifths of responses each. A much smaller proportion report a neutral experience, while only a small minority express dissatisfaction.

2.2.1 Impact on apprentices

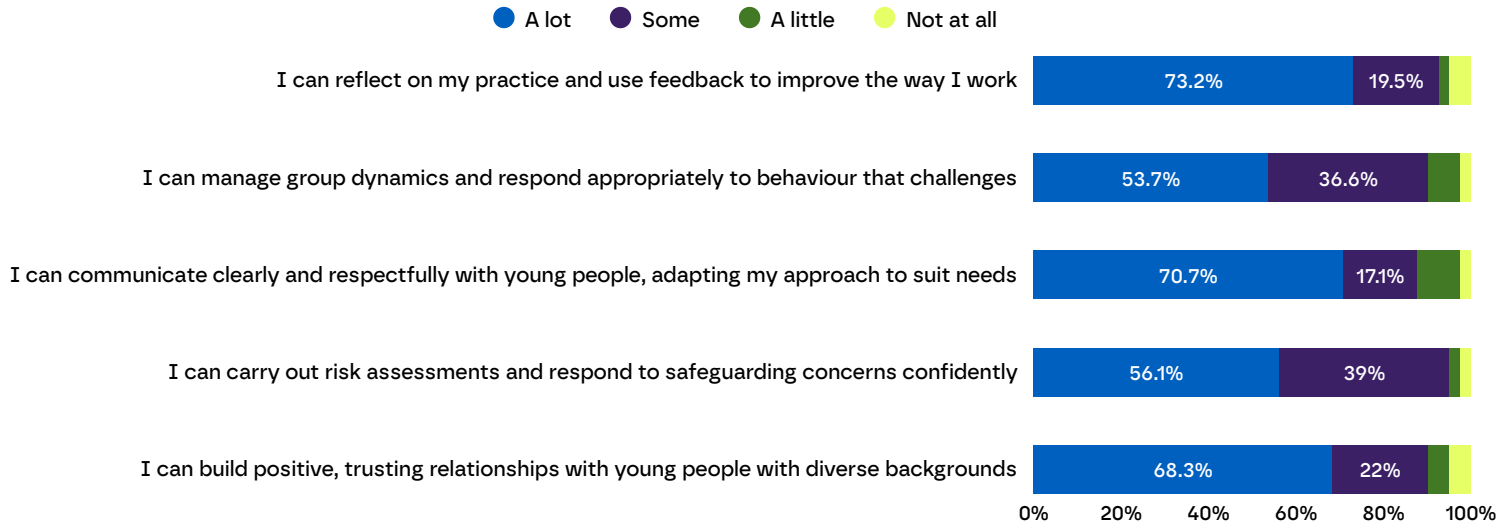
The survey data and interview evidence consistently shows that apprentices are experiencing growth in their professional skills, behaviours and knowledge. This evidence is reinforced through multiple perspectives including apprentices, learning providers and employers.[8]

The survey data on skills, behaviours and knowledge development further reinforces the impact of the apprenticeship described in the qualitative evidence. Across all three areas, apprentices report substantial improvements, with the majority indicating that their experience on the apprenticeship programme has increased their capabilities either "a lot" or "some" in every domain measured.

In relation to professional skills, apprentices report particularly strong gains in reflective practice and communication.

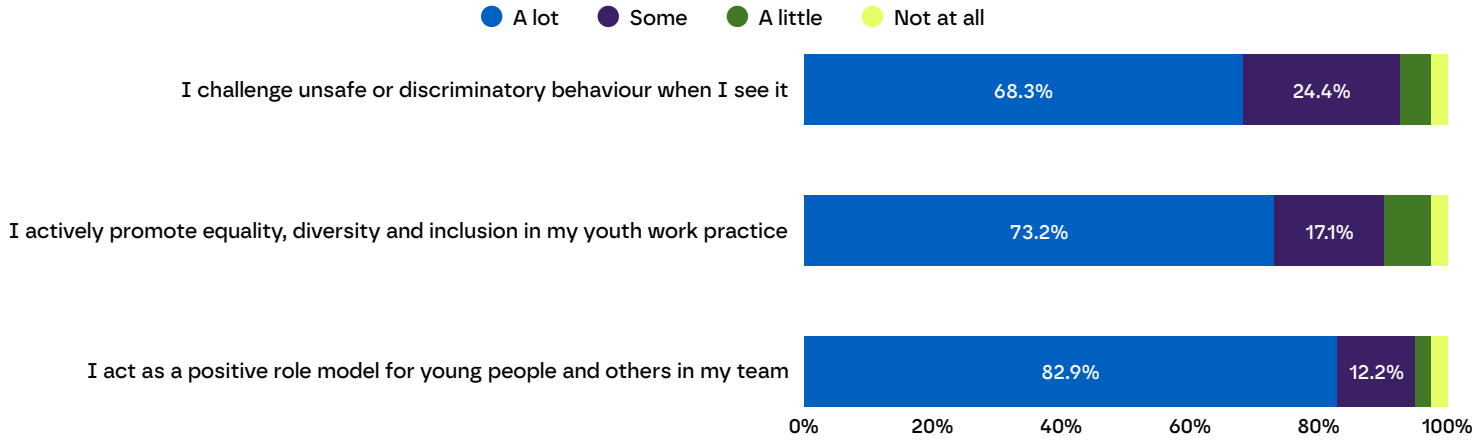
- Most apprentices (30) state the programme significantly strengthens their ability to reflect on practice and use feedback to improve their work.
- Increasing confidence is also reported in communicating clearly and respectfully with young people, and in adapting approaches when needed (29).
- Apprentices note improvements in building positive, trusting relationships with young people from diverse backgrounds.
- Many also report greater confidence in managing group dynamics and behavioural challenges effectively.
- While responses around risk assessment and safeguarding are slightly more mixed than other areas, the majority still report meaningful improvements, suggesting increased confidence in responding appropriately to safeguarding concerns.

Figure 5: Skills development through apprenticeship



Reported changes in professional behaviours are similarly strong. As shown in figure 6, most apprentices (39) indicate that the apprenticeship programme has helped them to act more confidently as positive role models for young people and others in their team (either a lot or some). Apprentices also report substantial increases in their commitment to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion within their youth work practice, as well as greater confidence in challenging unfair or discriminatory behaviour when encountered. These responses suggest that the apprenticeship programme is not only developing technical competence, but also reinforcing core youth work values and ethical practice.

Figure 6: Behaviour change of apprentices through apprenticeship experience



In terms of knowledge development, apprentices overwhelmingly report improved knowledge of how to plan, deliver and evaluate youth work sessions that meet young people's needs, a stronger understanding of safeguarding policies and risk management within youth work settings, and a deeper grasp of the core values and principles underpinning youth work practice. Apprentices also report greater understanding of the different forms of youth work, including open access, targeted and digital approaches, and the importance of youth voice and participation. Knowledge gains related to personal, social and emotional development are particularly strong, aligning with employer and apprentice interviews.

Increased confidence and professional identity

Apprentices said having a recognised qualification gives them confidence and a stronger sense of professional identity. It helps them feel more credible and respected when working with parents and professionals such as teachers and NHS staff.

> "The work that I'm doing now makes me more confident because there's a programme and a process that I will complete that makes me feel backed up."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

More experienced apprentices report increased confidence but find early course content largely familiar. Instead, the courses helped them to better articulate their existing practice and strengthen their ability to support and guide less experienced colleagues.

> "I think there is stuff that makes me feel a bit more competent and confident to have those conversations with other people around youth work and help them think of different ways and different methods to explore. So yes, it assists me in supporting new youth workers."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

Improved employment outcomes and economic impact

Similarly, employers also highlight the wider benefits the programme brings to younger apprentices, particularly in relation to increasing their independence and enabling fuller engagement in the economic aspects of adulthood. Employers describe how the apprenticeship programme has given younger apprentices their first opportunities to manage earnings, open bank accounts and make independent financial decisions.

> "They have begun to have bank accounts, you know, some have bought motorcycles to get around. It really is empowering for a young person to engage in the world of work."
>
> **— Employer**

> "Some of our young people who are impacted by social disadvantage have saved like 2-3-4 thousand pounds as a result of working and have plans for the very first time. They can see that in a certain length of time they will be able to move out into rental accommodation. You know they can move in with partners … they are getting outside of Blackpool and going to Preston."
>
> **— Employer**

In addition to the personal and economic gains for apprentices, employers also report strong employment outcomes following completion of the apprenticeship. As one employer notes:

> "Everyone who has completed their apprenticeship has been given a job, and it's a more senior role."
>
> **— Employer**

The apprenticeship serves not only as a development opportunity but also as a clear pathway into sustained employment in the youth sector. Evidence shows it delivers wider benefits beyond workforce development, including greater independence, financial stability, and a stronger sense of personal agency, improving outcomes for those who undertake it.

2.2.2 Impact on organisations

The most important organisational impact is reflected in improved outcomes for young people. As apprentices develop professionally, the quality of support, relational practice, and opportunities increases, demonstrating that the apprenticeship programmes both strengthens workforce capability and directly enhances young people's experiences.

Enhanced confidence in practice

Interview data also clearly demonstrates direct and noticeable effect on the organisations apprentices are working in. As apprentices develop practical skills through training and experience, they gain greater confidence in applying these skills in real-world settings.

Employers describe how this growing competence supports deeper engagement with young people, encourages more reflective and intentional practice, and reinforces a stronger youth-centred focus within their teams. In this sense, confidence becomes a catalyst for improved practice, influencing not only how apprentices work, but also how services evolve around them.

> "The confidence and creativity of the worker and their ability to set their own tasks, figure out their outcomes and understand needs – doing that needs assessment so the impact on young people of the work is more specific to them. "
>
> **— Employer**

Apprentices also reflect on how their increased skills and confidence allows them to deliver more effective youth work sessions and to create greater opportunities for young people to shape their own experiences.

> "It's given them more of a chance to have a voice on what they're doing."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

Another echoed this, explaining that they now feel more capable of working in a youth-led way, adapting their approach to better reflect the needs, interests and priorities of the young people they support. This theme is repeated across several interviews, with many apprentices noting that their growing competence allows them to create more responsive and participatory environments.

Apprentices also describe becoming more confident in supporting young people through complex or challenging situations. This includes navigating sensitive issues, providing emotional support, and facilitating opportunities for young people to explore their own boundaries safely. One apprentice reflected on this shift in confidence, sharing:

> "So I think like pushing them to like a limit within reason, you know, I mean like I never would have done that however long ago when I first tried compared to now."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

This suggests a significant development in their ability to manage risk and empower young people while maintaining safe practice. The same apprentice offers a practical example of their growth in conflict management, an area they had previously avoided. They describe stepping into a challenging situation, saying:

> "I'm jumping in the middle of arguments and conflict resolution and after I'm like, whoa, okay, that was scary, but okay, I did it and I survived and everyone's happy now."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

Apprentices also report feeling more capable of working effectively with a broader range of young people. For example, one apprentice who had previously worked predominantly with LGBT+ groups, who were mainly female or gender non-conforming young people, shared that they now feel confident engaging with groups of boys and those outside of the LGBT+ space. This demonstrates a growing ability to adapt to diverse youth populations, which is essential for inclusive, equitable youth work delivery, and a key component of the apprenticeships.

Improved organisation practice

Another clear impact coming from the interviews on both organisations and the young people they work with is the introduction of new ideas, learning, and examples of best practice brought in by apprentices through their academic studies. Both apprentices and employers reflect on how apprentices often challenge their assumptions and prompts staff teams to reconsider traditional models of youth provision. Insights gained through the apprenticeship, particularly from the theoretical and reflective components, encourage wider teams to question whether longstanding approaches remained fit for purpose in meeting the needs of today's young people. As one employer explains:

> "So the traditional model, is it something that young people want or not want anymore? Now I don't want him to go into his degree and thinking we get rid of all youth clubs, right? That's not the ultimate goal, but it is about making sure it's current and it's fresh."
>
> **— Employer**

This infusion of fresh perspectives is reported as being particularly valuable in organisations with longstanding staff teams, where practice has historically been more insular or slow to change. Apprentices will bring in new ideas encountered through their coursework, placements or visits to other youth organisations. One employer gives a practical example of this, describing how exposure to new environments directly influences organisational development:

> "We have had some people who have gone and visited another organisation and seen that they have a sensory room, and have come back wanting to do that here."
>
> **— Employer**

By bringing contemporary practice into established settings, apprentices play an active role in challenging the status quo, broadening organisational horizons, and ensuring youth provision evolves in line with the changing needs and expectations of young people.

Value of long-term consistency and internal workforce pipeline

Beyond the immediate practice benefits, organisations frequently emphasise the importance of apprenticeships for long-term workforce development. Employers highlight the value of having an apprentice committed to the organisation for a full three-year period, noting that this continuity is particularly significant in youth work. This long-term presence is viewed as supporting relationship consistency and contributing to more meaningful outcomes for young people.

> "You know that you've got the investment of three years of somebody into young people's lives, which is a massive chunk in the journey of youth work, really."
>
> **— Employer**

In addition, many organisations describe ongoing challenges in recruiting youth workers with approved qualifications. Apprenticeships are seen as a practical and effective way of tackling this shortage by developing local talent with a strong connection to their communities. One employer articulates this approach as intentionally focused on building a "culturally recognisable" workforce, ensuring that staff reflect the identities, lived experiences, and cultural contexts of the young people they support. They explain:

> "We're taking people from the community and training them up. There was a bit of a big thing four years ago where young people saying we want to get out of this place because it's not a great place to grow up and work. So, we're trying to create work through youth work, so young people stay in Blackpool and bring about the change that they want to see and the change they want to be."
>
> **— Employer**

> "The phrase we're using is that when the young people come to one of our centres, they will culturally recognise the staff team that are working there."
>
> **— Employer**

This approach is described by one employer as "growing their own" youth workers, with multiple organisations discussing recruiting apprentices from among the young people they have previously supported. The impact of this strategy appears to be two-fold. Organisations benefit from a more stable, rooted and culturally resonant workforce, while young people receive higher quality, more consistent support from staff who understand their local context and lived realities.

Finally, employers frequently describe the wider inspirational effect of the apprenticeship model. In organisations explicitly committed to developing their own workforce, young people can visibly see employment pathways and progression opportunities that feel tangible and achievable. In other settings, simply having apprentices present sparks conversations among young people about apprenticeships more broadly, not only within youth work but across other sectors.

> "We've talked about the opportunity for apprenticeships in catering for other areas. It's opened up that dialogue within our organisation."
>
> **— Employer**

2.3 Benefits of apprenticeships compared to traditional routes

Across the interviews with apprentices, employers and training providers, various benefits of the apprenticeship are identified. These benefits are framed not only in terms of accessibility and financial support, but also in relation to the practical nature of youth work, the development of the workforce pipeline, and the long-term sustainability of the profession.

Financial accessibility

One of the most prominent themes is the financial accessibility offered through the apprenticeship route. Apprentices, employers and training providers consistently note the significant advantage of having tuition fees covered. For many apprentices, this removes a major barrier to entering the profession, enabling them to gain a recognised Level 6 qualification while earning a wage. Several apprentices describe how they have previously considered undertaking a degree, either in youth work or in another subject, but are deterred by tuition costs or by personal circumstances that made full-time university study unfeasible. The apprenticeship route, therefore, provides a realistic and attainable alternative that widens access to the profession.

> "For me it was the worries about the courses being right and also the thought of the fees and everything like that."
>
> **— Level 6 apprentice**

Despite this being one of the most frequently mentioned benefits, not everyone views the financial model positively. One employer expresses concern that the lack of personal financial investment from apprentices may reduce their motivation or commitment, comparing this to traditional university students who pay tuition fees either directly or from student loan programmes. From this perspective, the apprenticeship model may inadvertently shift perceptions of value, with some employers feeling that the financial stakes for apprentices are lower.

> "If someone back in the day went to university and studied youth work – they're financially buying into that, and even today, I've not heard anyone saying we need to be paying all university students while they're doing their courses. Everyone just accepts that's fine. There's financial buy into that. So, I don't understand when you're doing degree-level apprenticeships why there's not that same emphasis on financially paying."
>
> **— Employer**

Similarly, employers highlight that while apprenticeships remove the financial burden for individuals, the cost is not eliminated from the system altogether but is instead redistributed. Employers note that hosting an apprentice requires significant investment, both financially and in terms of staff time and capacity. For organisations already operating under financial strain, this shift presents challenges. Some describe needing to carefully weigh the cost of taking on an apprentice, particularly more than one, against the potential long-term benefits.

These concerns suggest that clearer communication is needed about the financial model of apprenticeships, including the responsibilities placed on employers and the long-term value for the youth sector workforce. Both apprentices and employers recognise the clear advantages, but there remains uncertainty and differing perceptions around where the financial burden lies and how sustainable it is for organisations in the current funding landscape.

Alignment with youth work

Many apprentices describe the apprenticeship route as being better aligned with the practical nature of youth work. They value the opportunity to learn through hands-on experience and feel that the apprenticeship model suits their preferred learning style far more effectively than a purely academic route. Anecdotally, across the interviews there is a broad consensus that youth work, as a profession rooted in relational and experiential practice, lends itself naturally to a more applied, on-the-job learning approach.

Training providers, however, emphasise the importance of maintaining both apprenticeship and traditional degree routes. They argue that removing the non-apprenticeship pathway would limit apprentice choice and risk undermining the professional status of youth work, particularly given the sector's long history of fighting for recognition as a graduate profession. As one provider stated:

> "We want a professional workforce. We want practitioners who are degree qualified and if we're removing one of those options for them, I think it's bad news."
>
> **— HEI training provider**

Another provider notes the symbolic significance of maintaining a traditional degree route, arguing:

> "We've struggled as a profession for so long to get recognition. I'm not sure that removing those kinds of opportunities is a good idea."
>
> **— HEI training provider**

Conversely, other providers and employers feel that the apprenticeship route has helped keep youth work accessible even after it formally became a graduate profession in 2009. For them, apprenticeships offer a more inclusive and accessible alternative for individuals who may have been excluded by traditional academic pathways.

> "That's what the apprenticeships have done in my mind. It bridges the gap that was created in 2009 when it became a graduate profession."
>
> **— Employer**

Despite the clear benefits, some potential apprentices continue to face barriers to accessing apprenticeships due to employer constraints, contractual limits or funding rules. These structural issues mean that individuals who wish to undertake the qualification are sometimes unable to do so.

One training provider describes this frustration:

> "Someone recently left because her employers wouldn't take on the apprenticeship and her contract came to an end. So, she has missed out."
>
> **— HEI training provider**

This suggests that while apprenticeships increase accessibility in theory, access is still contingent on employer willingness, capacity and funding requirements. It is also influenced by employers' awareness and understanding of available funding mechanisms, such as levy transfer schemes (for example the NatWest levy transfer), which can shape take-up.

Employers and training providers also emphasise the value of apprenticeships in developing a long-term workforce pipeline. Many describe apprenticeships as a crucial mechanism for attracting new practitioners, supporting their development over a sustained period, and enabling them to gain extensive practical experience alongside academic learning. This is frequently contrasted with traditional degree routes, where placements are shorter and apprentices often juggle study with part-time work.

> "I've seen the progression or the decrease of people accessing the degree for youth work over the years … and I think the introduction to the Level 6 youth work apprentices is the way forward. It's a real, beneficial way of developing a workforce that are going to be delivering youth work throughout the three years and developing their skills, but also gaining the sort of practice and the education and enhance them as professional youth workers, rather than being at university and only having an 8-week placement each year and then trying to hold down a part-time job."
>
> **— Employer**

Some employers feel that apprenticeships facilitate quicker, deeper learning and engagement with the profession. Because apprentices are embedded in practice from the outset, they are able to apply theoretical learning immediately, engage in reflective practice more consistently, and develop stronger professional identities earlier in their journey.

Training providers echo this observation, noting that while both routes produce capable practitioners, the apprenticeship model accelerates the process through continuous integration of theory and practice.

> "I don't think the quality of an apprentice's development is different... but I think you get the same enlightened practitioner sooner with the apprenticeship."
>
> **— Employer**

2.4 Apprenticeship pathways

Gaps in existing pathway

Across interviews with training providers and employers, a critical gap has been repeatedly identified within the current qualification pathway. Both groups highlight the absence of a funded Level 2 route, which they feel significantly restricts access for younger apprentices aged 16 to 17 and for individuals who were felt not yet academically ready for Level 3. Without this foundation, many potential apprentices were unable to enter the youth work pathway at all.

Training providers described the difficult position they often found themselves in. Several reported regularly meeting enthusiastic prospective apprentices who were unsuitable for Level 3, either due to academic readiness or lack of foundational skills.

> "(...) you don't want to set an apprentice up to fail. You want to stretch and challenge them, but there's only so much we can do. And if their academic ability isn't right for Level 3, then we've got to say I really don't think this is right level at this time."
>
> **— Independent training provider**

This resulted in apprentices being turned away, despite their interest in pursuing youth work, simply because no appropriate entry-level option existed. Employers echoed these concerns and expressed frustration that the lack of Level 2 limited them from developing talent already connected to their services.

> "I think an earlier pathway and an earlier introduction into youth work would be a way of encouraging more people to join."
>
> **— Employer**

In the context of the broader workforce challenges facing the sector, providers and employers both expressed concern that the current pathway fails to attract or prepare those who could benefit most from an accessible, early introduction to youth work.

The importance of this gap was heightened by the strong value placed on apprenticeships more generally. Several employers described the apprenticeship model as one of the most effective workforce development initiatives in years. This made the lack of an accessible starting point even more significant, as it prevented a wider pool of potential practitioners from progressing into Level 3 and eventually Level 6.

Overall, the absence of a funded Level 2 route undermines inclusivity, limits early entry into the profession, and restricts progression through the youth work pipeline. At a time of chronic workforce shortages, this structural gap represents a significant barrier to building a sustainable and diverse youth work workforce.

Establishing youth work as a recognised profession

Apprenticeships were widely described as influencing the professional identity, status and recognition of youth work. Employers consistently emphasised the importance of grounding practice in theory, values and a shared professional language, and they viewed apprenticeships as central to this shift.

> "If you're going to do some multicultural work (...) it is a political statement. It is about that social change about the change you want to see. And I think having people who have had off-the-job hours or have spent time thinking about that is significant."
>
> **— Employer**

For many, apprenticeships reinforced the idea that youth work is not simply an activity but a skilled profession. Having apprentices in the workforce also appeared to give organisations greater confidence to identify as legitimate youth work providers rather than informal youth activity spaces.

> "There's a massive difference between saying we're an organisation that works for young people and an organisation that delivers youth work."
>
> **— Employer**

> "If my son falls over and scratches his leg and I put a plaster on his bleeding knee, that is a good thing and everyone would agree with that. But it doesn't make me a doctor … youth work is a profession. It has a particular value base, it has a particular skillset."
>
> **— Employer**

Summary

Overall, the evaluation demonstrates that youth work apprenticeships are a highly valued and effective route into the profession, supporting apprentices' skills, confidence, professional identity and employment outcomes while delivering tangible benefits to organisations and young people. The evidence shows strong apprentice satisfaction and meaningful integration of theory and practice, alongside clear contributions to workforce sustainability.

However, variations in delivery quality, structural pressures on study time, and gaps in progression pathways limit the model's full potential. Addressing these challenges will be essential to ensuring apprenticeships play a consistent, inclusive and sustainable role in strengthening the youth work workforce over the long term.

3. Recommendations

Four overarching recommendations have emerged. These relate to:

- widening access
- strengthening professional identity
- ensuring consistency and quality across apprenticeship delivery

The recommendations presented are the result of collaborative co-analysis, discussion and input from the NYA Workforce Transformation Team ensuring they reflect both the research findings and sector expertise.

3.1 Widening access to the apprenticeship pathway

The absence of a funded entry-level pathway restricts early engagement with the profession and undermines the development of a diverse and sustainable workforce.

Recommendation 1: Introduce a 'Foundation to Level 3' programme.

- The NYA should work with other sector bodies and the government to develop and fund a Level 2 Youth Work Apprenticeship or transition pathway, creating a structured progression route for individuals not yet ready for Level 3 and strengthening the pipeline into advanced training.
- Clearer guidance is needed to help employers and providers understand the difference between Level 2 and Level 3 learning to prevent inappropriate entry and reduce apprentice attrition.

3.2 Strengthening professional identity and workforce development

The findings show that apprenticeships significantly support professionalism, theoretical understanding and the confidence of new practitioners. They also help organisations shape their internal workforce in more sustainable ways.

Recommendation 2: Establish an employer forum to unlock barriers within apprenticeship pathways and establish good practice.

- The forum should share good practice on supporting apprentices, navigating requirements, supervision and embedding theory into practice.
- The forum should work with employers and providers to coproduce practical, sector-specific guidance on supporting apprentices in youth work settings. This should include models for protecting off-the-job training time alongside clear expectations around supervision and workload management.
- The forum should help identify demand and need for apprentices in local regions, using support from the NYA Knowledge Team to identify key areas in need.

3.3 Ensuring consistency and quality across apprenticeship providers

The research revealed notable variation between online and offline delivery, HEI and non-HEI providers, and the effect this had on learning and support.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen the overall quality assurance of the youth work apprenticeship qualification, through monitoring, governance and clear accountability frameworks.

- The NYA should work closely with quality assurance bodies including the Education and Skills Funding Agency, Ofqual and Ofsted to improve the overall monitoring consistency and quality assurance of the apprenticeship programme.

Recommendation 4: The NYA to utilise levy funding to develop best practice in approaches to evaluation and monitoring.

- The NYA should implement consistent evaluation frameworks through its apprenticeship levy funding including the NatWest Thrive funding. This could include identifying and tracking cohorts of apprentices over time to assess changes in confidence, skills and practice, as well as the longer-term impact on workforce development and retention.
- A longitudinal approach would enable the sector to better understand how apprenticeships influence professional practice in the short and medium term, and where improvements to delivery and support are needed.

4. Appendices

4.1 Summary of the Theory of Change / Logic Model

The theory of change underpinning the apprenticeship evaluation framework sets out how the NYA expects its apprenticeship pathways to strengthen and futureproof the youth work profession. It explains the connection between strategic aims, delivery activities, and the outcomes expected for learners, providers, employers and the wider sector.

Strategic goal	Long-term outcome	Short-term outcomes (draft)	Outputs (Key Performance Indicators)	Inputs/activities
We will future proof the youth work profession through widening opportunities for youth workers	Established apprenticeship learning pathway with sustainable funding as an accessible route to qualification	Established apprenticeship model designed and piloted through the NYA Thrive programme	1. Number of completed apprenticeships (NatWest apprentice levy funding) ▪ Level 3 ▪ Level 6 2. Demographic breakdown of enrolled and completing apprentices 3. Destinations of apprentices on completion 4. Overall satisfaction of apprentices with apprenticeship offer	NYA delivery of the Thrive programme. We enable organisations to access levy funding by raising awareness of apprenticeship programmes and facilitating the levy transfer
		A high-quality apprenticeship training and qualification programme delivered in partnership between learning centres, FE colleges, HEIs and employers	1. Number of completed apprenticeships ▪ Level 3 ▪ Level 6 2. Number of completed apprenticeships per provider	NYA support in the development of apprenticeship courses and providers to support them to validation
		A growing pipeline of skilled and confident youth workers equipped to effectively support and engage distinct groups of young people	1. Destinations of youth work apprentices 2. Apprentices developed skills and confidence in their work	
		Established partnerships with investors to support apprenticeship delivery and sustainability	1. Number of established partnerships by employers and investors 2. Investment into apprenticeships per year	Provide support opportunities with employers to support apprenticeship delivery and sustainability. Continue to build the portfolio of investors for apprenticeships

4.2 Methodology

Evaluation approach

This evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to understand how youth work apprenticeships are delivered, experienced and sustained across Levels 3 and 6.

Collection sources and methods

The evaluation drew on 4 primary sources.

1. Thrive programme monitoring data

This is data collected as part of the NYA's Thrive partnership. Currently, there is no regular evaluation and monitoring data collected as part of the partnership, including learner demographics, destination information or indications of satisfaction.

2. HEI annual monitoring

This is data collected from HEIs as part of an annual survey that reports on the number of learners at each youth worker qualification level.

3. Apprentice survey

An online survey was sent to Level 3 and Level 6 apprentices to complete, which asked about the development of their knowledge, skills and behaviours since beginning the apprenticeship. It also aimed to establish intention for destination after completing their course and their overall satisfaction.

The survey was open for 2 months and shared with apprentices through learning providers, employers connected to the Thrive programme and through the NYA's social media channels.

Level 3 survey completions	Level 6 survey completions
0	47

47 surveys were completed and are used as part of this data. Although a relatively low uptake, the survey data is an indication of overall trends in conjunction with the interviews.

4. Interviews and focus groups

Qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted with learning providers, employers and apprentices to get a deeper understanding of how the apprenticeship learning pathway is meeting their needs, and identifying barriers, challenges and opportunities in not only the learning itself, but the model which connects them all together.

Interviewee type	Participant total
Training provider – HEI	2
Training provider – FE	4
Other training provider	2
Employer	5
Apprentice Level 6	9
Apprentice Level 3	1

Endnotes

1 - National Youth Agency, 'Pathways to Practice: a consultation outcomes report on the future of youth work qualifications', 2025. Published on NYA.ORG.UK.
2 - Department for Education, Department for Work & Pension, Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, 'Post-16 education and skills white paper', 2025. Published on GOV.UK.
3 - https://findapprenticeshiptraining.apprenticeships.education.gov.uk/courses/610
4 - https://findapprenticeshiptraining.apprenticeships.education.gov.uk/courses/675
5 - Department for Education, 'How are apprenticeships funded and what is the apprenticeship levy?', 2025. Published on EDUCATIONHUB.BLOG.GOV.UK.
6 - NYA, 'NatWest Thrive', Published on NYA.ORG.UK.
7 - Department for Education, 'Academic year 2024/25, Apprenticeships', 2026. Published on EXPLORE-EDUCATION-STATISTICS.SERVICE.GOV.UK.
8 - The impact of the apprenticeship differed notably between more experienced and less experienced youth workers. While this is, in places, age related, often it was the length of experience within youth work roles that was the dominant factor. For example, more experienced youth workers were more likely to be entering the apprenticeship in managerial roles.

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