

Experiences and Perceived Impacts of the Apprenticeship Minimum Wage: A Qualitative Scoping Study

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Abstract

Around 14% of apprentices are paid the apprenticeship minimum wage in England (LPC, 2022). These apprentices tend to be younger, on a Level 2 apprenticeship, and employed by small businesses (Ibid). Our research sought to uncover the experiences of those paid the apprenticeship minimum wage. We interviewed 10 current and former apprentices about their initial choices, their experiences on the apprenticeship, including pay, and their post-apprenticeship pathways and plans. Most had discovered their apprenticeship through family or an advert online, with none having been given a positive view of apprenticeships by their school. We found that all apprentices were motivated by the opportunity to gain a “foot in the door” and progress on a career path. However, whilst accepting the concept of earning a lower wage while training to earn more in future, those apprentices who were living independently were not able to make ends meet on the apprenticeship minimum wage. We conclude that Level 2 apprenticeships can be an effective stepping stone for a career but that pay needs to be set high enough that apprentices can support themselves.

Introduction

This project was commissioned by the Low Pay Commission and conducted by Charlynn Pullen, Bob Jeffery and Teri-Lisa Griffiths, all at Sheffield Hallam University. The objective of this research project was to consider the experiences, attitudes, motivations, and pathways of individuals who have previously been apprentices and were paid the National Minimum Wage Apprentice Rate (NMWAR). In this report, we aim to answer the following core questions:

- What were former and current apprentices' motivations for undertaking an apprenticeship?
- What were their routes into an apprenticeship?
- What are apprentices' experiences of being paid the apprenticeship minimum wage?
- What working conditions do apprentices experience on their apprenticeship?
- What contribution has the apprenticeship made to future work opportunities?
- What is the former apprentice's current work situation?

It is difficult to obtain an exact figure for the proportion of apprentices who are paid the apprenticeship minimum wage, but recent estimates suggest it is around 14% of apprentices overall, and 35% of first-year 16-18 apprentices (Low Pay Commission, 2022). The changes in apprenticeships since 2017, particularly the introduction of the apprenticeship levy have led to large falls in the number of apprenticeship starts at Level 2 and at younger ages, both groups which are more likely to be paid the apprenticeship minimum wage. The charts below, from the Low Pay Commission's 2022 report, show these falls between 2016/17 and 2021/22:

Figure 1: Apprenticeship starts over time by age

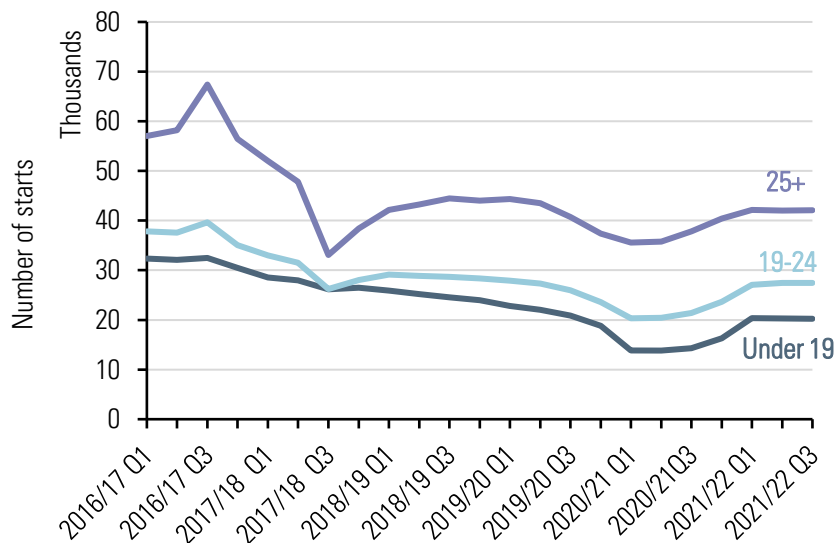
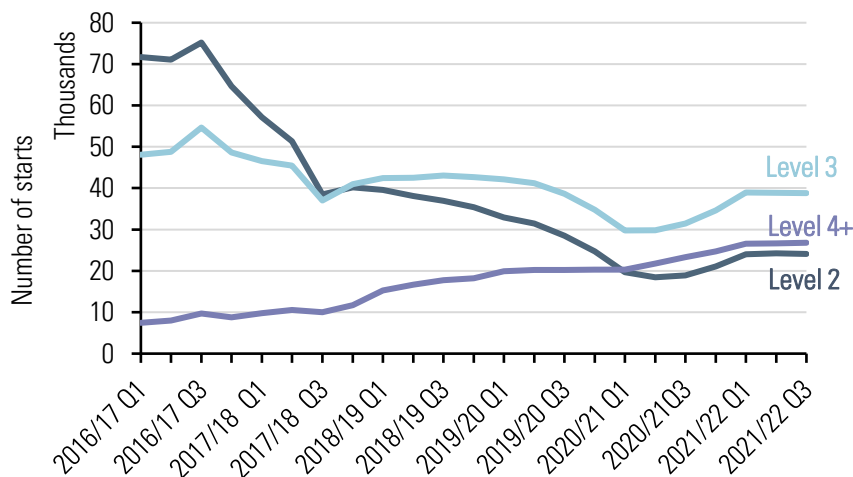


Figure 2: Apprenticeship starts over time by Level



Source for both figures: Low Pay Commission Annual Report 2022, p.133

Apprenticeships over the past decade have shifted from being programme-led, mostly funded by government, and most often at Levels 2 and 3 (equivalent to GCSEs and A Levels respectively) to being employer-led through apprenticeship standards, mostly funded by employers, and increasingly at higher and degree level. The apprenticeship levy and system of employer-led standards approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) introduced in 2017 have been the main causes of these shifts (Pullen and Clifton, 2016). Employers with a salary bill of £3m or higher must pay an apprenticeship levy of 0.5% into their digital Apprenticeship Service Account which is topped up by government at a rate of 10%, and can be used to pay for apprenticeships for new or existing staff at the employer, with up to 25% of the account available to transfer to other organisations, either smaller employers or groups who can spend them on apprenticeships, e.g. Mayoral Combined Authorities (HMRC, 2023). The funds in the Apprenticeship Service Account expire after 24

months and are returned to the Department for Education to be used for apprenticeships at companies that do not pay the levy. Smaller employers pay 5% of the cost of an apprenticeship directly to the training provider although employers with fewer than 50 employees receive 100% of the cost of apprenticeship training if the apprentice is 16-18 or 19-24 with an education health and care plan or is a care leaver (Apprenticeships.gov.uk, 2022).

Apprenticeship standards were introduced in 2017, alongside the levy, having been agreed in 2015 (Pullen and Clifton, 2016). Prior to standards, apprenticeship frameworks were developed by sector bodies in association with awarding organisations and were qualifications. Employers were typically involved in the development of apprenticeship frameworks in a similar way to being involved in most vocational qualifications, and in the same way as other kinds of vocational qualifications, apprenticeship frameworks were approved by the government regulator for qualifications, Ofqual. Apprenticeship standards are a new kind of system, and involve groups of employers deciding on the knowledge, skills and behaviours required for a particular job, potentially but not necessarily including a qualification and/or professional status, and it being approved by the new regulating organisation IfATE.

For young people on Level 2 apprenticeships, those who are most likely to be paid the apprenticeship minimum wage, these big changes to apprenticeships have affected both the availability of specific apprenticeships and the employers more inclined to offer them. The levy has meant that larger employers are more likely to offer apprenticeships than smaller ones. That shift to incentivise larger employers to offer more apprenticeships, has led to more higher and degree apprenticeships, and more existing employees being offered apprenticeships. This pattern can be seen in figures 1 and 2 above. While this offers those who enter an organisation on a lower-skilled role or a Level 2 apprenticeship greater opportunities to progress, it has also meant a reduction in the available Level 2 apprenticeships, particularly at smaller employers (Pullen, 2022).

The content of apprenticeships has also changed in the shift from frameworks to standards, which has particularly affected the Business Administration apprenticeship as discussed below. However, the training providers for Level 2 apprenticeships are similar, with more quality checks for the apprenticeship standards for the providers. Also, without a qualification requirement for apprenticeships, there is now an end point assessment which for Level 2 apprenticeships has typically replaced what would have been a portfolio of work and as well as an in-person assessment for areas like hair and beauty, and skilled trades.

The apprenticeship minimum wage has also changed over time, and was aligned with the 16-17 year old minimum wage in April 2022. The apprenticeship minimum wage rates, with the age-related minimum wages as reference are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: National Minimum Wage Rates 2017-2023

Starting date for rate	Apprenticeship rate (£)	16-17 rate	18-20 rate	21-24 rate	21-22 rate	Adult rate
2017 Apr	3.5	4.05	5.6	7.05		7.5
2018 Apr	3.7	4.2	5.9	7.38		7.83
2019 Apr	3.9	4.35	6.15	7.7		8.21
2020 Apr	4.15	4.55	6.45	8.2		8.72
2021 Apr	4.3	4.62	6.56		8.36	8.91
2022 Apr	4.81	4.81	6.83		9.18	9.5
2023 Apr	5.28	5.28	7.49		10.18	10.42

Source: Low Pay Commission

The Low Pay Commission report from 2022 suggests that it is mostly small businesses who pay the apprenticeship minimum wage, and as above, younger apprentices and those on Level 2 apprenticeships are also more likely to be paid the apprenticeship minimum wage (Low Pay Commission, 2022).

Methodology

2

This report is based on a series of interviews and focus groups with current and former apprentices who were paid the apprenticeship minimum wage during their apprenticeship. In total, the experiences of 10 current and former apprentices are reflected in this report. An incentive of a £20 Amazon voucher was offered to those who participated.

Initially, we aimed to recruit only former apprentices who were paid the apprenticeship minimum wage using an online form. We posted the form on a LinkedIn group specifically for those delivering apprenticeships, we contacted the Association of Colleges who sent the request and the online form to their apprenticeship network, and we directly contacted more than 10 Further Education Colleges that our team and others at Sheffield Hallam University have links with. We asked colleagues and posted on other kinds of social media, we contacted trade unions, large public sector organisations who recruit apprentices, and we contacted local employers and private training providers. In the first instance, during July and August 2023, we obtained more than 100 responses to the online form, and ran two focus groups, each with 5 individuals. All claimed to have been paid the apprenticeship minimum wage and confirmed this in the forms and at the online focus groups. During the course of the focus groups, attended by all three members of the research team, it became clear that not only had these individuals not been paid the apprenticeship minimum wage, but they had also not been formal apprentices in England. All further focus groups were cancelled, and the information from these focus groups has not been included in any analysis or reporting. It does however highlight the challenges of conducting qualitative research with individuals online without prior contact information.

In late August 2023, we redoubled our efforts, created a new form, and only sent it to trusted organisations, including specific colleges and employers. As a result, we located 10 individuals, all of whom, we have been able to confirm, had been or were apprentices, and all had been paid the relevant apprenticeship minimum wage at the time they completed their Level 2 apprenticeship. 2 of the apprentices were at the same training provider and were in a focus group together, 4 worked for the NHS, of which 2 were in a focus group together and 2 were interviewed separately although we don't believe any of them knew each other before the focus group, and 4 were identified through other sources. Of the 10, 7 had completed or left their Level 2 apprenticeship, and 3 were currently undertaking their Level 2 apprenticeship. Around half of those who are categorised as former apprentices are currently undertaking higher level apprenticeships. All the current apprentices were on either a Hairdressing or a Beauty Therapy apprenticeship in small firms. All the former apprentices we spoke to, except one who had undertaken a Level 2 apprenticeship in Bench Joinery, had been on Business Administration (or more recently Customer Service with similar content) apprenticeships, in a mix of large and smaller firms.

Business Administration as a Level 2 apprenticeship has been a source of some controversy over the past decade in the shift from apprenticeship frameworks to standards (Camden, 2023). The Level 2 apprenticeship framework for Business Administration was one of the last to continue to be offered, with the last apprentices starting on the programme in July 2020. Employers have been putting together proposals for a Business Administration Level 2 standard for some years, as it was one of the most popular apprenticeship frameworks. However, IfATE have had quality concerns about these proposals and have so far refused to approve a Level 2 apprenticeship standard for Business Administration (Ibid). As a result, employers have been able to use the Customer Service Practitioner Level 2 apprenticeship as an alternative. All our interviewees in this subject area started on Business Administration apprenticeships in 2020 or before, and all described themselves as on a Business Administration apprenticeship. It may be that those who started in 2020 were actually on the Customer Service Practitioner apprenticeship but as they all working for a large employer with a cohort model of apprenticeships that had previously delivered the Business Administration apprenticeship, we have considered them to be Business Administration apprentices.

In terms of region, we were able to speak to current or former apprentices in the North East, Yorkshire and Humber, East Midlands, and the South East. In terms of age, just over half the individuals had begun their first apprenticeship when they were under 18, while the others were up to their mid-20s when they started. Six of these individuals were interviewed alone with one or two members of the research team, and there were two focus groups with two individuals in each group. Interviews and focus groups last a minimum of 35 minutes and a maximum of 75 minutes with an average of 50 minutes.

Table 2: Sample overview

Pseudonym	Apprenticeship	Former/current apprentice (Level 2)	Apprenticeship Pay	Current Age
Bethany	Hairdressing and Beauty	Current	£5.28 (2023)	17
Ali	Business administration	Former	£4.15 (2020)	20
Antony	Business administration	Former	£4 (approx.) (2020)	28
David	Business administration	Former	£4 (approx.) (2020)	23 (approx.)
Jenni	Business administration	Former	£3 (approx.) (2016)	25
Chloe	Business administration	Former	£4 (approx.) (2020)	20
Frankie	Hairdressing and Beauty	Current	£5.28 (2023)	17
Chelsea	Hairdressing and Beauty	Current	£5.28 (2023)	17
Katie	Business Administration	Former	£3.30 (2015)	24
Rory	Joinery/ furniture maker	Former	£5 (approx.) (2022)	25

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed and have been analysed by the research team to produce the findings. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms and we have not sought to identify employers other than the NHS which we consider sufficiently large to be sure individuals cannot be identified. We firstly discuss the general determinants of apprenticeship pay and discuss how they relate to our sample, before presenting our findings in relation to the main research questions noted above, providing illustrative quotes as well as analysis. This is followed by a short conclusions section.

Determinants of Pay

As is widely understood, wages as a general rule vary in relation to skill specificity, monitoring difficulty (or the extent of autonomy that must be granted to the worker) (Koumenta and Williams, 2019: 25) and productivity, while also being influenced by longer term considerations around the investment in and maintenance of specific skills – traditionally important in the context of apprenticeships (Mohrenweiser and Backes-Gellner, 2008) - and labour market context.

In terms of skills specificity, monitoring and productivity, we would expect apprenticeship pay to generally be lower in low-skilled occupations where the required training is limited, output is easier to monitor, or where the apprentice would be deemed to be much less productive than an ordinary member of staff. Where apprentices are seen to be highly productive during their training – as has been reported by some healthcare employers (Barker et al, 2018: 14) – we would expect employers to be willing to consider higher wages.

Apprentices themselves may also be willing to accept lower wages during their apprenticeship in return for higher wages once they have completed their apprenticeship. Evidence from the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) matched dataset suggests that this trade-off is worth making, as individuals who completed apprenticeships at Levels 2 and 3 have higher earnings aged 23 and 28 than their peers who completed the equivalent vocational course in full-time education (Cavaglia et al., 2018). However, this research also finds that the return varies hugely by sector and gender. Although these individuals would have been on apprenticeships more than a decade before our sample, it is likely that this trade off continues. However, the analysis compares those on apprenticeships with those on the same level of full-time vocational qualifications. It is not clear that this comparison holds for many of our interviewees, and it is discussed further below.

As regards overall training costs, Barker et al (2018) argue this figure is much more important in influencing employer decision-making to take on an apprenticeship, rather than simply the wage rate in isolation. The introduction of the apprenticeship levy, where business can view their funds in an account and draw them down only to pay for apprenticeships until they expire, can focus the desire to fund apprenticeships. This has been the case as large employers who have paid the levy since 2017 have increasingly begun to offer apprenticeships, as they only way to 'use' their funds. Others have simply considered the apprenticeship levy to be an additional tax and written it off. But unlike other taxes, employers can view their balance and see the funds expiring or being used, which has created a different incentive.

Smaller employers must find the 5% cost upfront to pay for the apprenticeship, which connects with the idea that lower rates of pay are necessary for employers to off-set the costs of training (Behling and Speckesser, 2013), especially where these might not be recouped if the apprentice moves on to another job. However, since 2017, the levy means that the cost of training is low for most employers offering apprenticeships –

either as a small upfront cost for smaller companies, or as a way of recouping funds which would otherwise be sent straight to government for larger levy-paying companies.

However, perhaps the overwhelming factor in determining pay in different areas and amongst different demographics is labour market context. A key aspect of this for young people is the trend in recent decades towards high rates of youth unemployment, increasing contractual insecurity and low rates of pay, which in turn is a consequence of large-scale economic restructuring in the 1970s and 80s, and the increasing predominance of service sector employment thereafter. More specifically, the unemployment rate of both 16–17-year-olds and 18–24-year-olds rose precipitously in the 1980s. The former continued to rise through to the 2010s while the latter fell somewhat between the late 1990s and mid-2000s, before both spiked again with the Global Financial Crisis and current cost of living crisis (Petrongolo and Van Reenen, 2011; Murphy, 2023). Work has also become more precarious, with the proportion of 18-29 year olds undertaking work classified as 'insecure' rising from 40 to 50 per cent between 1994 and 2014 (Yates, 2017: 464). Finally, as of 2019, 68 per cent of 18-21 year olds were paid less than the real living wage (LWF, 2019).

One aspect of this restructuring is the decline of larger manufacturing businesses, which also provided internal labour markets and the opportunity for progression (Yates, 2017: 468). As a result of these changes young people face increasingly complex, protracted, and non-linear transitions into employment and adulthood (Sanderson, 2020: 1310). They also tend to be overconcentrated in elementary occupations such as hospitality, retails, sales, and customer services (Yates, 2017: 469; Tailby and Pollert, 2011), which due to low profit margins require a plentiful supply of cheap labour (Yates, 2017: 475). At the same time, a tighter labour market in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic has led to a number of sectors (hospitality, retail and manufacturing) tending to pay above the apprenticeship rate (LPC, 2023: 138).

There are also concerns that the existence of apprenticeships reduces the cost of youth labour overall, given the lower wages that have been traditionally attached to apprenticeships (Yates, 2017: 474). Indeed, in the UK in the early 2000s the youth 'discount' –the difference between average adult and youth wages, which in the UK is partially a product of both the 'youth' and 'apprenticeship' rates of the National Minimum Wage¹ - was estimated as being as much as 60 per cent (Grimshaw, 2014: v). This discount may then have a material influence on hiring practices, as research from a number of European countries where youth and apprenticeship rates are offered has found that fast-food companies exploit the existence of those rates by pressurising older workers (who must be paid more) to leave the company (Royle, 2010: 255). Such practices are labelled 'substitution' and are sometimes contrasted with 'investment' (in the future workforce) as the two major rationales for hiring apprentices (Mohrenweiser and Backes-Gellner, 2008). Concerns that the lower NMWAR has promoted substitution were highlighted by the trade union Unison in the most recent Low Pay Commission annual report (2023: 136).

Moreover, the generally weak labour market position of young people, combined with a lack of knowledge of employment opportunities and a lack of knowledge of employment rights (Meagar et al, 2002) - or at least a lack of confidence in their enforcement (Orlando, 2022) - could render them susceptible to poor working conditions and exploitation. One potential indicator of this is payment below the statutory entitlement, reported by 24 per cent of 16–18-year-olds in the 2014 Apprentice Pay Survey (Winterbotham et al, 2014) and by 19 per cent in the most recent 2018 Survey (BEIS, 2020: 42). The Apprenticeship Pay Survey was suspended

¹ In 2018 the largest gap between the minimum wage age rates in the UK was 40 per cent, as compared to only 17 per cent in the Netherlands (Barker et al, 2018).

after 2018 with other datasets being used instead (LPC, 2023: 138). The Low Pay Commission report from 2021 includes data on apprenticeship pay using data from the apprenticeship survey and from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), both in 2021. These tables suggest that particular issues of underpayment exist for 16-18 year olds, and for older ages in the second year of their apprenticeship (LPC, 2021: Data Table 7.15). However, there are large differences in reported underpayment by apprentices, compared with the ASHE survey data. The current bi-annual apprenticeship survey (fieldwork in 2023) required apprentices to provide more information on pay, although the report will not be available until 2024.

Beyond this, wage differentials are also a function of occupational segregation, by gender and other demographic factors, and in terms of apprenticeships women continue to be disproportionately represented in low paying industries such as hair and beauty, retail, customer service, social care, early years and business administration (Gambin and Hogarth, 2016: 484). Such gender segregation has been sustained even as the proportion of apprenticeships being taken up by women dramatically increased over the late 1990s and 2000s (Campbell et al, 2011: 371).

3.1. Occupations and the NMWAR

Our sample is largely composed of apprentices in Business Administration and Hair and Beauty². We anticipated that hospitality and retail might also be sectors with high numbers of individuals on the NMWAR but a review of current apprenticeships available on the government website and discussions with staff from training providers identified these two sectors as the most likely to be currently paying the NMWAR to apprentices. As such, these groups were targeted, although as discussed in the methodology above, identifying interviewees was difficult.

The review of the government website (<https://www.gov.uk/apply-apprenticeship>) for apprenticeship wages highlighted that the tight labour market has meant apprenticeships in hospitality and retail are now more likely to pay the standard National Minimum Wage at age levels from the 18-20 rate upwards. Anecdotal evidence from training providers confirms this, and also suggests that fewer hairdressing and beauty therapy apprentices are being paid NMWAR, and instead being paid higher wages. One of our interviewees highlighted that in their area, although they were paid NMWAR during their apprenticeship, apprentices are now paid the full adult National Living Wage to enable them to recruit locally due to competition, particularly from warehouse and logistics companies.

Business is a subject area where an impact analysis of the NMWAR in 2010, analysing the development of apprenticeship pay between 2007-2011, revealed wages to have fallen during that period for the youngest apprentices (16-18), from £4.20 to £2.86, while the median for all of those aged under 25 saw a decline from £4.95 to £4.00 (Behling and Speckesser, 2013: 34). Median pay subsequently increased, reaching £6.27 for the Business and Related category by 2018, up 7 per cent on the 2016 survey (BEIS, 2020: 29). The shift towards higher level apprenticeships in this period discussed above (Barker et al, 2018: 14-15), is likely to have had an impact on these increased pay rates as the data is also not disaggregated by age and framework in combination, unlike the earlier study. Median pay as of the 2021 Apprenticeship Evaluation Learner Survey for the Business category was £12.73 (IFF Research, 2022: 78) as the effect of higher level apprenticeships increased. As of the 2018 Apprenticeship Pay Survey those on Business and Related apprenticeships

² The names for Apprenticeships, Standards and Frameworks, have varied over the last decade or more as discussed in section 1. We have used the term 'Business Administration' to cover all business administration and customer service roles.

experienced high levels of compliance with the NMW at 86 per cent (BEIS, 2020: 44). Awareness of the NMWAR was relatively high amongst Business Related apprentices as of 2018, but fewer knew the specific hourly rate, at 77 and 40 per cent respectively (BEIS, 2020: 59). However, awareness of the NMWAR and the specific rate amongst Business and related apprentices was above average.

By contrast, Hairdressing has been characterised by consistently low levels of pay over more than a decade, as well as low levels of compliance with the National Minimum Wage evidenced in recent surveys. Hairdressing was the sector at the very bottom of the apprentice wage distribution (£2.57) in 2011 (Behling and Speckesser, 2013: 30; Lawton and Norris, 2010: 5) and remained at the bottom in 2018 at £3.70, though this was 11 per cent up on the 2016 survey (BEIS, 2020: 29). Hairdressing also had the lowest levels of compliance with the NMW in 2018 at only 52 per cent (BEIS, 2020: 44). Awareness of both a NMW Apprenticeship Rate more generally was again reasonably high amongst Hairdressing apprentices, but knowledge of the specific hourly rate was again lower, at 72 and 44 per cent respectively (BEIS, 2020: 59).

It should be noted that these two sectors have quite different models of operation in general. The higher level apprenticeships in business would likely be management apprenticeships for existing managers in small and large businesses (Burke, 2017). For apprentices, they would therefore more often be part of a large business and have some engagement with teams like human resources (HR) and finance. However, in Hair and Beauty establishments, there is a more common route of a Level 2, then a Level 3 apprenticeship at a small employer. After a typically short period of employed work after qualifying, hairdressers and beauty therapists generally become self-employed, renting a chair or a room. As such, wage progression in employment for hairdressers and beauty therapists is limited, with the focus of the business on how much to charge clients for services while gaining skills and experience to be able to charge higher rates as a self-employed hairdresser or beauty therapist. Often these small companies rely on having apprentices as well as employing 16-17 year olds at the weekends and during busy periods.

Finally, in terms of labour market context, our sample was largely recruited from the East Midlands, North East and South East. The unemployment rates at different ages and average wages for these areas are provided in Table 2 below. They show large variations, particularly between the North East and South East, suggesting our sample are from quite different labour markets.

Table 3

Region	Unemployment rate (as at April 2023)	Youth (16-24) unemployment rate (as at April 2023)	16-18 year old unemployment rate (as at July 2023)	Average wages (as at April 2022)
East Midlands	4.1%	12.1%	5.2%	£594
South East	3.9%	9.9%	17.8%	£664
North East	5.2%	17.1%	23.9%	£575
UK average	4.3%	12.7%		£640

Sources: for unemployment rates, ONS 2023 and ONS 2023b; for average wages ONS 2022

Findings

4.1. Selecting an apprenticeship

In the following section we explore participants' experiences of and motivation for choosing an apprenticeship in relation to school factors, prior experiences of work, the apprentice rate of the national minimum wage, comparisons with alternative options, as well as the actual process of selecting a specific apprenticeship programme.

4.1.1. School factors

Our sample covers a range of ages and experiences. The oldest participant in our sample attended Year 11 at school (aged 15 or 16) from 2011, and the youngest participants finished Year 11 in Summer 2023. Four participants were in Year 11 before the 2016/17 reforms to apprenticeships, and six started afterwards. None of those we interviewed had received a positive view of apprenticeships from their school. Most described feeling that the school had focused on encouraging them to stay on for sixth form and then to go to university, or in areas where schools were 11-16 rather than 11-18, encouraging them to go to a local college for sixth form (cf. Ryan and Lőrinc, 2018: 770). A common experience of the discussion around apprenticeships at school was offered by Ali who was in Year 11 after the apprenticeship reforms:

“Yeah, well we had like a few careers sessions at high school, but apprenticeships were always kind of referred to as like if you don't do well at school or if you fail or if you're struggling in school then 'go and do an apprenticeship' and that's how it was always advertised, so when I left school and I went to college and then I eventually ended up leaving and heard about apprenticeships I was really like 'I don't want to do one, I don't want to be seen as like I've made a mistake and I'm struggling so I need to an apprenticeship'.”

One current apprentice even mentioned that her school had told her that it was a precarious option with poor quality training in 2023:

Frankie: “We had a few [talks about apprenticeships at school], but they didn't explain it like college did. [At school] They kind of just put it as you don't really learn as much, but you get paid for learning... the school put negative effects on apprenticeships. They [the school] told us if you don't do everything right, they'll just kick you off and you'll have to find something else to do. But whereas in college, they'll tell you that that doesn't really happen.”

This clearly influenced the young people we spoke to, as they had to 'break out' of what was expected to do an apprenticeship. While they reported their parents were generally supportive of their choice, particularly for those who have since progressed to higher level apprenticeships through work, they felt the education system and potentially others in society judged them for their decision to do an apprenticeship (cf. Ryan and Lőrinc, 2018: 764 and below).

Many of the individuals we interviewed had family or friends who had previously been through apprenticeships or knew there were apprenticeships available at their workplace. Amongst the individuals interviewed, there was a mix of understanding of apprenticeships, particularly in terms of the available routes post-apprenticeship, but almost all were happy with their choices.

4.1.2. Prior work experience

The Apprenticeship Evaluation Learner Survey 2021 suggests that around 44% of younger apprentices (aged under 25) were at school or college immediately before starting their apprenticeship, while 40% were employed by a different employer (IFF Research, 2021: 43). This reflects our interviewees, where just under half went from school or a college to their apprenticeship, and most had previous work experience. Two of the interviewees had initially started A-Levels at a college and then decided they wanted a different learning experience and found apprenticeships, while one had been at university and dropped out, then considered apprenticeships. For participants who had started an apprenticeship following some work experience, they were motivated by the idea that an apprenticeship could provide them with stability and direction:

Rory: "Well, I lived abroad for the best part of two years and then when I came back [...] my parents basically said to me, 'look, you're a competent person, why don't you do something that's actually going to get you some qualifications, get some direction in life' and I was like, you know what? You're probably right."

One of our interviewees had been working in a similar role prior to starting on their apprenticeship, but it had been a zero-hours contract, so their main motivation in applying for the apprenticeship had been to obtain greater security:

Anthony: "Before I started the apprenticeship I was doing various jobs under agencies and I just needed something to help me secure a future, being on agencies 100% of the time doesn't exactly give you security, and there's been occasions where it has stressed me out, and I do need a secure future, so this is kind of the reason why I started the apprenticeship in the first place, with the help of my parents and family."

4.1.3. Prior education and qualifications

For those who had dropped out or switched from other educational options, most felt they wanted to move on from a school-like experience to learn in the workplace. One interviewee explained her situation:

Chloe: "So I left school due to Covid in 2020 and I had my heart set on sitting my GCSEs, obviously that didn't happen [...] then I knew exactly what I wanted to do, I wanted to go [to] 6th form and do [a mix of A-Levels and BTECs], so September came and I went, and it wasn't what I thought, I think cos I'd been out of education for so, like the classroom setting for so long, I struggled getting back into it and like, and obviously having places to be, like lessons and taking notes and everything."

Similarly, David, reflecting on his two months of university (before quitting) stated that he needed "on-the-job" training and couldn't focus on "off-the-job" training, while Katie noted that "6th form doesn't suit everyone". Ali described a situation where they had to travel for more than an hour to attend college, and it was too tiring, so they began to look for alternatives. Others always knew they would go to college and saw an apprenticeship as a similar route with a vocational focus. After either studying at a

college (Rory) or attending college open days (Frankie and Chelsea), they decided an apprenticeship was the best option to pursue their chosen occupation.

Although all the apprentices we spoke to were on Level 2 courses, they had a range of existing qualifications. Around half of the interviewees had GCSEs with relatively low grades or equivalent so a Level 2 apprenticeship would be considered progression. However, the other half had good GCSEs and had either dropped out of Level 3 qualifications at a college, with a couple having good Level 3 qualifications. One, as above, had been accepted to university and dropped out after two months. One participant explained how they had started at a lower level than necessary:

Katie: "So, I started on a Level 2 apprenticeship which took me just over a year. It actually came to light once I did my Level 2 apprenticeship that I didn't need to have done the Level 2 apprenticeship, I could have started at Level 3, but it wasn't clear when I started."

This suggests that a Level 2 apprenticeship does not always relate to progression in terms of academic levels, and that the appropriate comparator group is not always individuals who would otherwise be on a full-time Level 2 vocational course, as is often used in economic analysis (Cavaglia et al., 2018).

4.1.4. Motivation

For almost all the apprentices, the notion of entering a career was important in choosing an apprenticeship. This is a similar finding to the 2021 Apprenticeship Survey where the most cited reason was 'a desire to enter into or progress in a specific career' (IFF Research, 2022: 15). However, there was a difference in the kind of career that individuals wanted to move into. For those who chose a traditional vocational apprenticeship in hairdressing, beauty therapy, or joinery, it was the job role that was the initial choice, and then the option of an apprenticeship rather than a full-time college course made it more attractive. The concept of apprenticeship being an entry to and training for an occupation is widely understood (Fuller & Unwin, 2011). It has been embedded in the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) in the form of knowledge, skills, and behaviours for each apprenticeship standard.

For those on other apprenticeships, there was still a desire to enter an occupation, but less certainty on exactly which occupation. For this group, a Business Administration apprenticeship, particularly in a large organisation, provided a way of trying out different, similar occupations before settling on their preferred role:

David: "the business administration apprenticeship, it got me into a large organisation [...] and I think the big bit for me was [that] we do placements, and I was essentially told where I was going to go. And for me that was probably what I needed. I was applying for the apprenticeship, I was applying for the qualification, but I was mainly applying for a foot in the door in a career where someone else will tell me what I'd do [...] So the decision for me was out of my hands. And I got a qualification at the end of it, which I could use going forward. And then obviously, the plan was to develop to further apprenticeships."

4.1.5. Subject/occupational choice

Here, there is a contrast between traditional vocational apprenticeships, which typically involve working with your hands (Sennett, 2008), and more modern apprenticeships which include office-based and online working as well as providing progression to higher level apprenticeships. Those apprentices interviewed on hair and beauty apprenticeships had not considered other vocational options, they were clear on their occupational choice. One of our interviewees who completed a Business

Administration apprenticeship was clear that they wanted to be an accountant, and that apprenticeships were the route they wanted to take. However, most of the other Business Administration apprentices felt they generally wanted to work in an office job, usually with a sense that they might end up in finance, but were keen to start with a role that enabled them to try a range of roles, either through different placements or just interaction with other teams. They felt the first apprenticeship would give them a better understanding of the roles available to them and help them pick a route to pursue.

Our small sample suggests that for the more visible vocational occupations like hairdressing, beauty therapy, and skilled trades, individuals had a clearer idea of what an occupation involved, while for more modern, service sector related occupations, young people were keen to work in the general area but were less clear about the specific occupation they could or should choose initially.

4.1.6. Awareness of the National Minimum Wage Apprenticeship Rate

In this section we explore general levels of awareness of NMWAR and the comparison with other options, before moving on to considerations of that pay in relation to other possible transitions into work in the next section. Firstly, it is worth emphasising that the NMWAR is a minimum rate, which is estimated to be paid to only around 14% of apprentices (LPC, 2023) and that apprentices can be, and often are, paid above this. Our interviewees were specifically selected on the basis that they were paid the apprenticeship minimum wage at some point during an apprenticeship.

In terms of general context, analysis of the 2018 Apprenticeship Pay Survey reveals that awareness of the Apprenticeship Rate is lower than awareness of the age-related National Minimum Wage, at 69 per cent and 95 per cent respectively (BEIS, 2020: 57). Nonetheless, Business-related and Hairdressing apprentices tended to demonstrate higher levels of awareness (77 per cent and 72 per cent). Previous research has suggested that younger apprentices tended to be less concerned with pay, because they had both less knowledge of the pay that may be available elsewhere (as they have less knowledge of their employment rights more generally - Meagar et al, 2002), and because they were living with their parents and did not have to cover the full cost of living independently (see Lawton and Norris, 2010: 5 and below).

Echoing existing research (Lawton and Norris, 2010: 31), all our participants were aware of the NMWAR by the point of the interview, but this may not have been the case when they originally made the decision to undertake the apprenticeship. Ali for example notes that while he was told the hourly rate, he didn't know what hours he would be undertaking and therefore it was difficult to get a sense of his overall take home pay:

Ali: "I think, I do remember asking what the hourly pay was and they did tell us, but at the time I didn't even know what hours I would be working so I didn't know what I would be making [...] so I wasn't really conscious of what I was asking for, I would have liked to have known, prior, 'this is what you will come out with a month', roughly, instead of just what you get an hour, because that would have made more sense to how I would budget my finances."

Frankie experienced the opposite problem: "[...] I just got told how much I was getting paid a month, I didn't get told how much I was getting an hour." These accounts highlight that the variation of approaches between employers, despite a minimum wage standard, can cause confusion for apprentices. Taking into account previous research mentioned above, apprentices may also need support to understand the implications of their pay.

Understanding of pay was also related to more general access to information regarding the apprenticeship and in Anthony's case his link (via a family connection) to the person responsible for managing apprenticeships at his workplace, was clearly an advantage:

Anthony: "I kind of knew a few weeks, well, I knew about 6 months before I started my apprenticeship, I had a meeting with this person at [my prospective employer] at the time, this other person who is in charge of the apprenticeship team, about the wage, so I did know in advance."

Bethany, Chloe, and Jenni were also clear of how much they would be earning via the NMWAR, and considered this to be a reasonable amount compared to their peers who were studying full-time at college. There was no suggestion from any of the interviewees that they had 'shopped around' for their apprenticeship on the basis of pay, including those who had previous paid work experience. The motivation, as highlighted above, for choosing an apprenticeship was typically around a solid basis for a future career, and so there was an understanding that the pay initially would not be very high. More detail on the experiences of being paid the NMWAR can be found in section 4.2 below.

4.1.7. Comparing apprenticeship pay with other options

It is worth underscoring the fact that apprenticeships continue to be stigmatised due to unfavourable comparisons with continuing education, which lead apprenticeships to being perceived by some as a low status and academically undemanding route for poorly attaining students (Ryan and Lőrinc, 2018: 764; Evans, 2021). One aspect of this clearly pertains to low pay (Low Pay Commission, 2023: 127) and the Apprenticeship Rate of the National Minimum Wage can make simply 'getting by' challenging, at least for some apprentices, as we explore further below.

Nonetheless, pay is clearly not the only motivation for undertaking an apprenticeship, a decision-making process that has been conceptualised by Ryan and Lőrinc (2018: 767) as entailing individual preference (linked to learner identity), relational influences (from friends and family) and wider contextual factors (including structural constraints and public discourse). On the relational front, the examples of friends incurring significant costs to go to university and with less disposable incomes while they studied could be an influence on decision-making (Ryan and Lőrinc, 2018: 768; Evans, 2021: 1173):

Ali: "a few months into the programme when I started earning a wage and I was actually 'oh, do you want to go out to town' and they were like 'oh no, I can't, I've got work to do, I don't have any money, I need to go to my part-time job', then it was like, wow, okay, I'm in a position where I'm actually a little bit better off, I'm earning as I go, I'm earning a wage, and looking at what everyone else is currently doing I'm actually quite happy with my situation."

Chloe: "so me having £600 a month while my friends were going to college, I was loaded! [laughs] I could do everything I wanted to do. [...] Like I was putting some in savings, but everything my friends wanted to do, I could do, I didn't feel like I missed out on anything."

Rory: "It's the fact that you're getting a qualification, you're getting to the next stage [...] a point from which you can progress from further, but as opposed to like a traditional sort of educational course where you pay to be there, I'm getting paid for my time and that was kind of crucial. [...] I don't live at home, so I do pay rent and stuff. I pay bills and food and stuff. But the reality is I'm a I'm a 25-year-old with no kids. Like, I don't really have any mad expenses."

For our participants, the relational influences on their decision-making often manifested through peer comparison, as outlined by some of the accounts above. This was replicated with our participants who were under-18. For Frankie and Chelsea, both hairdressing apprentices, being able to earn while they trained was a significant attraction, which they compared favourably with their peer group were in full-time education, usually at college.

Turning to wider contextual factors, considerations of the local labour market and previous experiences of low pay also influenced the relative attractiveness of apprenticeships. In the case of Bethany, she felt lucky to be receiving the legally mandated apprenticeship minimum wage because she had previous experience of working as a waitress earning less than the minimum wage. So, she would be earning more in her apprenticeship simply by virtue of working more hours. Her previous experiences also potentially cultivated mistrust in employers as she describes researching what her earnings 'should be':

"[...] so I shouldn't really be expecting it to be as high as it is, because normally an apprenticeship can be quite low, it depends on what the person wants to pay you really, so I feel quite lucky, but I did like google it on how much it should be, and it is correct, they are paying me how much it should be."

Similar experiences were noted by Chloe who also said that while her take home pay would be lower during the apprenticeship than her previous summer job, she would also earn more due the greater number of hours on offer:

"Yeah, so, when I was in my little summer job I was on like £6 an hour, so when I thought I was going to £4, I am taking a little bit of a cut, but then I had no bills, and it worked out more cos obviously it was more hours, but at the age of 17, I was like £600 a month, 'that's a lot!', so I was just thriving!"

The apprenticeship wage also seemed attractive to Jenni who compared it to her previous experiences of low pay (actually comparable to the NMWAR) and poor terms and conditions. At 16, she was earning £500 a month working 37 hours a week on "£3-something an hour" in her first job in a small independent clothes shop, contending with the misogyny of the owner and manager, and not being paid the wages she was owed when she left: "I do remember when I left, they didn't pay me, they owed me a couple of hundred pounds, which was an enormous amount of money to me then, and I don't think I ever got that money". For Chelsea, who stayed with her existing employer for the apprenticeship, she saw an increase in her earnings in moving onto the apprenticeship: "I hadn't been told how much I'm getting paid an hour either, but when I was working my Saturday job, I only got paid £5 an hour, so they put it up when I started the actual apprenticeship"³.

Clearly, comparative judgements are strongly influenced by age and life course, which is implicit in the accounts above where comparisons are made to the kind of entry level or 'Saturday work' which is often the only kind of work accessible to young people, and explicit in the case of Frankie for whom her hairdressing apprenticeships represented her first real experience of work:

³ It is worth stating that Chelsea moved on to apprenticeship in September 2023, at which point the NMWAR and the 16-17 year old NMW rate were aligned. From this we infer that Chelsea had previously been illegally paid below the required rate. Previous research (Clark and Herman, 2017) has noted the very high rates of minimum wage violations in this sector.

Frankie: "Like it's not a lot [the wage], but it's a lot."

Chelsea: "It's a lot for you because you've never been paid before."

Frankie: "I'm quite happy with it."

Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that Frankie and Chelsea were both at a very early stage of their apprenticeships and previous research has demonstrated that while in initial interviews participants largely sought to present a more positive perception of their apprenticeship (in part to combat stigma relating to this kind of youth transition), follow up interviews revealed a more complex and ambiguous picture (Ryan and Lőrinc, 2018: 767).

Moreover, it is not simply the relative rates of pay which workers took into consideration, also pertinent are questions of job security, or the promise of future job security. This was evident in Anthony's satisfaction in escaping the insecurity of agency work through his apprenticeship, as we saw above. As for longer term security, represented by a job at the end of the apprenticeship, Barker's research (2018: 24) shows that this is more likely to be fulfilled by some employers rather than others. Indeed, the perceived security of a job in the NHS was not lost on young people like Ali and Chloe or the people around them:

Ali: "I think one the reasons my mam and sister recommended my apprenticeship in the first place for my level 2 was because they were like 'NHS is secure, it's not going to go out of business, you're not going to get halfway through your apprenticeship and they're not going to close down and go bankrupt', you have that security of like it's always going to be needed, and that'd definitely one of the reasons I chose it."

Chloe: "so, obviously I work for one of the NHS Trusts, so it's quite a public sector, and the NHS is going nowhere any time soon, so once you're in you can progress, if you don't want to leave there are so many opportunities to move departments, you haven't got to leave, you could even go to different Trusts and you're still on the same terms and conditions."

At the same time, while the promise of future job security could be a reason why participants would tolerate lower pay during their apprenticeship, the failure of that to materialise could feed into their overall discontent with apprenticeships, as we will discuss in the case of Jenni below.

4.1.8 Pathways into apprenticeships

The application process for some, particularly in smaller companies, was relatively informal. Chelsea had previously worked for the same salon, and they told her that provided that the college accepted her, they would happily take her on as an apprentice. Bethany was offered an apprenticeship, again on the condition that the training provider accepted them, when they were overheard by a manager talking to a parent about wanting to complete an apprenticeship. In these cases, the training provider would have the final decision, as the prospective apprentice was also interviewed by them.

For smaller employers, prior to the 2017 apprenticeship levy system, much of the administrative burden was undertaken by the training provider, who also received the training funds directly (Pullen & Clifton, 2016). The introduction of the levy system has resulted in a greater administrative burden for smaller employers in theory, but anecdotal evidence from training providers approached during this project suggests that some are supporting smaller employers in a similar way, where possible, to before the reforms.

For larger organisations with more formal routes, the prospective apprentice made a formal application, were interviewed by the employer, and then allocated to a training provider upon successful appointment to the role. One organisation had two intakes of apprentices each year, so applications needed to be made at certain times to join a cohort. When the cohorts started seemed to differ by region and organisation, but three of the interviewees started around March/April, while the three current apprentices in Hair and Beauty all started in August/September. Even with more formal processes, routes of entry could still be contingent on being aware of the process, with Anthony only finding out about the apprenticeship through a family friend who worked for the NHS. Ali found out about his NHS apprenticeship through his sister, who had previously completed one as a healthcare support worker. Jenni was directed to her first apprenticeship through a charity she was volunteering with. Chloe shared how she found out about her apprenticeship:

“[I have] no idea how I found out about them! I remember there just been a random night and I was like “mam, I’m going to apply for this”, I can’t remember how I found anything, but I just remember applying for it. [...] Some little corner shops had [apprenticeships], so my mam wanted to like check it over first to make sure it was like, [that] there was a development path and I was actually going to get something out of it.”

Here there is an understanding (at least on the part of Chloe’s mother) that apprenticeships might vary significantly in quality or outcomes and therefore there was a need to do some research into them. More generally our findings echo previous research (cf. Ryan and Lőrinc, 2018: 772), which indicates that the process of finding an apprenticeship could be confusing, and that there may be risks associated with finding them in random ways (as we will explore below).

Chloe had initially been rejected from their apprenticeship, but the person who was offered the role dropped out after a few days, and the employer went back to the interviewee, and they were able to start a bit later. David had applied for two apprenticeships, the only one of our interviewees to have applied for more than one apprenticeship, and been rejected from the first, but accepted by the second. Rory was forced to leave his first employer due to unsafe working conditions (this is explored further below). In an attempt to restart his training, he sent multiple speculative applications to relevant local businesses without success. Most of the individuals interviewed understood that apprenticeships are jobs with training so would not be overly put off by an initial rejection, although only the aforementioned participants had experienced any rejection.

4.2 Apprenticeship experiences

In this second set of findings, we explore participants’ general satisfaction with the NMWAR, their wider experiences with their employer and the link between pay and conditions in influencing completion. We also describe their experiences with their training providers.

4.2.1 General satisfaction with pay

Firstly, it is worth emphasising that the majority of our sample were broadly content with the NMWAR. This was the case for all three current Hair and Beauty apprentices and three out of four NHS apprentices. Secondly, the 2021 Apprenticeship Evaluation Learner Survey makes it clear that pay is not correlated to general satisfaction with an apprenticeship, and in fact those earning less than £9 per hour expressed greater satisfaction than those earning above this rate (IFF Research, 2022: 114).

That said, their analysis fails to distinguish those on the Apprenticeship Rate, and concerns have been raised in the last decade that apprenticeship pay is not high enough to cover basic living expenses, such as travel, rent, and food (NUS, 2015). This has led to concerns that apprentices are having to take on additional part-time work, and that low apprenticeship pay excludes certain demographics from participation. One of the themes that emerged from Green's qualitative interviews (2015: 7) with apprentices and employers was that in part apprenticeships were considered feasible because of high levels of family support (also noted by Lawton and Norris, 2010: 5).

This was clearly evident in the following extracts where NHS apprentices Ali and Chloe and Hair and Beauty apprentice Bethany all highlighted the significance of support from their families:

Ali: "So I was coming out with roughly £650 a month, and for me, I lived with my parents at the time, I don't have a car, I'm not paying anything off, so it was manageable, but I was paying board, so I paid £200 board a month, and I was paying my phone bill on top of that, which was sixty quid, so that's like £260 gone already."

Chloe: "Due to my age, I was 17 when I started, I was still living at home, so I had very little, I did pay board, I paid £60 a month board, which isn't a lot, but other than that I kept the rest of my wage, [...] My parents were quite supportive, [...] they said 'while you live at home you may as well have these nice things, cos there will be a time when you have a house and kids, and mortgage, and you can't afford them, so do them while you have the money'."

Bethany: "Yeah, I think a month from my apprenticeship, or like last month, but I think I ended up with £550 that I got paid, and my board is £200, so it saves me quite a bit left for the rest of the month."

Chelsea and Frankie, who like Bethany are also Hair and Beauty apprentices, are also living at home, receiving support from their parents. Chelsea pays her parents board, but she reported that this is actually paid into a savings account for her to access in the future. Business Administration apprenticeship Katie also noted that while her pay dropped when she started her apprenticeship, 'It didn't actually feel like a drop', because she didn't have to pay any board, noting that she kept '[...] every single penny. My dad actually did pay for my bus, because I had to get the bus to and from [my apprenticeship] work, and my dad paid for that [...]'. She also retained her Saturday job in a small shop for the first year of her apprenticeship, which supplemented her earnings.

On the other hand, we also spoke to Jenni, who was trying to live independently at the age of 18 without any family support while she was undertaking an apprenticeship with a local authority:

Jenni: "at this point I was living independently, I had my own flat, and the wage wasn't enough to cover my rent, but I wasn't entitled to income support⁴, because technically I was in education, as an apprentice, but then I wasn't entitled to any bursaries, because technically I was employed, so I was living in poverty, I was using foodbanks, I could not afford to heat my home, I was, you know, it was just, awful, I look back and I do not know how I survived on that money I had."

⁴ The situation described in the quote happened prior to the roll-out of Universal Credit and the levy reforms, so it is not clear whether this was the case or whether Jenni received incorrect advice. However, our interviews suggest that other apprentices have been able to claim benefits whilst on their apprenticeship.

Elsewhere she refers to the fact that while “on paper” services for people in her circumstances exist to provide additional forms of support, the reality was that cuts to services meant such support was limited and difficult to access.

NHS apprentice David also noted that getting by on apprenticeship pay was challenging (“actually living independently was very difficult”). This was in spite of his access to Universal Credit and some support from his family to help with living expenses: “And I was lucky that my family supported me throughout with my finances, I don’t think I would have been able to do it without the backing of my family, in terms of some financial support.” Anthony was similarly able to access benefits payments to supplement his income: “tax credits filled the gap as it were [...] it helped, it helps pay bills and all that, pay for petrol for my car and all that, it certainly helped [having a car], I think it just helps me get through the travel barriers that there were.”

And finally, Rory referred to his first apprenticeship, where he was paid the Apprenticeship Rate, as being insufficient to support his independent living, resulting in maintaining a Saturday job at a builder’s merchant to make ends meet. His second apprenticeship was at a local authority, which was committed to a basic rate 43% above the NMWAR and where he reported being more able to get by, even if not to be able to afford “little luxuries”. The view of these participants that the NMWAR is too low for apprentices to live independently echoes the comments of some of those interviewed by Lawton and Norris (2010: 25), and by the St Martin’s Group (2022: 35, 46) over a decade later. Such a concern was also expressed by the Prince’s Trust in a recent submission to the Low Pay Commission, arguing that low pay is particularly a barrier to those from disadvantaged backgrounds (LPC, 2023: 137).

4.2.2 Experiences with the employer

The experiences of the apprentices interviewed were very different, with a key factor being the employer. As set out in Fuller and Unwin one of the four dimensions of apprenticeships is ‘locational’, notably the employing organisation that offers the apprenticeship and the communities in which they are located (Fuller & Unwin, 2011). Participants who were apprentices in the NHS and with local authorities, reported an overall good experience. This started with their induction and training, with Anthony explaining all of the health and safety training he received when he started working in a warehouse for the NHS, ranging from manual handling to fire safety training. David in his NHS induction received information on the trade unions in the workplace, and how to join if he wanted to. Rory was pleased with the breadth of experience he was gaining within the different teams in his local authority employer.

For many of our participants, a friendly and supportive environment was maintained throughout the apprenticeship. Bethany commented that she does “really like it and everyone is really friendly, and they don’t treat me like just an apprentice, they treat me like I really work there, so it’s really nice”. Chloe noted that “even though I was learning my actual job, I felt like I could ask anyone anything and [...] you didn’t feel bad for continuously asking the same thing, cos everyone had been in that place before you”. And for Ali, his line managers were always supportive with regards to stress and mental health, were ready to step in when he was dealing with difficult or abusive members of the public and were even prepared to move him to a less risky environment during the pandemic due to him living with family members with Covid-vulnerabilities.

These generally good working conditions extended to policies around equality and diversity and the absence of bullying or discrimination in the workplace (again, particularly the case for the NHS employers). NHS apprentice David described his team as the “gold standard” in terms of managing employee relations. Hair and beauty apprentice Bethany talked about how her spa was inclusive of all genders and mindful

of customers' potential disabilities. NHS apprentice Ali did note that he had encountered some issues in the workplace around sexuality, he actually felt empowered to challenge a manager's comments about a member of the public, telling them that "if I was [that person] coming in to seek care, I wouldn't want to be treat[ed] that way, I wouldn't want to be spoken about that way". Happily, the manager took the comments on board, and crucially, part of what empowered Ali to challenge that behaviour was the emphasis on equality and diversity that was built into his NHS apprenticeship training.

For some, though, the support from the employer was lacking. One interviewee, who undertook their first apprenticeship nearly a decade ago, described the situation when a charity wanted to end their apprenticeship:

Jenni: "they told me they'd run out of money to keep me on [...] They told me they could no longer afford to keep me on, it was a part-time apprenticeship with them as well, it was 16 hours a week and I think I was being paid £3-something an hour, maybe even less, it might have even been £2-something an hour. They told me the money had run out and I couldn't do the last year of my apprenticeship there, looking back I think that must have been a lie."

Jenni elaborated on the last comment in relation to a number of dubious management and accounting practices at that small charity. She was then taken on to complete her apprenticeship with a local authority. Reflecting back on this second apprenticeship employer, Jenni described how she felt exploited by the Local Authority by being asked to frequently appear at meetings to represent a particular group of service users, of which she had been one in the past. This meant being asked to share personal details in a public setting, and then having to interact with co-workers who may have been present on a professional basis. This is how she described it to us:

Jenni: "And I felt proud of myself, you know, but actually on reflection, that is so exploitative, and it's almost indirect discrimination in lots of ways, because if you're asking me to go and talk about my mental health and barriers to employment [...] and then expect me to go back to my desk and be around the same professionals, but no longer [as a former service user], you're here as a professional, work, work really hard, for no money."

Many organisations ask apprentices to talk about their experiences prior to and during their apprenticeship in public, to show their commitment to the apprenticeship system. Although the individual was 18 at the time they described the situation, there is a duty of care on the employer when asking individuals to undertake tasks that are outside of their job description. The individual describes learning a lot from the apprenticeship outside of these meetings, including having a particularly positive relationship with their assessor from the training provider.

Wider working conditions were also an issue for Rory. In addition to the lack of training (which we return to below), Rory also described the poor treatment he had experienced from his boss, and how it created a negative working environment:

"we'd be monitored on like going to the toilet and stuff and having a drink [...] if I'd [already] been outside the workshop in the past hour, and [then] I went out to get a drink of water. That was a problem. That was a big issue for my boss, and I was like, I can't work in this environment. I can't work in an environment where I'm not allowed to go to the toilet, and I'm not allowed to get a drink of water, I'm pretty sure that's illegal. So that was that was one of the big issues."

Perhaps even more seriously, Rory also explained that “[h]ealth and safety was basically non-existent”. Indeed, it is likely that his employer was breaking the law in failing to provide – in a furniture manufacturing workshop – personal protection equipment (PPE) and a complete first aid kit. Finally, Rory noted that, other than the employer himself, there was only one other apprentice on site, and that the employer himself was absent for “50 per cent of the time”, meaning effectively the work was being completed by apprentices. This is one of the clearest instances of ‘substitution’ (Mohrenweiser and Backes-Gellner, 2008) – i.e., of apprentices effectively being deployed as low-cost labour – within our sample. Although Katie also indicated that this was the case at the small accountancy firm where she completed her Level 2 qualification, and this was part of the reason why she moved firms to undertake her higher apprenticeships.

Returning to the positive experiences that were more common across our sample, many of our participants reported a great deal of support in terms of helping them to understand the possible career options, and encouraging them to progress. Most of the apprentices we spoke to from the NHS were now on a higher level apprenticeship, and they recognised that it wasn’t automatic, but if they asked, they were supported. Ali described the process:

“and then I expressed interest in my level 3 and my manager was really supportive and put me straight on it, and yeah I started my level 3 and my full-time post I think it was a few months apart [...] I do think I had to do a little bit of independent digging after I finished my level 2 to kind of reach out and say ‘I want more’, it wasn’t just like ‘right, you can go straight on to this, if you’re interested’, you had to reach out and say “right, I want to know my options’, but they were sort of straight on it when I asked and really supportive.”

Similarly, another of our participants, who worked for a local authority, had been approached by a senior leader who encouraged him to consider undertaking a higher apprenticeship with their organisation.

Others currently in apprenticeships in hair and beauty were looking ahead to the Level 3 when they finished the Level 2. Even for small organisations, in these sectors, there is a clear pathway of moving up to the Level 3, and on completion of that apprenticeship, being fully qualified in the occupation. In most cases, the more experienced staff in the salons and spa had followed the same path, and then transitioned to self-employment, so there was support available from others to discuss the practicalities of each stage.

Overall, it is evident that the apprentices we spoke to in larger firms – the NHS and Local Authorities – generally indicated more supportive work environments and better policies regarding aspects of their working conditions, such as health and safety and equality and diversity. In contrast, it was two of the smaller firms where there were concerns around substitution, with one of these displaying poor working conditions across the board. The question of completion in relation to both pay and wider working conditions is further explored in the following section.

4.2.3 Pay and working conditions

Low pay is reported as a factor leading to higher levels of turnover and non-completion (Gallacher et al, 2004; Barker et al, 2018: 21). Previous research also suggests (Lawton and Norris, 2010: 6; Campbell et al, 2011: 370; Yates, 2017: 471) that there is often a close relationship between low pay and poor-quality training. This was not the case for our participants, with the exception of Rory, who received Apprenticeship Rate at the furniture workshop. Nonetheless, pay is context dependent and favourable

labour markets for unskilled workers can also increase the rate of dropouts from apprenticeships (Gambin and Hogarth, 2016: 479).

Amongst our sample it was clear that questions of pay were weighed together with other considerations around the experience of the work. For example, Chloe, who started her apprenticeship in financial services for the NHS, clearly did not enjoy her work during the apprenticeship, but this changed when she was offered a permanent contact on the main pay scale after only six months as an apprentice:

“while I was on apprenticeship minimum wage, I don’t know if it was linked to that, I didn’t like my job, I don’t know whether that was, obviously it takes ages to get into a job and get settled. I didn’t like it, but then when I got the band 2 job, the secondment job, in the March, my feelings kind of changed, I don’t whether that was because I was getting paid the same as everyone else for doing the same job, or if it was because I was more comfortable around the people, but I wouldn’t have stayed for so many years if I didn’t enjoy it.”

On the one hand, Chloe links her changing attitudes towards the work to the sense of fair reward (“the same pay for the same job”) echoing the argument of Lawton and Norris (2010: 30, 32) that apprentices are less willing to tolerate the lower apprenticeship wage when they felt they were doing a similar kind and amount of work to their non-apprenticeship colleagues. In Chloe’s case this was linked to her progression onto a full contract, and it is notable that this was also the case for other NHS apprentices we spoke to, rapidly being offered a main grade contract on completion of their Level 2 apprenticeships (even when they progressed to a Level 3 apprenticeship).

This tallies with Barker et al’s research (2018: 20) that argues that apprentices are more willing to accept a lower apprenticeship wage when this is seen as a trade off against the promise of higher future earnings (cf. Lawton and Norris, 2010: 6). This is particularly salient given that the same research (on the basis of Freedom of Information requests) found that the NHS was more likely than other public sector employers to guarantee a job at the end of the scheme (Barker et al, 2018: 24). This is supported by the 2021 Apprenticeships Evaluation, which indicated that those undertaking business apprenticeships were amongst the most likely to be in employment following completion, second only to those undertaking an apprenticeship in Information and Communication Technology (IFF Research, 2022: 137). This is also confirmed by research for the St Martins Group that suggested business apprentices were more likely to stay with the same employer compared to those in other sectors (2022: 16).

But on the other hand, Chloe also describes her changing attitudes to becoming more ‘settled’ in the workplace and her role changing slightly (and becoming less ‘repetitive’) as she moved into a different role and was able to assume greater responsibility. She also reported becoming better known by her colleagues, who would send requests directly to her rather than going to her manager, making her feel more like part of the team. This highlights the fact that pay is considered alongside wider working conditions as part of the ‘psychological contract’ (Walker et al, 2012) between worker and employer that determines overall satisfaction with work. Similar experiences were reported by David, whose discontent with the low pay was such that had he been able to move to any other job with his employer during the Level 2, he would have taken it, even if it meant leaving the apprenticeship. Nonetheless, the fact that so many other aspects of his working conditions were good, and that he did rapidly progress to better paid and more responsible roles on completion of the Level 2, kept him in the NHS.

The question of the wider psychological contract also comes through with Jenni, who feels that her two apprenticeships - the first with a small charity, the second with a local

authority - were 'exploitative'. In part this was attributed to low pay and the fact that she was clearly subsisting below the poverty line, but ultimately also because of the wider working conditions we have described above. Moreover, while the promise of subsequent job security was realised for the NHS apprentices, this was not the case for Jenni, who felt she had the 'carrot' of a secure contract dangled in front of her as an incentive to work harder during her apprenticeship, and evidently resented the fact that this did not materialise:

"I know that I felt that I had to always say yes, because throughout my apprenticeship I was constantly told that if you don't, they won't give you a contract at the end. And the contract was sort of held over me like a carrot. If you don't work really, really hard, and work all this overtime and agree to everything, you won't get hired, and then you'll have lost that opportunity. And that's how my manager would speak to me 'you will have done that, you will have lost this opportunity, and you will never come back from that', it was a lot of pressure."

She was offered a 6 month, fixed-term contract at the end of her apprenticeship and then left the organisation.

4.2.4 Experiences with training

The interviewees had a variety of experiences with their apprenticeship training providers. Some of the Level 2 apprenticeships operated on a standard model of day release, where the apprentice was in a college or with a training provider for a day a week for their training. Others had remote training with tasks to complete alongside regular personal, rather than class-based contact, with a tutor. Much of the training would also take place in the workplace, which will be explored in the section 4.3 below. Participant reports of their training provider were varied. Some participants had nothing to note about their training provider, which is perhaps indicative of their inclination towards in-work training and suggests that they had no particular issues. However, when we did get reports about bad experiences, they were more extreme and included non-existent formal training and chaotic experiences in college.

Business Administration apprentice Katie noted that there were effectively two routes into finding a combination of work-placement and training provider for an apprenticeship: "So there was either you find your job, so you find your place of work and then they will find a college, or you find a college and the college will help you find a job." In her case she took the initiative of volunteering with an accountancy firm as additional work experience during the half-term holiday in her final year of compulsory schooling. They offered her an apprenticeship and directed her to a training provider that the employer had just established a relationship with. While she felt the content of that training was rather basic ("we didn't really need [to work], to pass the exams we didn't really need to revise for it, it wasn't hard work"), she commented that the "teacher was lovely" and she was pleased to stay with the same training provider for her Level 3, when the difficulty picked up somewhat.

Supportive tutors were a significant theme of the interviews we conducted. Bethany for instance noted that while as an apprentice she attended one day a week of college - in contrast to the two days a week undertaken by those undertaking a full-time Hair and Beauty college qualification - the tutor always gives "us time to catch up. So, in the mornings, when you first go in, she'll have everything recapped back on the whiteboard and she'll just speak it through again". Meanwhile, Jenni, despite her difficult apprenticeship experiences (as outlined above), also paid testimony to her tutor, who was critical to her staying on the programme:

"my apprenticeship tutor was fantastic, I still remember his name, he was a lovely guy and he was excellent when it came to training me in what the apprenticeship

was in, the Business Admin stuff, he's sit with me for hours doing coursework and, my functional skills and all of that, so that side [!] can't fault."

For the NHS apprenticeships the training component of their studies was delivered in-house, with Ali reporting a class-based training day once a month, supplemented by a full day every two weeks in the library to undertake individual study. The content of the training focused on NHS policies and the needs of different stakeholders. Apprentices were placed in teams to research and present topics relating to key issues of the service (such as health inequalities or the ageing population). This was combined with training in generic software like Excel spreadsheets (Chloe: "my excel skills have definitely improved, I'm a wizard at look-up now"), as well as specialist and bespoke systems utilised by the organisation.

The most negative experience was that of Rory, where on his Level 2 furniture manufacturing programme, the employer completely ignored the requirement for formal learning:

"The nearest place that provided that course was [seventy miles away], which meant that I wouldn't actually have been going into the college. I would have just been having, well, so this was one of the problems, in theory, you should spend 20% of your time not at work, you're doing learning, but we didn't actually go to college. In theory, someone from the college would come to the workplace once a month and just check we're getting on with all our work and stuff, but in reality that didn't happen and in reality the workplace didn't give you any time to do your college work."

Indeed, as noted above, Rory was trained by another apprentice, who had been there a year longer than he had, and the input from the employer (the only other member of staff on site) was virtually non-existent.

Rory also reported some issues with the training component of his second apprenticeship with a local authority. While in most respects this second apprenticeship was infinitely preferable to the first – better pay, treated with respect, good on-the-job training – the college component was lacking. Rory was clear that this was mostly a product of the underfunding of Further Education:

"The only thing that's been a little bit negative [...] Essentially, they don't have enough staff [...] We started in January right, so we thought we'd be put on a January start, but what happened was we got put in with a group of first years who'd been there since September. [...] They've kind of tried to squish us through the first year and then pick up the bits we've missed out. [...] I think part of the reason this has happened is because by the end of last term they had one member of staff who could teach that entire [group of subjects]. He was great, a really nice guy and a good tutor, but it was clear that he just had far too much on his plate and couldn't handle it all by himself, and that was negatively affecting the experience of the students."

The issues with staffing even led to Rory not being entered into an exam, because the person whose job it was to book the exams had left the organisation.

Finally, Katie also had a negative experience later in her career development journey when a different training provider with whom she was undertaking her Level 4 was shut down amidst a police investigation into financial irregularities. This left her in a state of suspension for five months while she attempted to locate another training provider where she could sit her final exams.

4.3 Training in the workplace

The National Careers Service assert that apprenticeships allow young people to ‘work alongside experienced staff to learn while you earn a wage’ (no date). This is widely considered fundamental to the delivery of apprenticeships (Fuller and Unwin, 2011; Guile and Young, 2014). Participants acknowledged that the benefits of undertaking an apprenticeship were learning from experienced staff, ‘on the job’ and developing their professional networks:

Frankie: “I thought it was gonna be kind of the same as college really, just in a salon. But I feel like I get more practical work from the apprenticeship, and I actually meet with like, real clients, because in college it’s kind of just family members and people you know, so.”

Bethany: “when I first started practising my facials, I had to sit in a room while, the other therapists worked on each other, and then they’d talk me through it, and then after they’d let me try and have a go on them [...] we’d do it that way, and then it was the same for the manicures and the pedicures, and then, when I started to do it on customers, we got in people that I was more comfortable with. So, my first customer was my mum [laughs] [...] and then it built up my confidence, to then just do it to random people, so that’s what I do now.”

David: “I got into a job, I got into a career, I got the ability to start networking within the trust, networking within managers, networking outside.”

In addition, being in work led to developing knowledge about further options, particularly for those based in large organisations with a range of functions, as described by a participant who was working in the NHS:

Chloe: “So when I started for the NHS I didn’t know what to expect because when you think of the NHS you just assume doctors and nurses, but then I was like “oh, actually when you think about it they will need a finance team” [...] But there’s probably like every job that ever exists, is in the NHS, somewhere down the line.”

Guile and Young (2014) outline how learning within an apprenticeship has developed beyond traditional concepts of developing job-specific, specialised skills under the instruction of a ‘master’ to a continual process of social assimilation to a community of practice. Our findings reinforce the importance of professional relationship development, and negative or exploitative relationships with colleagues had a long-lasting impact. One participant developed anxiety about how they might be perceived by colleagues in future jobs:

Jenni: “I still have a lot of anxiety around going into the workplace and fearing that it’s not going to work out for me, and I won’t be respected by colleagues, and I will be thought of in a certain way, because it was so bad how I was treated [in my previous apprenticeship].”

Rory also had a poor experience, but felt able to challenge behaviour in the workplace when it related to the quality of the training he was receiving, which he attributed to the fact that he started later than the typical apprentice and had previous jobs he could compare with:

Rory: “I’m like, you’ve not taught me anything yet, you’ve not shown me how to do this. You don’t show me the techniques, how fast to do it or anything like that. I’ve been shown by another one of your apprentices and yet you’re criticising me for doing something, if you wanted me to do it, how you want me to do it, maybe you should’ve shown me. [...] I remember saying to him at one point, like, I want

what you want. You want me to be good. I want to be good. But this is not how we're going to get there."

Concerns over a lack of training and/or training quality influences apprenticeship drop-outs, and this was clear in Rory's account of his reasons for leaving his first apprenticeship, where he states that the on-the-job training at his furniture manufacturing placement was non-existent, only receiving some instruction from a fellow apprentice, as described above. Rory left his apprenticeship and moved on to a larger employer with more success (and better pay), this is consistent with the findings of the St Martin's Group apprenticeship outcomes and destinations (2022), which cites working with a micro-sized employer as a factor which is more likely to result in early withdrawal from an apprenticeship programme. Conversely, Chelsea, who was a new apprentice, emphasised how valuable it was to her professional development that her colleagues were available to support her:

"I feel like everyone tries to help me more like, I don't know how to explain it but, they'll like keep an eye on me so if I need help, they'll be there to help."

Both Frankie and Chelsea described how their colleagues were showing them a possible career pathway and giving them confidence in their long-term progression:

Chelsea: "Just seeing how far along like they've got like because they, they'll show us stuff like on their Instagram accounts or whatever and it shows them when they was at college and doing their apprenticeship and just seeing how far they've come with it. It just makes you want to do it more and get to the stage that they're [at]."

Frankie: "Like most of the girls in my salon have all come from apprenticeships. So, I kind of just like, I don't really know how to describe it, I kind of follow their, like what they've done [...] They're teaching me what they learnt."

Gessler (2019) highlights that historically the apprenticeship system in the United Kingdom was characterised by a liberal, laissez-faire approach with few overarching regulation standards. Although there have been more recent reforms to address the standards gap for apprenticeships, from a career development perspective, apprenticeships have suffered stigmatisation when compared to post-16 choices which focussed on academic pathways (Rory noted that he had been given the impression that apprenticeships were the "second rate" option). As noted in previous sections, there is a lack of reliable information available to young people about apprenticeships as a post-16 option. There was evidence that this had a short-term impact on participants' career progression. Around half of the apprentices interviewed for this research were training at a level where they already had qualifications, as noted in section 4.1.3.

Most of our participants acknowledged that once they understood more about the apprenticeship route, it made sense for them and their career goals. Both Ali and Ed described how they saw the possibility for progression opportunities in work:

Ali: "when I learned more about [apprenticeships] I actually realised that they're kind of for everyone and there's loads of progression within them so that's why I chose that, and I wanted a wage."

David: "I was applying [for an apprenticeship] for the qualification, but I was mainly applying for a foot in the door in a career."

Our findings underline the importance of access to impartial, up-to-date careers advice and guidance to enable young people to make choices which align with their goals and abilities.

4.4 Work after the apprenticeship

Fuller & Unwin (2011) suggest that evidence of progression, both vertical (into higher level learning) and horizontal (into other jobs and sectors), is needed for apprenticeship outcomes. UK apprenticeship completion rates improved significantly in the mid-2000s, potentially as a result of improvements in training standards (Campbell et al, 2011: 366), though they remain lower than comparable European countries, such as Germany and Austria (Gambin and Hogarth, 2016: 472-3). It is also worth noting that Gambin and Hogarth's quantitative study, based on an analysis of Further Education Individualised Learner Records (ILRs) for the years 2008/2009, reveals that apprentices undertaking a programme in Business and Administration have one of the highest completion rates of all (Gambin and Hogarth, 2016: 488), though Hairdressing also has a (slightly) above average rate of completing.

Given our sample is largely focussed on these two sectors, it follows that most of our participants, who had completed their apprenticeship, had positive employment outcomes. It is also worth noting that this finding may be influenced by the fact that most of our participants who had finished their apprenticeship worked with larger employers, which is a recognised factor for successful completion (St Martin's Group, 2022).

Looking at the NHS apprentices, Anthony had progressed into a permanent staff role. Chloe had moved from the Level 2 apprenticeship to a secondment to a band 2 job, which was made permanent a couple of months later, before making a horizontal transition into another NHS team. At the time of the interview, she was being encouraged to apply for a band 3 job, alongside undertaking a Level 3 apprenticeship. David had progressed into a role as Human Resources consultant and having completed a Level 3 apprenticeship, is now beginning a Level 5 apprenticeship. Ali moved from the Level 2 apprenticeship to a permanent contract alongside his Level 3 apprenticeship. He is now looking to progress to a degree apprenticeship and wants to work towards a managerial role.

Similarly, even Jenni, who had negative experiences with her apprenticeship, still gained a wide range of skills, which she ascribed to equipping her to take a job with a social housing company and then later completing a degree:

“And that’s the thing about my experience [in my apprenticeship], it was exploitative, and it did end really badly for me, but, I can’t fault, I can’t deny how much I learned professionally, it gave me a really solid foundation in, participation and engagement, my facilitation skills, my presentation skills are excellent, and it, you know, filled out my CV. I don’t think I would have got to university without that experience.”

While Jenni had been out of work briefly following the completion of the degree, this was more out of choice than necessity, and towards the end of her interview she explained that she had a number of interviews lined up with third sector organisations and even felt empowered to negotiate over the salary: “I really, really want that job, but the salary is not quite high enough, so I’m going to try and potentially negotiate that a little bit, because I think I’ll get the other job offers, so I think if I can ask them to match, potentially”. Rory’s transition to another apprenticeship programme was necessitated by the poor training and working environment of his furniture making apprenticeship, leading him to diverge from his goal of working in a maker’s industry:

“What I thought wanted to do was go into, of the furniture making industry it’s what I really enjoyed doing, like I probably do even now, even though my job is not so much anymore, I do prefer work that’s sort of more hands on and [...] making something. [...I’d already] tried to research companies that I want to work for in [place name]. I’ve written to them all. I’ve not gotten anywhere. It is what it is. But I can either do nothing and just wait it out or I can just do something [...] So like I said, I started applying for any apprenticeships I could find online that I thought sounded vaguely interesting, and it just so happened to be [my current role].”

Whilst being mindful of potential selection bias with a small sample of participants, this research clearly reinforces existing findings about what goes into constituting a successful apprenticeship experience. Our interviews with young people, also shed light on what can happen when the requisite training and support and pay and progression opportunities are not in place.

Conclusions

These brief conclusions set out the key issues to consider from the research.

5.1 Pay

Starting with pay, for young people living with parents/guardians (often under 18)⁵, the NMWAR compares favourably with their peers in full-time education. For those living independently (more likely to be over 18), parental support and access to the social welfare system allows them to stay on their apprenticeship until they can obtain a higher paying job, often the next apprenticeship. While parental support is an explicit expectation for young people up to age 25 in full-time Higher Education courses, the funding system does not systematically take parental support into account for young people in Further Education or on vocational courses.

As an apprenticeship is by nature a job with training, rather than a full-time course, there is a debate to be had about whether the level of pay on an apprenticeship is sufficient. Our research suggests that for those living with parents/guardians and under 18, the NMWAR is sufficient. For those living independently who are most likely to be over 18, our findings demonstrate that the NMWAR is not sufficient to cover rent, bills, food, and travel. The rate for those living independently, most easily defined as 18-year-olds or over should be reconsidered, in combination with entitlements to benefits and other support. If parental support is expected, in a similar way to university students under 25, it should be made explicit.

5.2 Apprenticeship pathways

All the current and former apprentices interviewed had received a negative view of apprenticeships from their schools and had only begun to understand them fully on commencement. As a result, most participants had a relatively haphazard entry to their apprenticeship, often starting in January having tried a different learning option and dropped out. With so little information about apprenticeships from school, some interviewees had simply searched the internet for apprenticeships in their area to find them. Others found apprenticeships through friends or family, or through their own work experience. Only one interviewee had a relatively ordered transition to their apprenticeship, through attending a college open day, being given both full-time study and apprenticeship options, choosing the apprenticeship, and then applying. Although some of the interviewees began their apprenticeship up to 8 years ago, their experiences were matched by those who started since 2020, suggesting a long-term

⁵ Note: we use the distinction between under 18s living with parents/guardians, and over-18s living independently both because these are the distinctions we saw in our interviewees, but also because it can be easier to confirm age than living situation, the latter of which may change during the course of an apprenticeship. Of course, there will be circumstances where under 18s are living independently and over 18s are living with parents/guardians, and policy-makers and the LPC should consider the implications of both age and living situation.

issue around the lack of information. There is a clear gap in careers advice for young people about apprenticeships, where to access them, and the potential career trajectories following completion.

5.3 Apprenticeship experiences – employer and training provider

Most participants had good experiences of their apprenticeship, particularly those at larger employers, and at organisations which had had apprentices before. Our findings demonstrate that those with smaller employers and employers with less experience of apprenticeships had poorer experiences, which aligns with existing literature. In most cases, apprentices were treated appropriately and felt part of the team. Building workplace relationships and learning how to function in the workplace are key elements of the apprenticeship and, apart from one apprentice, all individuals felt they had good experiences and were able to learn and develop through the apprenticeship.

Training providers, particularly individual lecturers, trainers, and assessors were mostly praised by the apprentices who felt individually supported and enabled to learn the course content. Some participants highlighted areas where funding cuts and challenges to recruiting and retaining staff in colleges and training providers had caused problems. One had to find an alternative training provider to complete their exam as the previous training provider was shut down at short notice, and another noted that their lecturer was over-burdened meaning large groups and truncated sessions. However, many participants felt able to speak to their lecturer, trainer, or assessor if there were issues at work or in their personal lives and appreciated the availability of pastoral support.

For a good experience, having a supportive employer and training provider, who both have a stake in supporting the apprentice to complete is crucial. Larger employers and employers who have previously had apprentices are better able to provide both the employment support and have the experience to be working with a high quality training provider. From an apprentice perspective, having one individual at the training provider they had a good working relationship with was a key part of their success as an apprentice and beyond.

5.4 Impact on careers and outcomes

As well as technical knowledge in their chosen field, apprentices gained confidence from workplace interactions, and a better understanding of potential future career pathways. Given the haphazard entry to apprenticeships, many participants, particularly those in Business Administration roles, were pursuing apprenticeships as a way of better understanding their future job and career options. The apprenticeship was often a gateway to understanding what a career in accountancy, or human resources really means, what professional qualifications are required, and how to gain the right experience. For the apprentices who had selected Business Administration apprenticeships, only one was clear they wanted to be an accountant, while the others wanted an opportunity to try out different roles to identify what they enjoyed most. The general nature of the apprenticeship gave them the opportunity to find the right role, and all our interviewees are currently pursuing apprenticeships at higher levels in those fields.

The recent changes to apprenticeships, with a wider variety of higher-level apprenticeship standards, aided the development and movement through organisations for this particular group. The ability to learn in their preferred way, through work-based learning, and to pursue higher education allowed them to gain qualifications, and to plan to gain further qualifications, that they would not have considered otherwise. Traditional conceptions of social mobility and widening

participation would not include these individuals, who began on the lowest level apprenticeships and the lowest pay, but they are arguably some of the best examples of successful mobility.

For those on Hair and Beauty apprenticeships, they already knew they wanted to pursue a career in these fields and had an idea of the pathway available to them. Two of these apprentices mentioned wanting to fully qualify by completing the Level 3 apprenticeship, and then spend some time working on a cruise ship as a way of using their skills at work whilst seeing the world. All the apprentices in these fields considered self-employment or running their own salon or spa as the ultimate end goal for a hairdresser or beauty therapist.

In relation to career progression for these young people, almost all either had already or planned to complete a further apprenticeship and additional learning, with one completing a degree. To complete the next apprenticeship, most would stay at the same employer as they had a permanent contract. As described here, often apprentices progress from one level to another, sometimes skipping a level due to high performance. The description given here of these pathways, that enable young people to develop from apprenticeships on the NMWAR, through additional learning to secure jobs and higher qualifications, shows how important the first apprenticeship can be, where there is stable and supportive employment and training.

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