

Apprenticeship Task Group

Final report to Full Council – 08/07/2015

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Gloucestershire
COUNTY COUNCIL

APPRENTICESHIP TASK GROUP - FINAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

- 1 The Task Group was set up as result of the following motion resolved at Full Council in June 2014:

This Council is delighted that since 2010 a total of 15,560 apprenticeships in the county have been created and that this Council itself has recruited over 20 apprentices to date with further recruitment scheduled for later this year.

This Council notes its commitment to demonstrating that apprenticeships are good for businesses, personal careers and creating opportunities for both employers and apprentices alike.

To establish how this Council can best persuade and encourage businesses across Gloucestershire to recruit even more apprentices, this Council resolves to create a cross-party 'Apprenticeship Task Group' that will invite businesses, apprentices and schools for a report to be compiled and recommendations brought to a full Council meeting within the next six months.

- 2 **Membership:** Councillors Paul Hodgkinson (Chair), Lesley Williams and Roger Wilson.

The Task Group worked closely with Peter Holmes, Head of Extended Learning at Gloucestershire County Council, who provided valuable advice on the operation of apprenticeships in the county and relevant areas for enquiry. The Task Group was supported by Philip Williams from Democratic Services.

How did the Task Group Operate?

- 3 The first task of the Task Group was to research in depth the state of apprenticeships in the county. To achieve this, a number of focus group meetings were held from September to November with a wide sample of providers, employers, schools and apprentices from across Gloucestershire. In each focus group, members had the chance to explore what is working well for each group and what barriers each faced. Attendants of the focus groups included:

- 4 **Providers:-**

Bridge Training Ltd.

South Gloucestershire and Stroud College

Gloucestershire College

Prospect Training

South West Apprenticeship Company

5 **Schools:-**

*Cirencester Deer Park School
Rednock School
St. Peters High School*

6 **Apprentices from:-**

*Future Advanced Manufacture Ltd.
The Warranty Group EDF Energy
Gloucestershire County Council
ABB Engineering*

7 **Employers:-**

*GFirst
EDF Energy
CF Roberts
NKS Contracts Central
Clarkson Evans
Barnwood Construction
DMXpressions Ltd
Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Versarien
GE Aviation
Renishaw
Hazlewoods*

8 To support the findings of the focus groups, a survey was sent out to employers to collect quantitative data on attitudes, experiences and perceptions around apprenticeships. This was distributed with the kind co-operation of providers, employers, local Chambers of Commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses and GFirst.

9 The Task Group also attended the Grow Gloucestershire Skills event at Cheltenham Racecourse, with the opportunity to speak informally with parents, young people, teachers and employers.

10 Once this initial research had been undertaken an interim report was produced detailing the Task Group's findings. A discussion was then held about the best way to translate these findings into positive change to support apprenticeships in Gloucestershire. The Task Group chose two areas to focus on:

- The Youth Employment & Skills (YES) campaign – a £1 million Gloucestershire County Council fund targeted at raising the level and range of skills available to young people to help encourage youth employment
- The work of the Local Enterprise Partnership, GFirst, in supporting apprenticeships, skills and training in the county.

11 Working in these areas and alongside Peter Holmes, the Task Group has shaped how the YES campaign has developed. The Task Group has also co-operated with GFirst in the initiation of a project to create an “Apprenticeship Clearing House” for Gloucestershire, using their findings and research to inform and advise the drawing up of a specification that will be taken to tender by Skills Funding Agency in July.

12 Contained in the following report is an overview of this work and the final recommendations of the Task Group.

SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUPS

Providers

13 It was felt that the discussions with providers emphasized the key role they play in driving apprenticeships in Gloucestershire, supporting those who need to attain GCSEs, providing in work training, and acting as a connecting point between schools and employers.

14 The main barrier identified by providers lay in the common perception within schools that apprenticeships were 'second best', with the emphasis overwhelmingly on helping students achieve GCSEs, A levels and to go on to degree-level. This perception at times made it difficult for providers to persuade schools to hold careers events, assemblies and information days to inform students about the benefits of apprenticeships and vocational pathways.

15 Providers all noted that not enough employers were aware of apprenticeships. They felt in part this was due to misconceptions on the cost of apprenticeships and the amount of paperwork involved; this was especially true for smaller businesses.

16 Finally, the providers identified a significant need to improve the pool of apprenticeship applicants. One provider noted that out of 320 recent applications, 300 had to be discarded due to poor quality of application. Providers attributed this to the lack of emphasis placed by schools on careers advice and the teaching of employability skills but also commented that applicants often had little idea of what an apprenticeship entailed. They identified a problem in both the perceptions of schools and teachers, but also of those of young people themselves.

Employers

17 Employers echoed the feelings of providers that within most schools the dominant perception of apprenticeships was poor. Employers felt this was largely due to the need to better educate schools about the benefits of apprenticeships. One employer went so far as to say that their apprentices reported being treated like 'outcasts' among their peers at school for pursuing an apprenticeship.

18 Employers emphasized the high value they attached to work experience in potential apprentices. Once more echoing providers, employers considered many applicants for apprenticeships not 'work ready', with those who had the opportunity for work experience during their time at school faring far better. The difficulties of providing work experience for employers was noted, especially the challenge of accommodating the academic year.

19 A large concern for employers was the support needed to encourage smaller businesses to take on apprentices. Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of businesses in Gloucestershire are SMEs, the vast majority of employers of apprentices are larger firms. For SMEs, there is a perception that the time and 'red tape' required to take on an apprentice can be a barrier.

20 Employers also felt that some fellow employers are unaware of the benefits, opportunities and realities of taking on apprentices, a situation exacerbated by the lack of an easy-to-access source of information and guidance.

Schools

21 The Task Group faced great difficulty in getting representatives to attend from the schools contacted; invitations to the Head-teachers of seven schools resulted in only three attendees, with no representative from a senior leadership team. While the Task Group recognized that Head-teachers were extremely busy, it was felt that this lack of engagement spoke clearly of the lack of importance placed on apprenticeships within some schools. The Task Group would like to note, however, that only a small proportion of schools were contacted, and that many schools in Gloucestershire are dedicated and enthusiastic about supporting apprenticeships

- 22 The representatives that did attend presented an extremely positive picture of this enthusiasm and the impact schools could have when dedicated to supporting apprenticeships.
- 23 Despite a somewhat negative perception of apprenticeships within schools being acknowledged, it was felt that this was beginning to change for the better. It was however agreed that advising students to consider apprenticeships felt like 'dropping pebbles in a pond'; significant misconceptions about apprenticeships still existed among parents, teachers and peers, often the biggest influences on student's career choices.
- 24 The pressures on schools to encourage students to go on to A-levels and 'high prestige' destinations were also recognised. Head-teachers were characterised as enthusiastic about apprenticeships but primarily concerned with making sure that all students achieved their desired GCSE and A-Level exam outcomes.
- 25 A growing trend within schools towards seeking out direct relationships with local employers, bypassing colleges and providers, was discussed. Schools have however had difficulties engaging with smaller employers who struggle to access information and support for apprenticeships and are reticent to engage with schools.
- 26 All the schools in attendance aimed to provide work experience, but recent changes that have made it non-compulsory have led to a decline in the number of schools offering work experience to their students.

Apprentices

- 27 Apprentices all felt that support for apprenticeships in their schools was minimal, targeted only at the 'weakest' students academically. It was felt that schools treated apprenticeships only as a 'back-up plan' for those who did not, or would not, achieve academically. Whilst all those the Task Group spoke to did have the chance to undertake work experience, it was felt that there was not enough careers guidance or emphasis on employability skills throughout their education.
- 28 In comparison to the support from schools, all agreed that parents had been extremely supportive. Even those parents who were initially sceptical were enthusiastic once given information on the benefits of apprenticeships, indicating the importance and effectiveness of combating misconceptions, especially amongst those most likely to influence a young person's career choice.
- 29 All apprentices were extremely positive about their decision to start an apprenticeship, and talked enthusiastically about how it has helped them to take their first steps into

careers. The majority of apprentices had however experienced some measure of stigma from their peers pursuing other, academic, routes.

30 All apprentices noted the importance of being paid a fair wage. It was agreed that for many, the choice to start an apprenticeship was financially motivated, and that they would not have been able to live off the minimum apprentice wage. To the apprentices, a key issue in supporting apprenticeships was helping ensure employers provide a fair wage.

Summary of Survey Findings

31 The survey, distributed to a large number of employers in Gloucestershire through the kind help of the local Chambers of Commerce, received responses from 23 employers from a wide-range of different sectors, sizes and geographical locations across Gloucestershire.

Key findings from employers who already had apprentices:

- 42% of employers rated support from the National Apprenticeship Service as Unsatisfactory or Poor.
- 67% of employers rated the ease of recruitment of apprentices as either Good or Excellent.
- 23% of employers rated the work readiness of apprentices as Unsatisfactory; 62% rated it as Satisfactory, with only 15% rating it Good.
- 54% of employers rated the paperwork associated with apprentices as Good.

Key Findings from employers who did not employ apprentices:

- 66% of employers were restricted from taking on an apprentice through lack of resources.
- 50% of employers cited the availability of suitable candidates as the main barrier to taking on an apprentice.

TASK GROUP FINDINGS

32 Having collected this data and spoken with employers, providers, schools and apprentices a number of key issues emerged.

“The perception of apprenticeships among some teachers, schools, young people and parents does not match reality”

- Schools, teachers, young people and parents can often see apprenticeships as an unprofitable, unfulfilling route, despite the reality being quite the opposite. The benefits, opportunities and advantages to apprenticeships need to be more widely understood.

33 ***“Young people need high quality career advice and support to develop the skills they need to start their careers in the workplace”***

- The poor perception of apprenticeships within schools has meant they are often neglected in favour of academic routes.
- Careers advice and support in gaining key skills needed in the workplace is thus often being neglected.
- Ensuring students have the chance to undertake work experience is key to building their employability skills and ensuring there is a large pool of high quality applicants.

34 ***“Employers need to be better informed, supported and encouraged to take on apprentices”***

- More employers, especially smaller employers, need to be encouraged to take on apprentices.
- The benefits of apprenticeships need to be better ‘sold’ to employers.
- Misconceptions around ‘red tape’ and cost of apprenticeships need to be tackled; the survey results showed that employers currently employing apprentices were generally positive about the associated paperwork and responsibilities.

THE IMPACT OF THE TASK GROUP

35 Having conducted their in-depth research into the situation of apprenticeships, schools, employers and providers, the Task Group held a discussion on the best way to translate this knowledge into positive action for apprenticeships in the county.

36 It was decided that there were two key areas in which the Task Group could have significant impact:

- **Shaping the work of Gloucestershire County Council** in supporting employment and skills through the Youth Employment & Skills (YES) campaign – a £1 million fund aimed at developing the range of skills and careers available to young people in Gloucestershire.
- **Influencing the work of the Local Enterprise Partnership (GFirst)** in supporting young people and employers to engage with apprenticeships.

The following sections detail the actions and impact of the task group in these areas.

Influencing GFirst

“Apprenticeship Hub”

37 In discussions with GFirst, the Task Group was made aware of GFirst’s plans for the creation of an “apprenticeship clearing house” in Gloucestershire, included as part of the LEP’s Strategic Economic Plan. This aimed to create a “clearing house” for apprenticeship vacancies in the county, on the model of UCAS, connecting employers, young people and schools.

38 This “clearing house” would include both an online portal and a physical presence, with advisors to support young people and employers to engage with apprenticeships, based in a number of ‘satellite hubs’ around the county. The plans for the project form part of GFirst’s European Skills and Innovation Fund bid and are expected to be funded by £1.7 million over 7 years.

39 In discussion with GFirst, the expertise of the Task Group gained through their investigations was well-recognized and the Task Group were invited to participate in the drawing up of the specification that would be taken to tender by the Skills Funding Agency.

40 The Task Group recognized the value of the initial proposals in addressing some of the concerns they had outlined, especially the access to apprenticeships in the county and the lack of a single reliable point for up-to-date information and advice. However, the

Task Group felt that the “clearing house” should instead be seen as an “**apprenticeship hub**”; a single co-ordinating point for apprenticeships in the county.

41 In line with this, the Task Group submitted two recommendations in line with their findings to ensure the project had the greatest impact:

- **1) The specification should include a requirement that the project takes on a pro-active role in approaching employers, schools and students.** The initial proposals only provided support to those that contacted the hub themselves. To drive growth in apprenticeships there must be a greater emphasis on seeking out employers and students that are not engaged already.
- **2) The specification should include a requirement that there be a single senior role responsible for the promotion and support of apprenticeships across the county, driving the projects role as a “hub”.** This role would provide clear direction in driving the growth of apprentices and act as an ambassador to schools, employers, and local authorities. Without a single point of leadership, co-ordinating the complex system of work, education and training would be a difficult task

42 These recommendations were positively received by GFirst and subsequently included in the specification for the project. As such, the Task Group has played an important role in shaping the co-ordination of apprenticeships in the county in the future.

43 The project initiation document for the project is currently being drawn up and will be sent to the Skills Funding Agency to draw up the final specification, which will be taken to tender in July 2015.

Influencing the work of the Council

The Youth Employment & Skills (YES) Campaign

44 On reviewing the current uses of the YES campaign, the Task Group submitted recommendations for two further ways in which the Council could improve apprenticeships in the county. Both recommendations were accepted and are currently being implemented:

- **A positive message on apprenticeships should reach children and parents early in their school career.** One of the key findings of the Task Group lay in the poor perception of apprenticeships among some teachers, parents and young people. In line with this recommendation, the YES campaign produced a booklet advertising the benefit of apprenticeships is produced annually for older

secondary school children; the Task Group recommended this booklet be extended to cover younger secondary school children in order to embed a positive message on apprenticeships as early as possible in a child's education.

As a result of this recommendation, the booklet being distributed in September 2015 now includes a section specifically targeted at Year 8/9 Secondary School pupils.

- **The extent to which schools are actively encouraging the development of youth employment & skills is variable and further work should be done to improve school engagement with apprenticeships.** It was recommended that some of the YES funding was used to hire an ambassador to engage with schools on apprenticeships, to start building a picture of how each school was promoting youth employment and skills and to encourage the promotion of apprenticeships.

As a result of this recommendation, a recently retired local head teacher was hired in order to work with schools to understand how they could better promote apprenticeships. Their past experience has ensured they have the reputation and ability to approach fellow Head-teachers with as great an impact as possible.

Laying the groundwork for the “Apprenticeship Clearing House”

- 45 Whilst the proposals for the LEP's “apprentice clearing house” promised to have a large impact on apprenticeships in the future, the Task Group agreed that something should be done immediately.
- 46 To ensure that the LEP's project can find its feet and make a positive impact on apprenticeships in the county, the Task Group recommended the setting up of a **“pump priming” project**, using Council funds marked for the promotion of skills and training for young people.
- 47 Working with Peter Holmes, the Task Group have advised on the drawing up of a specification that will invite providers to bid for a 6 month contract preceding the setting up the “clearing house”.
- 48 This specification follows the recommendations that the Task Group have made, calling for a pro-active approach to increasing both demand and supply of apprenticeship, and providing a single co-ordinating point of responsibility in the county.

49 **The required outcome will be a greater number of apprenticeships, traineeships and supported internships across the county, with up to £45,000 available for the project. The specification also includes the requirement that the provider pass all learning onto the provider chosen to deliver the LEP’s “clearing house”.**

50 In this way, the recommendations of the Task Group will be put into practice immediately whilst laying the grounds for future success.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

51 In addition to the above actions, the Task Group have drawn up two final recommendations to ensure the greatest positive impact on apprenticeship in Gloucestershire:

1) To make sure that the recommendations included in this report are implemented, Gloucestershire County Council’s Economic Growth and Scrutiny Committee should include a standing item on their agenda to scrutinise the LEP and the Council’s work around skills, training and apprenticeships – with special emphasis on ensuring that the LEP’s “apprenticeship clearing house” project is implemented in line with the findings in this report.

52 To make sure that the promotion of apprenticeships continues to improve and tackle the problems highlighted in this report, the Task Group recommends that a standing item be included on the agenda of the Gloucestershire Economic Growth Scrutiny Committee covering the LEP’s responsibility for skills, training and apprenticeships. This will give regular opportunities for the work of the LEP in this area to be scrutinised and to ensure that the recommendations of this report are delivered.

53 Councillor Paul Hodgkinson, chairman of the Task Group, is also chairman of the Scrutiny Committee, and so this recommendation provides a valuable opportunity to maintain the momentum behind the work begun by the Task Group.

2) That the Task Group write to all Head-teachers and Boards of Governors in Gloucestershire to request that in each school a Governor be nominated to take on responsibility for overseeing the quality of apprenticeship, skills and careers advice at each school in the county.

54 As highlighted in this report, schools play an essential role in developing the employability skills young people need to succeed and in encouraging young people to pursue apprenticeships and other vocational routes. Requesting each school nominate

a Governor dedicated to ensuring the highest quality provision in this area will ensure that it is given the prominence it deserves, something that has at times been lacking.

55 If Council approves the recommendations contained within this report, the Task Group will undertake to write to the Secretary of State for Education, Nikki Morgan, and the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Sajid Javid, to inform them of their work and findings.

56 The Task Group will also distribute a copy of the report to all local schools, colleges, district council leaders, chambers of commerce, the Skills Funding Agency and other relevant parties.

CONCLUSION

57 The Task Group would like to sincerely thank all those who have contributed to, and taken part in, this report. As an exercise in scrutiny, the Task Group would like to highlight the success that results from a cross-party group coming together to tackle an important complex issue. All members of the Task Group applaud the level of co-operation and consensus that has allowed their work to be so successful.

58 Engaging with such a wide cross section of employers, educators and young people has been an immensely enjoyable and interesting task for all involved in the Task group. From this engagement, the Task Group feels it has helped identify the key challenges facing apprenticeships in Gloucestershire, and to implement and suggest solutions that have the potential to have a real and positive impact. The recommendations contained within this report will ensure that these impacts are realised and the aims of the Task Group, to expand and support apprenticeships in Gloucestershire, are met.

Councillor Paul Hodgkinson

Chairman of the Apprenticeship Task Group