



The
Opportunity
Provider
Since 2006

From First Job to Future Career

TOP's Youth Employment Manifesto

The national conversation has moved on. The focus is no longer only on the Industrial Strategy and the sectors expected to drive future growth. That work still matters, but it cannot answer the immediate challenge facing the country: too many young people are outside education, employment and training, whilst at the same time employers are struggling to recruit, train and retain the next generation of talent.

If the government wants to fix the NEET crisis, it must back the sectors where young people are most likely to get their first chance. For many young people, that first step will not be in advanced manufacturing, clean energy or life sciences. It will be in a kitchen, a hotel, a pub, a restaurant, a shop, a nursery, a care setting, or a local family business. These are the places where young people learn how work works.

The Opportunity Provider works across these people-facing sectors through HIT Training, Connect2Care and EDN Training. We support employers in hospitality, retail, adult care, early years and funeral services. We understand the pressure these employers face, but we also know the role they play in creating opportunity. These sectors do not just offer jobs. They build confidence, teach responsibility, create progression and support communities.

Our view is simple: the NEET challenge does not need endless new initiatives or programmes, it needs the government to unlock more high-quality delivery through trusted providers. It must recognise and support the sectors that give them their first job, their first manager, their first wage, their first qualification, and use apprenticeships to create clear pathways from first job to future career.

1. Recognising the sectors that give young people their first chance

Hospitality, retail, early years and adult care should be formally recognised as **Career Starter Sectors** because they are often where young people first learn how work works. They are open, local, people-facing sectors that teach the professional behaviours every employer needs: timekeeping, teamwork, communication, resilience, responsibility, planning, problem solving, customer care, leadership and emotional intelligence.

These sectors pass the parent test: get a job there while you work out what you want to do. That should not be seen as a weakness. It is a strength. A first job in these can give a young person confidence, structure, income and transferable skills they can use wherever their career takes them. Some will progress within these sectors. Some will move into other industries. Both outcomes matter.

We are asking government to:

- recognise hospitality, retail, early years and adult care as Career Starter Sectors;
- use these sectors as practical delivery partners for the Youth Guarantee;
- fully fund apprenticeships and foundation apprenticeships for all 16 to 18-year-olds in these sectors, regardless of levy status;



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- support clear progression from foundation routes into Level 2, Level 3 and higher apprenticeship pathways;
- use volume of employment demand as a trigger for additional support, so funding follows the sectors most able to create real opportunities for young people.

2. Use apprenticeships to create pathways, not just entry-level vacancies

Youth employment is not only about creating new entry-level jobs. In many businesses, the best way to create an entry point for a young person is to upskill and promote someone already in the organisation and by moving them up, creating a new entry-level role. Apprenticeships can facilitate that movement.

A team member can progress into supervision. A supervisor can move into management. A care worker can become a senior care worker. An early years practitioner can progress into educator, lead practitioner or setting management. A funeral team member can build a skilled and respected career in a sector dominated by SMEs. When employers grow their own people, they create space for young people and those at risk of becoming NEET to enter the workforce.

This is where TOP can add value across all our sectors. Hospitality and retail may provide the first step for many young people, but adult care, early years, funeral services and the many other sectors also provide meaningful careers with purpose, progression and local demand. Apprenticeships connect the two.

What this means in practice:

- help employers build progression routes from Level 2 and Level 3 into first-line management and specialist roles;
- use apprenticeship pathways to improve retention, not just recruitment;
- promote internal talent so employers can open up more entry-level opportunities.

3. Make foundation apprenticeships more flexible, responsive and useful

Foundation apprenticeships are a welcome step. They give young people a structured route into work, while helping employers build confidence, employability and occupational skills before progressing into a full apprenticeship.

Our view is that foundation apprenticeships should be able to be completed in up to eight months, rather than requiring every learner to remain on programme for the full duration when they are ready to progress sooner.

This would give employers, learners and providers more flexibility. Some young people will build confidence, workplace behaviours and occupational skills quickly. Where they can demonstrate they are ready, they should be able to progress in real time into a full Level 2 or Level 3 apprenticeship. This would help them move forward faster, while also helping employers benefit from their development sooner.

Other young people may need more time, structure and support. For those learners, the full eight months should remain available, giving providers and employers the time needed to build confidence, provide pastoral support and prepare them properly for the next step.



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We are asking government to:

- allow foundation apprenticeships to be completed in up to eight months, with progression available sooner where the learner is ready;
- focus foundation apprenticeships on employability, confidence, workplace behaviours and practical sector skills;
- allow progression into a full Level 2 or Level 3 apprenticeship once the young person and employer are ready;
- keep quality high, while giving providers the flexibility to respond to learner progress and employer need.

A more flexible foundation apprenticeship model would support both pace and inclusion. Learners who are ready can progress faster. Learners who need more support can take the time they need. Employers benefit from a workforce that develops in real time, rather than waiting for a fixed programme length to end.

4. Create practical apprenticeship units for work-readiness and line managers

The move towards apprenticeship units gives government a chance to solve two problems at once. Many young people need a short, practical route into work before committing to a full apprenticeship. Many first-line managers also need support to manage young workers and apprentices well.

If government wants more young people to start work, it must also help employers keep them there. Better line management, early intervention and pastoral support should be treated as youth employment infrastructure.

If Foundation Apprenticeships cannot be more flexible, TOP supports the introduction of two funded apprenticeship units.

A Foundation Employment Unit

A short, practical unit for young people entering hospitality, retail and other people-facing sectors. This would focus on workplace behaviours, customer confidence, communication, reliability, resilience, food safety awareness, where relevant, service basics and understanding employer expectations.

A First-Line Management Unit

A funded unit for first-line managers who supervise young apprentices and new entrants. This would cover coaching, feedback, motivation, conflict prevention, reasonable adjustments, inclusion, communication, early intervention and supporting young people with low confidence or additional needs.

This matters because many young people do not leave work because they lack ability. They leave because the workplace does not know how to support them. Better line management should be seen as part of youth employment policy.



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We are asking government to:

- fund apprenticeship units that help young people become work-ready and allow employers to use units as a route into full apprenticeships where appropriate.
- recognise line management, communication and conflict prevention as core productivity and retention skills by funding a practical management unit for first-line managers supporting apprentices and young people into work.

5. De-risk young apprentices for providers, not just employers

The Youth Guarantee rightly includes measures to de-risk the recruitment of young people for employers, including incentives and fully funded apprenticeship training for eligible SMEs and non-levy employers. This is welcome and should continue, particularly in Career Starter Sectors where many businesses are small employers taking on apprentices for the first time.

However, while the Youth Guarantee helps de-risk participation for employers, it does little to de-risk delivery for training providers. If government wants more young people to move into work through apprenticeships, it must recognise that providers are not only delivering training and learner support, they are also the sales force for government apprenticeship programmes.

Providers invest significant time and resource in engaging employers, promoting apprenticeships, generating opportunities, supporting recruitment and helping businesses navigate the apprenticeship system. This is particularly important with SMEs, many of whom have limited capacity and may be unfamiliar with apprenticeships. Without provider engagement, many apprenticeship opportunities would simply not exist.

Young people often need more onboarding, more pastoral support, more employer engagement, more help with English and maths, more SEND support and more early intervention. SMEs also require more guidance, administration and relationship management than large levy-paying employers. These additional delivery requirements increase costs, yet apprenticeship funding bands have remained largely static while provider costs have continued to rise.

Rather than creating new programmes, government should refocus a small proportion of the existing Youth Guarantee funding to help de-risk youth apprenticeship delivery for providers. This would complement the support already available to employers and help unlock additional apprenticeship capacity where it is needed most.

We are asking government to:

- refocus part of the existing Youth Guarantee funding into a Youth Apprenticeship Provider Allowance;
- use this allowance to support providers delivering apprenticeships for 16 to 24-year-olds with SMEs, non-levy employers and recognised Career Starter Sectors;
- recognise the additional costs associated with supporting younger learners, including SEND, English and maths and pastoral support needs;



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- recognise the role providers play in promoting apprenticeships, engaging employers and generating apprenticeship opportunities on behalf of government;
- prioritise providers with strong outcomes, robust learner support and proven experience working with SMEs and disadvantaged young people;
- link the allowance to sustained participation, retention, progression and achievement, not just apprenticeship starts.

The Youth Guarantee should de-risk youth apprenticeships for both employers and providers. Employer incentives create the opportunity. Provider capacity, employer engagement and learner support ensure young people are able to take that opportunity, stay on programme and succeed.

6. Protect small businesses and remove unnecessary administration

Small and medium-sized employers are essential to youth employment. Policy should make it easier for them to take part, not harder.

The planned increase in co-investment for levy-paying employers who exhaust their funds risks harming marginal/cusp levy-paying SMEs, particularly those brought into the levy scope by fiscal drag rather than genuine growth in capacity. These employers may reduce starts, delay recruitment or avoid taking on young apprentices altogether. That would undermine the Youth Guarantee.

The Apprenticeship Service also continues to create avoidable delays for small employers. In some cases, an apprenticeship can be delayed or lost even after the employer has signed the training plan and apprenticeship agreement, simply because the employer has not completed a portal task quickly enough.

We are asking government to:

- protect marginal levy-paying SMEs from increased apprenticeship costs through a raised threshold, tapered model, or youth apprenticeship exemption;
- allow providers to fully administer the Apprenticeship Service on behalf of employers, with clear employer consent;
- remove duplication where employers have already signed a training plan and apprenticeship agreement;
- design apprenticeship administration around how small businesses actually operate.

7. Measure what matters

Success must not be measured by starts alone.

If the Youth Guarantee is to work, government, employers and providers must measure whether young people stay, achieve, progress and build confidence. This is particularly important for young people with SEND, additional learning needs, poor prior experience of education, or low confidence entering the workplace.



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TOP will continue to maintain and improve pastoral support through our SENDCo team, careers team, trainers and employer partnerships. We will focus on early intervention, English and maths, additional learning needs, wellbeing, workplace confidence, progression planning and sustained employment.

We believe success should be measured through:

- retention and achievement;
- progression into further apprenticeships, employment or promotion;
- sustained employment after completion;
- learner confidence and wellbeing;
- employer confidence in recruiting young people;
- access and outcomes for learners with SEND and additional learning needs;
- continued development of English, maths and wider employability skills.

The right measure is not simply whether a young person starts. It is whether they are supported to succeed.

TOP's commitment

The Opportunity Provider is ready to work with government, Skills England, DWP, Jobcentre Plus, mayoral authorities, sector bodies and employers to make youth employment work.

Through our brands, we will help employers create apprenticeship pathways across hospitality, retail, adult care, early years and funeral services. We will support employers to grow their own talent, promote from within and create space for young people to enter the business.

We will continue to work with sector institutions and partners to get the message out about opportunities for young people. This means using our relationships across hospitality, care, early years, funeral services and leadership to show employers what is possible, share good practice and build confidence in apprenticeships as a route into work and progression.

We will continue to maintain and improve pastoral support through our SENDCo team, careers team, trainers and employer partnerships. We will focus on early intervention, English and maths, additional learning needs, workplace confidence, progression planning and sustained employment.

We will not measure success by starts alone. We will measure whether young people stay, achieve, progress and build confidence. We will also support employers to understand how apprenticeships can help them recruit, develop and retain young talent in sectors that keep communities and local economies running.

The country does not just need more training schemes as a solution. It needs real routes into work, backed by employers, supported by providers and understood by young people.

Hospitality, retail, early years and adult care can provide the first step whilst also supporting lasting careers. Apprenticeships can connect both.



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If the government wants to move young people from NEET to in-work, it must back the sectors that already know how to give them their first chance.