

EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

– 22 September 2026

APPRENTICESHIPS

Report by Director of Children's Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is RECOMMENDED to**
 - a) Consider the current position regarding apprenticeship opportunities for young people aged 16-18 in Oxfordshire, including young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
 - b) Endorse continued partnership work between Oxfordshire County Council, apprenticeship training providers, education providers, Enterprise Oxfordshire and employers to increase awareness of, and access to, apprenticeship opportunities for young people, including those with SEND.
 - c) Support further targeted work to improve employer confidence in recruiting young people with SEND, including clearer guidance, improved access to specialist advice, education for employers around SEND and apprenticeships in general and strengthened mentoring and support arrangements.
 - d) Support further work to improve young people's work readiness, including through careers education, work experience, volunteering, employer encounters, pre-apprenticeship programmes and preparation for employment activity. In addition a consistent approach of support from all training providers.
 - e) Support the development of improved local data reporting on apprenticeship participation for young people aged 16-17, including where available those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or identified SEND.

Executive Summary

2. Apprenticeships provide an important route into education, employment and training for young people and support local employers to develop the future workforce. They offer young people the opportunity to earn while learning, gain practical workplace experience and work towards recognised qualifications.
3. This report provides an overview of apprenticeship opportunities for young people in Oxfordshire, with a particular focus on young people aged 16-18 and young people with SEND.

4. Engagement with local apprenticeship training providers indicates that employers are generally supportive of apprenticeships for young people aged 16-18 and are not inherently reluctant to employ young people with SEND. However, providers identified concerns about work readiness, supervision capacity and the practical challenges associated with supporting apprentices who may require additional assistance and whether they, as employers, have the expertise and resource required to do this well.
5. Feedback gathered from Enterprise Oxfordshire's engagement with employers shows a generally optimistic picture, with employers overall indicating a willingness to recruit younger apprentices and apprentices with SEND where appropriate support is available. However, it should be noted that training provider feedback was more cautious and highlighted practical barriers around capacity, confidence and readiness.
6. It is noteworthy that the themes emerging from employer and training provider engagement are consistent with wider government areas of focus relating to young people and their pathways into work, including those identified through the emerging Milburn Review and which include the importance of effective transition support, employer engagement, work experience, employability skills and the need for targeted support for vulnerable young people. Evidence gathered around apprenticeships highlights specific barriers such as employer confidence, mentoring requirements, employers having the expertise and resource themselves to support young apprentices and the need for support to secure travel independence. In tandem, both pieces of work highlight the need for coordinated partnership support to help vulnerable young people progress successfully into education, employment and training especially at key transition points such as moving into Year 12.
7. A consistent message from employer and training providers is that successful apprenticeships depend on effective matching, strong workplace mentoring, training provider support, SEND-specific guidance, advice on reasonable adjustments, work readiness and ongoing employer support.
8. This report identifies the following key themes:
 - a) Employer willingness exists, but confidence is variable.
 - b) Work readiness is the most significant barrier.
 - c) SEND itself is not the primary obstacle.
 - d) Mentoring and specialist support are critical to success and employers often do not have that specialist expertise
 - e) Larger employers may be better equipped than small and medium-sized enterprises.
 - f) Apprenticeships are often misunderstood by young people and families.
 - g) Transport, travel independence and delays in sharing EHCP information can create additional barriers for some young people with SEND.
 - h) Some inconsistency around training provider support.
 - i) The report recommends continued partnership action to strengthen employer confidence, improve young people's preparation for

employment, promote inclusive apprenticeship pathways and improve the visibility and quality of local apprenticeship data.

Context

9. The proportion of young people in Years 12 and 13 participating in apprenticeships has remained broadly comparable over the past two years and is in line with national, South East and neighbouring local authority benchmarks, particularly where cohort sizes are similar. However, individual Local Authorities and the national picture shows that there has been a decrease in young people in apprenticeships over the past 12 months.
10. Please note that March has been selected as the measurement point as it falls approximately six months after the start of the academic year and so provides a more reliable indicator of apprenticeship participation and retention following the initial period of apprenticeship recruitment.

Area	Year 12/13s March 2026	Actual in apprenticeships	March 2026 %	Year 12/13s March 2025	Actual in apprenticeships	March 2025 %
England	1,363,692	49,092	3.60%	1,337,297	52,275	3.90%
South East	222,243	7,112	3.20%	216,029	7,556	3.50%
Bucks	13,906	403	2.90%	13,713	514	3.74%
Cambs	15,183	516	3.40%	14,593	607	4.15%
Gloucs	14,980	569	3.80%	14,631	719	4.91%
Oxfordshire	15,112	589	3.90%	15,168	634	4.18%
Warks	13,228	463	3.50%	13,195	516	3.91%
Wilts	11,578	336	2.90%	11,256	347	3.08%

(Source National Client Caseload Information System March 2026)

11. Apprenticeships form an important part of the wider post-16 education, employment and training landscape. They provide a recognised route for young people to move into skilled employment while continuing to learn and develop.
12. For young people aged 16-18, apprenticeships can provide an alternative pathway to employment from school sixth form, college or other training routes. They can be particularly valuable for young people who are motivated by practical learning, workplace experience and progression into employment.
13. This briefing paper has been developed in response to local interest in apprenticeship opportunities for young people in Oxfordshire, including the accessibility of apprenticeships for young people with SEND.
14. The report draws on recent engagement undertaken with local apprenticeship training providers and Enterprise Oxfordshire employer engagement activity; including an employer focus group as well as a questionnaire sent to both

training providers and employers. The provider feedback specifically considered apprenticeships for young people aged 16-18 and young people with SEND.

15. The employer and training provider feedback provides useful insight into both the opportunities and barriers currently affecting apprenticeship participation. Employers were generally positive about recruiting younger apprentices provided there was accompanying support while training providers highlighted practical concerns such as supervision, maturity, capacity, and costs.

Financial Implications

16. There are no direct additional financial implications arising from this report. Current activity is being delivered through existing staffing and partnership arrangements. Any future proposals requiring additional resources will be subject to separate consideration through the Council's budget and governance processes.

Legal Implications

17. There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. The report is presented for consideration by the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee and does not itself seek approval for a new policy, budget or statutory decision. Members should note that the public sector equality duty under s.149 Equality Act 2010 will apply to the development of any future proposals, and that any improved data reporting or sharing concerning young people with SEND will need to comply with UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. Any future proposals that create legal, contractual or statutory implications will be subject to separate legal advice.

Staff Implications

18. There are no direct staffing implications arising from this report. Current activity is being undertaken through existing service and partnership arrangements.
19. Further work to improve employer engagement, data reporting, SEND guidance and apprenticeship pathways may require officer time across relevant services, including Education, Employment and Training, SEND, Enterprise Oxfordshire and partner organisations.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

20. This report has a clear equality and inclusion focus because it considers access to apprenticeship opportunities for young people with SEND.

21. Provider feedback indicates that SEND itself is not the primary barrier to apprenticeship recruitment. Instead, barriers are more commonly linked to employer capacity, confidence, access to support, travel independence, how quickly and effectively employers can access information about the needs of their young people, and how workplace expectations are communicated and supported. It was noted by training providers that the EHCP process can delay application. Often there are several layers to move through i.e. EHCP Team, apprenticeship provider, curriculum lead and this can be further complicated if the young person is from another county or requires their plan reviewing. If the apprenticeship vacancy has a short lead time then there are chronological barriers that may preclude an applicant with an EHCP.
22. Improving access to apprenticeships for young people with SEND will require attention to reasonable adjustments, specialist guidance, appropriate matching, mentoring and sustained support and some thinking around reducing the admin involved in an EHCP application.
23. Further work may require equality screening or an Equality Impact Assessment if new proposals, policies or service changes are developed.

Local Government Reorganisation Implications

24. There are no immediate Local Government Reorganisation implications arising directly from this report.
25. However, education, employment and training pathways for young people, including young people with SEND, will remain important areas of work during and beyond future local government reorganisation. The Millburn Report Recommendations are expected to be published in Autumn 2026 and it is possible that there will be further implications or responsibilities for Local Authorities within these pending recommendations.
26. Strengthening partnership arrangements across the post 16 and employer landscape in Oxfordshire and developing clearer support pathways for young people who follow an apprenticeship route may support continuity during future organisational change.

Sustainability Implications

27. There are no direct sustainability implications arising from this report. Apprenticeships may support young people to access local employment opportunities, although any specific sustainability implications would need to be considered in relation to future proposals, programmes or projects.

Risk Management

28. The following risks and mitigations have been identified:

Risk	Description	Mitigation
Low apprenticeship participation among young people	Young people may not access apprenticeships due to limited awareness, limited vacancies or lack of preparation.	Strengthen careers education, employer engagement and promotion of apprenticeship pathways.
Unequal access for young people with SEND	Young people with SEND may face additional barriers linked to support, travel, confidence, admin procedures or employer capacity.	Improve SEND guidance, mentoring, matching and access to specialist advice; especially for employers.
Employer reluctance or reduced confidence	Employers may be willing in principle but concerned about supervision, resource and support requirements.	Provide clear guidance, practical support and opportunities for direct employer engagement and education.
Poor matching between young people and employers	Apprenticeships may not be sustained if the role, employer and young person are not well matched.	Work with providers to strengthen matching and ongoing support arrangements.
Employability and work-readiness barriers	A proportion of young people face barriers to employment readiness, including limited work experience, lower confidence, poor attendance histories, unmet support needs or insufficient understanding of employer expectations. These factors may reduce access to apprenticeships and other employment opportunities.	Delivery of targeted employability support through education, employment and training services; promotion of work experience opportunities; early identification of barriers; and collaborative working with education providers, employers and partner agencies to support successful transitions into employment.
Lack of reliable local data	Limited data may make it difficult to assess participation trends for young people with EHCPs or SEND.	Develop local data reporting using available sources, including Core+/NCCIS and provider intelligence.

Consultations

29. This report draws on engagement with local apprenticeship training providers via Education's EET Service, as well as employer feedback gathered by Enterprise Oxfordshire during the period 1/8/2026 to 26/8/2026.
30. Due to the time of the year, there were some limitations around the engagement of training providers and employers but, as of 11th August 2026, a minimum of 20 employers/training providers have been consulted. An employer focus group took place on 26th August 2026 in collaboration with Enterprise Oxfordshire.

31. Provider engagement to date has identified key barriers including limited apprenticeship opportunities in some sectors i.e. construction where supervision for young apprentices (under 18) can be a challenge as well as implications of insurance from a Health & Safety perspective and young people being able to travel between construction sites. Also, smaller retail and hospitality businesses where staffing pressure impacts on training resource. In addition, employer capacity, finding the right qualification for an industry specific skill, supervision requirements, young people's work readiness, additional support requirements for some young people with SEND, transport and independence barriers, and a lack of understanding of apprenticeships and expectations amongst some young people, families and employers.
32. Employer engagement showed strong support for recruiting younger apprentices, but also identified a need for SEND guidance, ongoing support and advice, specialist resource on site or externally, access to specialist expertise, work readiness education and opportunities for discussion and networking.

Conclusion

33. The early local evidence from employer and provider engagement to date presents a broadly positive but nuanced picture. Employers are generally willing to consider recruiting young people aged 16-18 and young people with SEND, but confidence varies and practical barriers remain.
 - a) Work readiness, employer capacity, employer access to specialist support/mentoring. Long term and quality support from training provider and effective matching are the key factors influencing successful apprenticeship participation.
 - b) The findings suggest that the focus for Oxfordshire should be on strengthening young people's preparation for employment, improving employer confidence, making support easier to access, education for employers and improving local data on apprenticeship participation.
 - c) Further work will be required to incorporate local apprenticeship participation data, including data relating specifically to 16-17 year olds and, where available, young people with EHCPs or identified SEND. These groups are a particular focus because they can face additional barriers to accessing and sustaining apprenticeship opportunities. Improved data will provide a stronger evidence base for understanding participation rates, identifying any inequalities in access and informing future support and intervention activity

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Annex:	Nil
Background papers:	Nil
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