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**Apprenticeship Reform & Trailblazers Conference**

6 October 2015 – Haydock Park Racecourse

**Conference Report**

**NWPN - Apprenticeship Reform & Trailblazer Conference 2015**

**1. Introduction**

1.1 This report summarises the outcomes of the North West Provider Network’s Apprenticeship Reform and Trailblazer Conference held on 6 October 2015.

1.2 The event was attended by over 120 delegates representing organisations from across the North West. Three quarters of those attending were from existing Apprenticeship providers including independent providers, colleges and universities. In addition there were representatives from local enterprise partnerships, employers, awarding bodies, sector skills councils and the provider network organisations. Appendix A contains a copy of the annotated agenda listing the contributors and a brief overview of the content of their presentations.

**2. Presentations**

2.1 The slide presentations used at the event are available on the Lancashire Forum website.

**3. Summary**

3.1 The scale, breadth and pace of the reform agenda is both radical and wide reaching. Every aspect of the current Apprenticeship system is being subjected to change including; framework design & content, funding and the structure of delivery models. Following the general election, in addition to the reforms already underway, the Government has set out its intention to significantly expand Apprenticeship volumes. The combination of the existing reforms coupled to the planned expansion of Apprenticeship numbers present both huge opportunities and challenges across the whole sector.

3.2 The number of Trailblazer standards now in the development phase has increased substantially in recent months as has the pace of the overall reform agenda with full scale implementation planned for 2017. Whilst a number of Apprenticeship providers are already actively engaged in the development of Trailblazer standards, and in a limited number of cases delivery, it is evident that they are in the minority.

3.3 The overarching messages for attendees at the conference where:

* Organisations not currently engaged in Trailblazer developments needed to plan for and engage as quickly as possible.
* It is clear that employers need support in understanding and adapting to the planned changes. As a consequence there is a significant opportunity for providers to encourage employers to get involved in the development phase and to support those employers to implement the new Trailblazer standards.
* Providers have a key role to play in communicating, interpreting, simplifying and delivering Trailblazers standards and also in ensuring high standards of delivery.
* The funding reforms will require revised approaches to budgeting, costing and pricing and it is vital that providers develop the capacity to adapt to a more complex financial model where *price* is no longer guaranteed or standardised across the sector. Each provider will be faced with a substantially increased volume of financial transactions.
* The requirement for up-front cash contributions from employers under the proposed voucher system will significantly alter the relationship and dialogue between providers and employers and is likely to have cash flow implications.

3.4 Supporting providers to respond and adapt to the changing environment is critical if the planned changes are to be achieved. Employers and funding bodies cannot do this alone. A range of support is available to providers including the Education and Training Foundation, through their Apprenticeship Staff Support Programme as well as work undertaken by AELP. The NWPN and the provider networks in the North West have agreed to work with the SFA and NAS to plan and deliver further training events. In addition the networks are committed to alerting providers to other briefing events and programmes of support &training. **Appendix B contains some useful links.**

**4. Main Elements of Reform**

4.1 The introduction of the Trailblazer standards and funding reforms has five key aspects which are summarised as follows:

* Employer led groups designing and ‘owning’ the Trailblazer standards
* Short concise standards replace long complex frameworks
* All Apprenticeships now require an independent end point assessment
* Quality is at the heart of the new system
* Employers will have control over funding

4.2 Whilst the development of Trailblazer standards is employer led there is considerable scope for provider involvement. These include:

* Opportunities for providers to work alongside their existing employers and to encourage those employers to become involved in the development of Trailblazer standards.
* Acting as the second tier of expertise (reference groups) to support the development of new Trailblazers and more need to do so.
* Supporting and challenging during the development stage to ensure that the new standards and the proposed end point assessment can be delivered in practice by bringing their considerable sector knowledge and expertise in delivery to the development process.

**5. Issue Requiring Further Consideration and Clarification**

5.1 Employer Engagement

5.1.1 Whilst acknowledging the importance of employer leadership concerns remain that the current levels of awareness and understanding amongst the majority of employers are at present very low. Whilst efforts are being made to engage SMEs and micro businesses involvement is still limited. Despite the fact that the implementation phase was gathering pace few employers are engaged in the Trailblazer pilots.

5.1.2 Given the fundamental nature of the reform it was considered that there was a need for a significantly increased level of communication activity to ensure that employers were engaged and informed as to rationale for the reforms and also the potential benefits. If this is not undertaken effectively there are risks that some employers will not respond positively to the changes and will disengage.

5.1.3 The planned switch to an employer led funding model prompted a number of comments and questions:

* The need to brief providers in respect of planned employer communications strategy/activity.
* It is essential that the employer led funding system is easily understood and straightforward and that any associated administrative systems are kept to a minimum.
* There is a need for an advisory service to support employers to access the right training provider(s)/end point assessment organisation
* There are risks that employers may focus too much on the cost and not the quality of delivery when selecting a provider.

5.1.4 At present there are situations whereby employers are acting as sub-contractors to prime providers. They are a vital part of the current delivery model. Under the Trailblazer funding model this practice is not permitted and as a consequence current high quality provision may be lost/weakened.

5.1.5 Successful implementation of Trailblazer standards and effective end point assessment require a significantly increased level of engagement by employers especially in relation to approving a candidate as ready to undertake their end point assessment. Whilst providers can play a key role in providing assistance many employers will need additional support to develop their capacity and capability to be able to undertake this activity effectively. This issue has to be recognised and addressed if implementation is to be successful.

5.2 Developing a Coherent System

5.2.1 An important aspect of the Trailblazer standards will be governance of the standards to ensure that they are being delivered in the manner intended. As occupations change so will the need to update standards. Government will be consulting on future governance arrangements and employers and providers will need to be involved.

5.2.2 With an increased focus on Apprenticeships and significant investment by awarding bodies in Trailblazer standard delivery models there are potential risks that the qualifications system outside of Apprenticeship may be adversely impacted as volumes of other vocational qualifications delivered reduces and awarding bodies opt to focus their investments on developing qualifications and materials associated with the Trailblazer standards

5.2.3 With the adoption of a system whereby individual Trailblazer standards are being developed independently this may result in considerable variation of both standards, end assessment and ultimately quality. This has significant implications for the current provider base.

5.2.4 It is essential the standards, delivery methodologies and end point assessment are designed in a manner which means that they are accessible by employees working in all sizes of companies. At present the vast majority of Apprentices are employed by SMEs

5.3 Young People

5.3.1 There are concerns that young people who achieve a Level 3 or degree level via an ‘academic’ subject(s) route and who have not undertaken any vocational training are potentially vulnerable as they cannot normally access Apprenticeships because of current eligibility criteria.

5.3.2 One of the most significant challenges facing the both employers and providers is the lack of demand for Apprenticeships from young people and in particular those with good GCSEs. Compared with other post 16 learning options securing an Apprenticeship is a comparatively complex and risky option for many young people and their parents. This is a contributory factor in depressing demand.

5.3.3 The operation of the labour market is increasingly dynamic and in some sectors has relatively high churn especially amongst young people. As a consequence young people will inevitably change their employment and move between employers. The current Apprenticeship system operates flexibly and with the support of the ‘new’ employer it is relatively straightforward for an Apprentice to maintain their training and complete the Apprenticeship. This facility needs to be encapsulated within any reformed system.

5.3.4 The requirements for maths and English GCSE were determined by Government policy rather than employer demand. This had particular implications for many young people and was clearly acting as an entry barrier for young people who may struggle to achieve the prescribed GCSE standard

5.4 Implications for Apprenticeship Providers

5.4.1 An inevitable consequence of the introduction of several thousand occupational standards was the variation between standards, delivery, models and the content of end point assessments. This complexity will inevitably be challenging for providers and in particular those who operate across a number of industrial sectors

5.4.2 The new funding system potentially gives rise to pressures on cash flow. Delegates considered that the SFA should be modelling the impact of the funding changes and risk managing the potential impact.

5.5 Other Issues of a general nature

5.5.1 Further clarification of the operation of the proposed voucher system is required. The current understanding is that than any provider on the Register of Training Organisations will be able to deliver to an employer. This potentially leads to a situation where the number of providers offering their services to employers increases dramatically.

5.5.2 In situations where the Trailblazer standard does not specify a qualification delegates were keen to understand how the system will be overseen and that appropriate quality assurance mechanisms are in place. Further information was required on the proposed mechanisms and information which will be available to aid employers in sourcing high quality support, training and end point assessment.

5.6 Quality

5.6.1 Several issues were raised regarding quality. There is a need to ensure that there is some degree of consistency across the range of Trailblazer standards whilst accommodating sufficient flexibility to meet discrete occupational requirements. Where occupational have very similar competencies then there should be a degree of commonality between end point assessments.

5.6.2 Inspection of the new Apprenticeship system requires a significantly revised approach. There is a need for an OfSTED type of inspection/oversight arrangement which has the capability to assess all aspects of delivery of the Trailblazer standard. The approach needs to embrace the different aspects of the Trailblazer delivery model –including those aspects of delivery undertaken by employers, training providers and also organisations delivering end point assessment. The current OfSTED CIF was not appropriate to assess quality in a system utilising end point assessment with a much greater focus on demonstrating competencies and behaviours.

**Appendix A**

**Speakers and Summary Content of Presentations**

**Paul Holme – *Chair North West Learning Provider Network***

* Supporting colleges and training providers to respond to the changes
* Understanding the rapidly moving context and the balance between national policy developments and increasing devolution of the skills agenda to LEPs and local authorities
* The introduction of Area Based Reviews
* Influencing and shaping policy
* Influencing the support which will be made available by SFA, ETF and AELP

**Benita Notley Skills Funding Agency *Head of Apprenticeship Reform and Standards***

* Key principles and the rationale for changes
* Apprenticeship standards and assessment
* Apprenticeships funding models
* Update on the implementation of the reforms

**Richard Guy - *Senior Policy Adviser, City & Guilds***

* Apprenticeship Reform – The policy the challenges and opportunities
* The impact of the funding changes in terms of delivery and employer/provider
* Ensuring high quality provision
* The first year of reform – emerging issues and challenges
* Developing the provider offer

**Bryony Leonard & Tara Powerville** respectively - ***Sector Manager - Engineering, Manufacturing and Automotive & - Sector Manager - Hospitality and Retail Pearson WBL***

* New Apprenticeships: Assessment design and delivery
* An over view of the emerging assessment designs (including end assessment):
* Trailblazer assessment design
* Assessment models across a range of sectors
* Implications for providers

**Christine Sakhardande - *Head of Science Industry Assessment Services Cogent Skills***

* Supporting science employers to design the first tranche of trailblazer standards
* Development and implementation of a sector-specific Assessment Service.

**Jayne Edwards - *Director Operations, Cogent Skills****.*

* Working with employers to design over 250 new standard Apprenticeships
* Commissioning delivery with provider partners.
* The implications of being at the vanguard of Apprenticeship reform for the science industries and employer perspectives.

**Mark Donnelly - *Apprenticeships and Skills Manager BAE Systems PLC***

* The impact of employer led models on the delivery of Apprenticeships
* The evolving shape of Apprenticeship delivery within BAE Systems
* How the changes impact upon employer provider relationships

**Janice Woolley** - ***Associate Director Total People***

***David Barlow MD -Barlows Electrical and Eudie Thompson - CEO at Bright Futures.***

**Susan Kitchener - *Head of Financial Services Academy & Accounts & Steven Haynes Area Manager Financial Services. Babington Group***

These two contributions covered a range of topics describing why providers became engaged and the organisational impact of being involved with Trailblazers and included:

* Trailblazer involvement – the opportunities and challenges
* Lessons learnt from the development phase
* Employer perspectives - the rationale for getting involved, the experience of working with other employers and the ‘officials’ (BIS) providers etc.
* The opportunity to tailor the standards/delivery in different industry settings and with different types of learners
* Impact upon provider/employer relationships.
* Benefits to learners/employers
* The organisational challenges of implementing new ways of working
* How the revised funding methodology and is impacting on relationships with employers.

**Useful Links**

**Register of Apprenticeship End Assessment Organisations**

• Identifies organisations suitable to conduct independent end-point assessment by standard

• Employers must choose end-point assessment organisation from the register

• Published on the SFA website: www.gov.uk/sfa

• Application portal https://skillsfundingagency.bravosolution.co.uk/

• Register support email: apprenticeassessment@sfa.bis.gov.uk

**Education and Training Foundation, Apprenticeship Staff Support Programme**

http://www.apprenticeship-staff-support.co.uk/

**Employers interested in getting involved**

Email: apprenticeship.trailblazers@bis.gsi.gov.uk

**Providers interested in getting involved with an existing trailblazer group, can email:**

**trailblazers@aoc.co.uk (**AoC, AELP and UVAC co-ordinating support)