



Apprenticeships are a gateway

- Opportunities for young workers
- A stronger economy for all
- Better public services

Unite the union represents more than 40,000 workers in Northern Ireland, employed in every sector across the region. There is virtually no medium-sized business where Unite does not have membership.

Our union understands the vital contribution that high quality apprenticeships can make to workers, employers and the wider economy.

- Apprentices benefit from acquiring sought-after skills and transferable work experience
- Employers benefit from expanding their skilled labour force and raising productive capacity
- The economy benefits from having a broader and deeper labour market with industry-relevant skills and experience, making the most of new investment and ensuring flexibility to succeed in areas of opportunity.

The vital and continued importance of apprenticeships

Unite has repeatedly highlighted the importance of high-quality craft and trade apprenticeships.

Over the years we have opposed attempts to move away from employment-led apprenticeships to a focus on the capacities and preferences of educational institutions.

We oppose strongly any moves to degrade, redefine and weaken the definition of apprenticeships and any threats to transferability of qualifications or to impact relevancy of qualifications and skills.

Trade unions should be involved in the delivery of apprenticeships

Unions have a vital role to play both ensuring an employment-led focus and that apprentices are not being exploited, with day-one rights and a legitimate expectation of a decent job at the end.

We know many employers are unhappy with the way in which apprenticeship support is provided. Instead of going direct to the employer or a partnership-based training body, funding in Northern Ireland goes to training providers instead of going direct to the employer or a partnership-based training body, which would include a trade union.

The bureaucracy facing employers seeking to deliver apprenticeships is also highlighted as a reason they are not being delivered.

Unite is calling for a review of the funding processes to make them more streamlined, while also providing for a role for trade unions in oversight.

Stormont's Apprenticeship Action Plan – a missed opportunity

In its recently published *Apprenticeship Action Plan*, the Department for Economy recognised the role of apprenticeships in driving workforce development and lifting skills provision. We welcome its goal of broadening that impact to benefit as many as possible.

This focus on the potential and contribution of apprenticeships is welcome. However, the action plan fails to act on the continued exclusion of the public sector from financial support for apprenticeships.

Public sector apprenticeships

Opening the apprenticeship fund to public sector and arms-length bodies has the greatest potential to deliver a step-change the delivery of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland.

The apprenticeship fund covers the costs of the training element in private sector apprenticeships as well as providing a small incentive payment to ensure that trainees become 'time served' they are taken on full-time. By comparison public services can only access non-financial support.

The action plan describes this as access to a 'hub of policy expertise and practical support' which it claims will lead to the development of 'new frameworks' bringing the public sector together to 'share experiences and learning on apprenticeships'. The lack of ambition offered for public sector apprenticeships is remarkable.

While the Action Plan does acknowledge the public sector is one of the largest areas of 'untapped potential', it does not propose to equalise access to funding for apprenticeships to public sector bodies.

The exclusion of the public sector from obtaining funding support for apprenticeships in Northern Ireland is in marked contrast to the situation elsewhere in the UK, where public sector bodies are fully facilitated to benefit from this funding.

That is simply not good enough for our public services.

It is also not fair, since both private and public bodies are subject to the apprenticeship levy in Northern Ireland (which raises the funds for apprenticeships) that only the private sector can draw down these funds.



Public sector exclusion means fewer apprentices

At the October 22, 2025, meeting of the Assembly economy committee, Kathryn McCamley, deputy Director of Apprenticeships, Careers and Vocational Education Division stated that while Northern Ireland employers (including the public sector) paid out £73 million under the UK-wide Apprenticeship levy, only £48 million was committed to support apprenticeships.

The exclusion of public sector and arms-length employers from the scheme makes a huge difference in draw-down, and by extension the number of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland. It is to the substantial detriment of public services, services users and young people.

The public sector in Northern Ireland employs more than 27% of our labour force¹. Allowing the public sector to draw down funds on an equivalent basis would bring the total amount of support for apprentices to £65 million. Based on the latest (2023-24) total number of apprenticeships, this would suggest an additional 2,670 apprenticeship places would be created in the public sector.

Indeed, it is likely to be significantly higher since apprenticeships are more common among larger employers – given economies of scale in delivery mechanisms, co-determination with unions and other social partners. The public sector also has, traditionally, had a more long-term and considered approach to upskilling than for-profit competitors.

The continued bar on public bodies in Northern Ireland accessing support for apprenticeships is having a very significant – and likely disproportionate – adverse impact both economically and socially.

Impact on young people

Fewer apprenticeships mean fewer young people being given the opportunity to gain quality, union jobs in public services. Apprenticeships open doors and create futures.

There is also a severe equality and social mobility impact from so many fewer apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships have historically offered alternative career pathways to young people coming from socially deprived working-class communities. Working-class young people coming from socially deprived communities suffer acute and multiple disadvantage – in particular, in terms of educational attainment. This is a situation compounded by the continued existence of academic selection in Northern Ireland, which tends to substantially reinforce disadvantage and social exclusion.

¹ [publication-document-june-2025.pdf](#)

Apprenticeships are a gateway

Young people in Northern Ireland coming from working-class backgrounds often live in areas scarred by the legacy of conflict and blighted by criminality. They often do not have access to social networks to short-circuit opportunities within the economy and are disproportionately likely employed in casual, exploitative or precarious work. Aspiring to a career pathway is often simply not an option. Life chances are limited and ambition is blighted, posing wider and significant challenges for wider social progress.

Apprenticeships offer a way out. They can engender hope and offer an accessible pathway to a rewarding career and the prospect of real social mobility.



The constraint on the number of public sector apprenticeships taken alongside the inflation of academic prerequisites for entry to apprenticeships is increasingly cutting off the opportunity that used to exist for young people coming from deprived working-class areas to become a trade or craft worker.

The impact of this on communities already left behind is under-reported and insufficiently recognised. This reflects the fact that those disadvantaged are working class young people coming from deprived backgrounds. Indeed, there is a tendency to blame the young people who have been so severely failed by our society.

The social importance of apprenticeships to secure a better future for Northern Ireland is manifest.

Wider economic benefits

Apprenticeships have historically played a key role in enabling public bodies to fill gaps that cannot be filled by standard recruitment processes. All public sector bodies are currently struggling with staffing levels with difficulties reported in both recruitment and retention.

The exclusion of public bodies from accessing funding support for apprenticeships is effectively pump-priming outsourcing through the hollowing-out of public service capacities.

Indeed, despite their exclusion from public funding in support, some health and social care trusts and local authorities are working to introduce small scale apprenticeship programmes to address critical staffing shortages.

Unfortunately, these are the outliers. More widely the trend, especially in recent months, is towards a sharp reduction in apprenticeships. Budgets for apprenticeships are viewed as a soft and easy target to deliver reductions to meet highly constrained budgets.

Cutting apprenticeships is a false economy

Public and arms-length bodies are increasingly shutting down apprenticeship schemes leaving them increasingly 'deskilled', facing staffing shortages and left entirely dependent on private sector contractors to fill the gap.

Failing to invest in apprenticeships today means public bodies will be forced to 'buy-in' services from private sector providers (at considerable cost) tomorrow.

The reliance on private sector contractors to deliver functions and activities formerly provided by public sector workers represents a move away from 'good jobs' and from quality service delivery.

Private sector contractors are far less likely to provide employees with a real living wage, pensions or union-negotiated terms and conditions. It is significantly more challenging to collectively organise in smaller private sector employers; in general, there is a trend towards corner-cutting, not just in terms of the quality of the work done for the public sector but in terms of the skills of those doing it.

Few contractors will provide trainees with a quality apprenticeship in the way public sector employers did previously.

Over the last decade or more, Unite has repeatedly highlighted concerns for anti-competitive practices and exceptional costs to the public purse from private sector delivery and contracting. In many cases, jobs the private sector doesn't want because they are too difficult, dangerous or not sufficiently profitable are given back to the dwindling numbers of public sector workers to do it. Unite is also very aware that our members are called out to 'repair' or 'fix' work that has not been done properly by private contractors who have paid huge sums for the same work.

In a period of sharp budgetary pressures, there is even less justification for a lax approach to these problems today than ten years ago.

The threat to public sector apprenticeships

Very concerningly, Unite is aware of a sharp drop-off in the number of public sector bodies and arms-length bodies providing apprenticeships in the 2025-26 year.

This is not universal but even in health trusts and local authorities new initiatives are highly limited in scale and follow extended absences of any apprenticeships.

It should also be noted that local authorities have arguably greater flexibility given their ability to raise revenue. As such they are better able to invest now to realise longer-term savings and benefits.

Tables overleaf show responses to Freedom of Information requests submitted by Unite in September 2025. The data provided is historic and does not include the current fiscal year. We have carefully collated and interpreted as necessary what were quite differentiated responses to provide a comparable overview.

TABLE 1		
PUBLIC BODIES – OVERVIEW OF APPRENTICESHIPS (2022-2025)		
Authority	Existing apprenticeships (last three years)	Relevant staff vacancies/Context
Education Authority	2022 - 3 Mechanics. 2023 - 3 mechanics. 2024 - 1 mechanic.	- 1 mechanic. - Difficulty accessing financial support
Belfast Trust	None	Non definitive response
Western Trust	None	- Regional HSC working group set up - Pilot for radiography in NHSCT. Scoping exercise.
Northern Trust	None	1 Joiner, 2 electricians, 1 planner supervisor, 1 fitter, 1 painter.
Southern Trust	None - but one for diagnostic radiography.	No information yet - working on it.
Southeastern Trust	None	Vacancies filled with standard recruitment processes. Open to apprenticeships but barriers preventing
NIAS Trust	None (in last four years from 2022-23)	Zero relevant vacancies
NIHE	2022: 4 Project managers, 4 Quantity surveyors, 9 Customer Support. 2023 10 joiners, 3 electricians, 3 plumbers, 1 finance. 2024 1 payroll, 1 finance, 10 support, 3 joiners (part qualified), 3 plumber (part), 12 support services.	12 Joiners, 6 plumbers, 3 electricians, 2 painters, 2 roofers, 1 tiler, 2 grounds maintenance.
DFI (Roads, Rivers, Strangford Ferry)	Department of Finance has data for NICS as a whole	Plans to train 20 civil engineers, 20 planning Professional & Technical Officers in Roads. In Rivers 8 Professional & Technical Officers. Strangford-Portaferry Ferry - None
DAERA (Forestry)	None	N/A
NI Water	2022 26 apprenticeships. 2023 30 apprenticeships. 2024 23 apprenticeships.	Positions to be filled through apprenticeships: 7 Mechanical & Engineering and 5 in water utilities
AFBI	None	Unknown – on the to do list
PSNI	2022 8 Duty Apprentices. 2023 None. 2024 9 Duty Apprentices.	No relevant vacancies
Translink	2022-23 7. 2023-24 25. 2024-25 30.	Non definitive response

TABLE 2		
LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND APPRENTICESHIPS (2022-25)		
Local Authority	Number of Apprenticeships	Gaps to be filled
Antrim & Newtownabbey	Zero	Policy restrictions preventing
Ards & North Down	2022-23 2 Horticulture. 2023-24 Zero. 2024-25 2 Horticulture.	No definitive reply but has adopted a new policy
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	None	No definitive reply
Belfast City	2022-23 None. 2023-24 None. 2024-25 2 fleet technicians and 1 digital analyst.	19 craft and 3 tradespersons
Causeway Coast & Glens	2022-23 None. 2023-24 None. 2024-25 2 in horticulture	No definitive reply
Derry City & Strabane	23-24 - 1 mechanic 3 grounds maintenance. 2024-25 – None. 2025-26 - 1 mechanical engineering.	No definitive reply
Fermanagh & Omagh	2022-23 None. 2023-24 None. 2024-25 1 Community wellbeing, 1 HGV mechanic.	No definitive reply
Mid & East Antrim	None	No definitive reply
Mid Ulster	2024-25 1 Marketing, 2 Grounds maintenance, 1 fleet, 1 HR, 1 Leisure management.	All to get jobs
Newry Mourne & Down	None	To be determined
Lisburn & Castlereagh	2023-24 13 in marketing, mechanical, horticultural, IT, business admin, HR and facility management. 2024-25: 6 in Graphic design, mechanical, horticultural, business administration.	No definitive reply

As will be readily apparent, the number of craft and trade apprenticeships offered by public bodies in Northern Ireland over the last three years is exceptionally small compared to the overall size of the public sector.

The main sources of public sector craft and trade apprenticeships have traditionally been in the public transport, education, housing and water infrastructure sectors but there are clearly significant opportunities for more apprenticeships to be provided across all public sector bodies.

One example is the education authority where in some legacy ELB areas in-house vehicle maintenance is retained. In these areas EA workers are responsible for this work, whereas in others this work is outsourced (at very considerable cost). The bulk of apprenticeships identified for the EA are attributable to these legacy areas. Ensuring that maintenance of all school buses and vehicles is in-house (or perhaps in conjunction with Translink repair hubs) could allow a considerable expansion in the number of apprenticeships in EA.

Similar opportunities exist in other public sector employers for a 'levelling-up' approach, e.g. health trusts. But it is also true that providing support for apprenticeships would open significantly more roles to benefit ensuring a much greater uplift in the numbers.

The sharp downturn in the number of apprenticeships offered in the 2025-26 fiscal year is particularly marked in the public transport provider Translink, one of the most significant providers. Translink has suspended their apprenticeships programme for the year.

Local authorities

Unite represents workers in all eleven city, borough and district councils in Northern Ireland. Table 2 summarises the situation in the eleven local authorities and provides some evidence of increasing use.

The table shows that there is considerable variation across councils. It also shows some evidence of an overall but limited trend towards increasing uptake.

That some councils can include craft or trade apprenticeships confirms the potential for a levelling-up approach across all local authorities to do similar.

The main barrier to uptake was referenced (unsolicited) in several responses from councils: political policy is restricting public sector access to funding support for apprenticeships. If this barrier was removed it is likely that the number of apprenticeships provided, including in craft and trades, would dramatically increase.

The geographic spread of councils would mean a more generalised provision of apprenticeships would have a benefit across all parts of Northern Ireland and help deliver more balanced regional development.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Opening access to public bodies to financial support towards apprenticeships will end the unfair playing field and have a dramatic impact on the economy, as well as opening opportunity for young people.
- The barrier to public bodies accessing funding support for apprentices is not only holding back more ambitious plans but resulting in a further sharp drop. This is being driven by the squeeze on funding for public bodies.
- The reduction in apprenticeships is a false economy. Apprenticeships play a vital role in helping to counter the staffing crisis in public bodies. Further, in their absence the public bodies are left with no alternative but to go to market for delivery of services. That means substantially higher costs to the public purse.
- Apprenticeships have a capacity make a substantial contribution to our economy through upskilling and ensuring a robust supply of properly trained craft and trades professionals. One of the biggest problems holding back investment is the perceived skills shortage.
- Apprenticeships are transformative for the young people who pass through them, gaining genuine employability skills and experience. Such pathways play a particularly vital role in deprived working-class communities offering one of the few means of social mobility.
- It is vital that every effort is made to upskill the new generation, for the benefit of our economy, for the benefit of our public services and for the benefit of the young people involved.

Unite is calling for urgent action on the following:

- Agreement by the Executive to 'ring-fence' all Apprenticeship levy money returned through the Barnett formula for apprenticeships.
- Removal of the exclusion on public sector bodies applying for support from the fund
- Review of the decision for apprenticeship supports to go direct to training providers as opposed to employers (as previously was the case and is the case in England).
- Action to reduce social exclusion of young people from educationally disadvantaged working-class communities because of the inflation in academic entry requirements for apprenticeships and vocational training courses.
- Apprenticeship targets to be set across public bodies with active enforcement of such rules in procurement for private sector employers benefiting from public sector procurement contracts.



