

INSTITUTE OF HOSPITALITY

WHITE PAPER

HEADWINDS OR HEAD START?

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by Catherine Chetwynd MIH



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We should have a Minister of Hospitality – the industry is big and provides huge value, yet it has no representation.

John Hollywood MIH, head of learning and development at Iconic Luxury Hotels

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Headwinds or Head start

With changes to the way the government funds and supports apprenticeships taking place this year, the Institute looks at whether these will boost hospitality training and recruitment or hinder it

In recent years, apprenticeships have been subject to reforms, funding adjustments and policy updates, and more revisions are afoot in April. But instead of making this valuable way of learning more accessible, a lack of definition has rendered apprenticeships a doubled-edge sword and employers are no longer clear what is required to make them work.

One of the big differences introduced last year was that 16-to-18-year-old apprentices no longer have to prove they have functional skills (English and Maths), although they must complete them as part of the apprenticeship, making them the employer's responsibility. In addition, the minimum duration for an apprenticeship has been reduced from 12 to 8 months.

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It's hard to know how employers would fit 16 hours of work a week into that. But at least it gets apprentices skilled and into the workforce.

Ben Wilson, area manager for The Opportunity Provider (TOP Training)

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Those preparing apprentices for management qualifications can now do so in 12 months rather than the 24 previously required: “That is not impossible but you would have to think hard about how to choose the right content,” Wilson confirmed.

Headwinds or Head start

Further budgetary restrictions are also going to have an impact. “The pot is getting ever smaller but it’s hard to know how it is reducing; there is a lot of rumour and gossip, and that makes planning difficult. But apprenticeships should be popular when we have massive problems with recruitment and availability of skills coming through,” says head of learning and development at Iconic Luxury Hotels John Hollywood MIH.

This uncertain picture is exacerbated by bad communication – the apprenticeship pages of the government website have not been updated since before the Autumn Budget. Iconic Luxury Hotels has the wherewithal to take on apprentices but may not be able to use the money, especially as from April 2026, unused levy funds will expire after 12 months, rather than the original 24, and from August 2026, the levy is removed altogether. “And even if you use all your levy, you don’t know what’s going to happen,” Hollywood says.

The complexities may soon overcome the attractions of apprenticeships. Cluster HR manager at Leonardo Hotels North West and Northern Ireland Rachel Burke CIPD MIH makes the point:

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One of my team is doing an apprenticeship and I am the mentor. The qualification is a good thing but to reach the level and demonstrate they have the knowledge is over-complicated. She’s doing it through an apprenticeship because we can get funding for it but it would have been a lot simpler for her to go to college.

Rachel Burke CIPD MIH, cluster HR manager at Leonardo Hotels North West and Northern Ireland

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Headwinds or Head start

The picture is no better defined for school and college leavers, who understand they are given time off work to study and will get help from a mentor but not what they achieve by doing it. And employers have to sign up to service level agreements (SLAs) and other commitments, as well as keep up with labyrinthine government rules changes, all of which creates mountains of paperwork.

Worse, given the hits to the industry on the bottom line, organisations may be loath to take people off the floor to do an apprenticeship – it is not feasible. Instead, they may provide internal training to keep employees motivated rather than follow the government line, which is becoming increasingly stressful and time-consuming.

Engagement

Although parents are keen to see their children educated, trainers have difficulty persuading them that hospitality provides a good, strong career path, offering continuing professional development with hands-on experience. That progression can provide excellent life skills but only when people stay in the industry.

Ben Wilson says employers are committed to training teams through apprenticeships; they see them as part of a profession and set aside the funds and training time, but: “Constant demands within the industry – staff sickness, big events, the ever-changing landscape – are an obstacle to fitting in one person’s training,” he says.

One outstanding benefit is the modular format, which gives employers flexibility. Leonardo Hotels is working on draft modules and their costing to provide a six-month course covering communication skills for hospitality management.

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That would be clever use of the curriculum and funding; I hope that comes in. But I also hope they keep the culinary side of apprenticeships because finding chefs is so difficult.

John Hollywood MIH, head of learning and development at Iconic Luxury Hotels

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For smaller organisations, the proposed revisions pay off because apprenticeships are fully funded for people under 25 at SMEs. There is also the prospect of giving continuing assessments of apprentices from day one, rather than delivering one at the end. Students joining from the education system are used to this but for mature learners going back into long-term training as an apprentice, it could add further pressure.

Also new is the addition of an external assessment body. Mentors would still be teachers throughout the apprenticeship, with the independent organisation doing quality control.

Investment, representation and clarity

As has been highlighted before, government's support of hospitality has been piecemeal and shows minimal grasp of the sector and the huge contribution it makes to employment and GDP. Despite the industry's best efforts, working in hospitality is still seen as a stopgap before moving on to another occupation. Yet career progression is evident – there are many examples of people who start as a pot wash and end up in senior positions, including CEO.

In France and Italy, hospitality is part of the culture but in the UK, government and society see long-term importance in AI, retail and healthcare. “They see hospitality as a housekeeper or a chef. They like the glamorous Gordon Ramsey side but they don't appreciate the day-to-day operation of hotels, restaurants or tourism – but without that we would close our hotels,” says Hollywood.

The government's dire perception is epitomised by its support of pubs but not the whole industry. Government sees hospitality as a local priority, not a national one – but it should be seen as part of tourism.

British governments have a long history of not investing in our foundations and the hotel sector is illustrative.

“There is British infrastructure being built but because the government focuses on big investment that influences employment rates and society, it is foreign, not British, money behind it,” says Hollywood.

Conclusion

Combine the above confusion with low government recognition and pressures on the bottom line, and the future of hospitality apprenticeships is bleak. “They are just sustainable from an employer’s point of view; they are keeping their head above water but when these amendments hit, and if the economy gets any worse – which is forecast, apprenticeships will not be sustainable anymore,” says Hollywood.

There are two potential remedies. First, one clear and consistent message should come from hospitality to encourage people into the industry, so that they understand the breadth of the available roles and the benefits, the career paths they can follow and where those can lead. “We ask where people are coming from but 20 years ago, we found chefs – where have they all gone?” asks Ben Wilson.

And secondly, hospitality needs accountability at the highest level.
It is time to take action.

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John Hollywood MIH, head of learning and development at Iconic Luxury Hotels

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Methodology

This white paper has been produced following a round table discussion at Leonardo Hotel, Liverpool.

Panel



Chaired by

Aymen Fetouak MIH

head of professional development, Institute of Hospitality



John Hollywood MIH

Head of learning and development, Iconic Luxury Hotels



Rachel Burke CIPD MIH

Cluster HR manager, Leonardo Hotels North West and Northern Ireland



Ben Wilson

Area manager, The Opportunity Provider (TOP Training)