

POLICY WATCH

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Apprenticeship Week brings another rash of developments to a head

National Apprenticeship Week and as Ministers fan out across the country to spread the word, kept firmly on their toes by Sir Alan Sugar, it's a time to catch up on the latest apprenticeship developments.

Four in particular stand out. First, there's the Government response to the [review](#) of the Draft Apprenticeship Bill by the two education Select Committees; not a lot of heat in here perhaps but some useful light shed on Government thinking about apprenticeships. Second, the [Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning \(ASCL\) Bill](#), given a Second Reading last Monday and incorporating some important Clauses on strengthening the apprenticeship system generally. Third, the refining of the current apprenticeship blueprint, promised last year and now out for [consultation](#) under the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE.) And fourth, the big push on increasing the number of public sector apprenticeships, announced as part of last year's [National Apprenticeship Strategy](#) and with some specific figures attached this week.

The Conservatives may be railing about missed targets and lack of places for apprenticeships but all sides agree that an effective apprenticeship system is key to meeting skill demand both now and in the future. The worry of course is whether enough places can be found for aspiring apprentices especially during an economic downturn. The Conservatives claim, for example, that the level of demand for apprenticeship places is higher than that for Oxbridge. The Government remain bullish and point to the new Matching Service and the new National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) due to launch formally in April, as important mechanisms in helping overcome this problem. Meanwhile, the Association of Learning Providers' (ALP) recent proposals to expand Group Training Associations and to allow apprentices made redundant within six months of completing an apprenticeship programme to finish on an 'off the job' basis with a local provider, remain good examples of the ways in which this traditional model of work-based training continues to adapt to meet changing circumstances.

So what of these latest four big developments?

First the Government's response to the Select Committees' Reports on the Draft Apprenticeship Bill released in the nick of time two weeks ago. Both Committees took evidence last autumn and published their recommendations in November; 13 in the case of the DCSF Committee and 35 in the case of the [DIUS Committee](#). Of the 13 recommendations from the DCSF Select Committee, the Government has accepted 7, noted 4 and disagreed with just 2, not a bad strike rate. The one significant one on which it disagreed was whether quality would be compromised by having to meet targeted numbers of places: "*we do not believe the entitlement will lead to compromises on the quality of provision,*" it says firmly before placing responsibility on the NAS to ensure this. As for the 35 recommendations from the



DIUS Committee, 10 are accepted, 23 noted and 2 disagreed with. Again, anxiety about sufficient quality places features large with the Government claiming that it is *“addressing the current economic downturn through a range of Apprenticeship flexibilities and freedoms.”* The issue over which there seems to be most dissension is whether the changes proposed in the Bill will work; the Committee arguing that *“stronger measures”* might be needed, the Government in response highlighting the inclusion of milestones in the NAS Delivery Plan and national evaluations in 2013 and 2015 to demonstrate that all is in hand. The extent of the downturn may be critical here.

Second, the ASCL Bill, now starting its progress through Parliament and with a number of important Clause on Apprenticeships on board. 40 in all in you include the 10 Clauses on the provision of apprenticeship places for young people included in the section on duties for the Chief Executive of the Skills Funding Agency and the additional Clause on careers education placing a duty on schools to consider information on apprenticeships as part of their careers education programme.

Those Clauses apart, it's Part 1 of the Bill that contains most of the provision on Apprenticeships. There are three main areas, starting with a duty to issue apprenticeship certificates for eligible completers. This has been under development for some time and the onset of the SFA and the NAS now puts contractors in place to administer this. Secondly, the issuing of apprenticeship frameworks and the specification of standards, coming together in a new blueprint but now put on a statutory footing; Clause 25, for example, sets out what must be included in the standards for England. Finally, clarification on what should go into an apprenticeship agreement: *“the Government expects that it should set out both the on-the-job training and the learning away from the workstation that will be delivered; make clear what job role an apprentice will be qualified to hold on completion; and stipulate the supervision that an apprentice will receive throughout the period of the apprenticeship.”*

Third in terms of current big developments the consultation on the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE.) These standards will form the basis of the requirements that each Apprenticeship framework will have to meet and the Bill intends to put them on a statutory footing for the first time. The consultation asks 15 questions broadly around framework content, off site training, and entry and progression. On framework content, for instance, it seeks views on whether standards should set a minimum credit level, perhaps 37: 10 for competence based units, 10 for knowledge based units and the rest for other components. This may make for consistency but could be seen as prescriptive. Other important questions cover the level of functional skills required, the status of the Employment Rights and Responsibilities component, the minimum for *“off workstation learning”* - 250 glh perhaps and entry and progression details.

Fourth and finally, the latest detail on public sector apprenticeships, something that the Government has been promoting for some time. This latest announcement deals with the 35,000 additional apprenticeship places singled out by the Prime Minister last month. 7,500 will be in local government, 5,000 in NHS and social care, 4,500 in schools and children's services and 2,500 in FE and HE. They will join the 500 due to be working in Westminster shortly. As it is, John Denham has become the first Cabinet Minister to have an apprentice working in his office. It makes it sound a bit like a trophy but is an important first step all the same.

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