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Process evaluation of the
Apprenticeship Trailblazers:
Final report

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RESEARCH

Process Evaluation of the Apprenticeship Trailblazers: Final Report

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

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The research team

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The Institute for Employment Studies

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Contents

Executive Summary	6
1 Introduction	14
1.1 The Trailblazers' progress	15
1.2 About the evaluation	15
1.3 About this report	18
2 Trends in network development	20
2.1 Network formation and early tasks	20
2.2 Membership	21
2.3 Resourcing	23
2.4 Financial support for developments	24
3 Trends in the development of Standards	27
3.1 Standards development	27
3.2 Views of the Standards	30
3.3 Responding to the challenge to scale up.....	30
4 National support	33
4.1 Arrangements in place to support Trailblazers	33
4.2 Working with Relationship Managers	34
4.3 National workshops	35
4.4 Views of the introduction of the Gateways	36
4.5 Future governance.....	37
5 From Standards to detailed assessment	39

5.1	Processes followed to develop a detailed assessment.....	39
5.2	The content and format of detailed assessments	41
5.3	Quality assurance, third-party assessors and the assessment market.....	43
5.4	Views of the panel approval process for assessments	44
5.5	Estimating the costs of delivery.....	46
6	Moving into Delivery	48
6.1	Progress	48
6.2	Planning.....	49
6.3	Trials, pre-pilots and soft launches.....	52
6.4	Big qualifications, small cohorts	53
7	Views of the funding model.....	55
7.1	Broad views of the funding model	55
7.2	Issues raised by the funding model.....	56
8	Outcomes and lessons for future developers.....	59
8.1	Perceived outcomes and impacts of the work to date	59
8.2	Lessons learned and recommendations for future developers	61
9	Strengths and risks.....	63
9.1	Strengths of the Trailblazer model	63
9.2	Potential risks	64
10	Conclusions	67
10.1	General conclusions.....	67
10.2	The Future of Apprenticeships in England: review of progress and lessons	67
	Appendix 1: The online survey	71

Executive Summary

The Apprenticeship Trailblazers were introduced as a means to address recommendations arising from the Richard Review (2012), which noted that employers are *'best placed to judge the quality and relevance of training and demand the highest possible Standards from training organisations'*. Since then, employer ownership has become a central theme of Apprenticeship policy in England and is viewed as the means to achieve a more robust linkage between the skills required by the labour market and the content of Apprenticeships. The Trailblazers were phased in from October 2013 and to date over 1,300 employers nationwide have engaged in the process. In total, 187 Standards have been published and more than 160 new Standards are in development. These new Apprenticeship Standards range from intermediate to higher levels with the majority of developments being at Level 3 (Advanced) and above. The new Higher and Degree Apprenticeships range from Level 4 (eg Foundation Degree or Higher National Diploma) to Level 7 (eg Masters degree and postgraduate certificate and diploma). Trailblazer activities are intended to continue into 2015/16.

This report is based on research covering selected Trailblazers between January 2014 and March 2015. As such, it reflects the policy and views at that time. Since this point policy on governance has developed further and an apprenticeship levy was announced in the 2015 budget.

The report provides an evaluation of the process through which the Trailblazer networks developed the new Apprenticeship Standards. Research objectives included exploring: how Trailblazer networks were established and organised; the processes involved in developments; responses to key national principles for the Standards; views of the funding reforms and perceived impact of the Trailblazers. The research involved longitudinal case studies with 16 Trailblazer networks, an online survey and interviews with national stakeholders including strategic and operational staff supporting developments.

Network set-up, membership and resourcing

While for pragmatic reasons the earliest Trailblazers built on established networks, there has been greater diversity of formation in later stages. Many of the earliest networks have links to the Employer Ownership Pilots and the Industrial Partnerships that these created. Later networks do not necessarily share this link. Trailblazer networks typically implemented a model of an oversight group and task-focused sub-groups. All were chaired by employers who were supported by a facilitator. Three types of facilitator emerged: a sectoral representative (sector skills council, industry or professional body); a consultant employed by the network (initially funded through financial support from the Gatsby Foundation, but later by employers themselves), and, least common, an employer.

The size of companies involved reflected the typical firm-size composition of the sectors, with medium- to-large organisations predominating. Engagement with small firms was often indirect, through a mediating or representative organisation, although in sectors where small businesses were stronger they were more actively engaged. Membership of the networks varied over time, for a variety of reasons. Early on, while the two-page Standard was being developed employers predominated. While most maintained an

input, over time some had to reduce involvement either moving to strategy groups or away from direct involvement due to resourcing issues. A key driver for changing membership within networks was the specialist expertise needed as the task moved to defining an assessment model. Lessons learned included configuring this expertise from the outset of assessment development however, many interviewees believed that employers must be at the heart of, and lead the development of the two-page Standard.

The overall views of those involved indicate that being part of a Trailblazer is resource intensive. Employers (and others) have made a considerable investment in developing the new Standards. This investment has not been driven by government funding as the Department has released no monies to support the Trailblazers¹. However, some – a small minority – of the networks explored by the research had been able to draw on funding from other sources, primarily the Gatsby Foundation which offers support aligned to its charitable objectives. This funding had been used by some of the Trailblazer networks to cover the costs of consultants to facilitate and administer the developments, and/or to undertake research or wider industry consultation, or to help reduce the barriers to small firms' engagement. In addition, some Trailblazer networks were part of the Employer Ownership Pilots which has led to some cross-subsidisation of developments.

While these sources of funding have undoubtedly been valued, their longer term impact is harder to discern – particularly in the case of the Employer Ownership Pilots since these and the Trailblazers have become tightly intertwined. The challenge in understanding the difference made by the availability of funding is that those Trailblazers in receipt of monies do not appear to be in a particularly different position to those that did not receive funding. However, the Gatsby Foundation resource can be said to act as an enabler and has supported the start of operations that has helped to build the momentum for further developments that has been currently seen.

Developing the two-page Standards

Although the Richard Review recommended root and branch review of Apprenticeships, many Trailblazers considered that the current model was largely fit for purpose and of good quality. For these, the Trailblazer presented an opportunity for evolution and refinement. In other sectors, the Trailblazer was an opportunity to establish a new Apprenticeship or to work from a clean sheet rather than be influenced by the former model. Some networks sought to extend Apprenticeships into regulated occupations, with differing experiences. In one, it proved challenging to build consensus on the new approach and it is unclear whether this Standard will be finalised. In others, bespoke arrangements were agreed with regulatory bodies that enabled Standards to be approved.

The networks adopted different approaches to the description of job roles, entry criteria and the skills, knowledge and behaviours, with potential implications for transferability and equity of Standards between different sectors. There were also differing approaches to

¹ The latest guidance, which was issued as this report was being finalised in July 2015, makes provision for a support fund to reduce barriers to the participation of small businesses. It indicates that reasonable travel costs in relation to attendance at Trailblazer meetings will be covered.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/447413/BIS-15-355-guidance-for-trailblazers-standards-to-starts-July-2015.pdf

incorporating qualifications until the Department tightened guidance on this point. The online survey revealed broad support for the new Standards which were believed to align well with job roles and business needs. However, a minority of respondents believed that they offered few advantages over Apprenticeship frameworks.

It is estimated by some stakeholders that the eventual number of new Apprenticeship Standards could reach 1,600-1,700. This raises questions of how quality can be assured. Many Trailblazer networks were concerned that this issue requires attention to ensure consistency. In response, the Department published the Quality Statement for the Trailblazers². A further question for Trailblazers was how quality would be assured over time and as Standards are updated to keep pace with industry developments. While guidance indicates at minimum a review every three years it is unclear who will lead these³. Employers often wished to be at the heart of the review process but were concerned that if they moved post or company this might not be possible. Continuity may therefore become an issue.

National support and approvals processes

Relationship Managers from the Apprenticeship Unit and Skills Funding Agency provide support to Trailblazers. For the Trailblazers involved in the evaluation research, Relationship Managers from the Unit supported the development of their Standards and those from the Agency supported the development of their assessments. This led to challenges in terms of continuity as well as capacity to offer the detailed support that Trailblazers wanted. More recently, the model has been changed such that the same Relationship Manager provides support throughout the development process.

Following approval of the earliest Standards, the Department established three formal Gateway meetings, as well as an informal panel review ahead of each, to evaluate, respectively, the expressions of interest in developing Standards, the Standards produced and the assessments plans. The panels assess each output against the national principles and offer feedback to Trailblazers which is relayed through Relationship Managers. The formal panel's feedback is given to the minister to assist in his approval decisions. While the panels were seen as central to the infrastructure Trailblazers required, some challenges were encountered. For example, different networks had been approved to develop the Standard for seemingly similar occupations. A proliferation of overlapping Apprenticeships poses a risk to rigour and quality, meaning that Apprenticeships become narrow and do not support transfer between jobs and sectors.

Broadly, employers saw the introduction of fixed Gateways meetings as an improvement over the early arrangements where the Department determined the submission date for Standards and assessment plans. However, the process could become protracted when a Standard or assessment was not approved first time. There were complaints about the

² Published in March 2015 - Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/Apprenticeship-trailblazer-quality-statement>

³ The Department has since announced that it plans to lead further consultations with Trailblazers on this issue.

time it took for feedback to be communicated when it could be quickly addressed. Having to wait to resubmit for the next panel meeting was a drag on progress. Reasons for the delays included the acceleration of the number of networks working on Standards and assessments. This has led to a huge volume of documents for the panels to review. A further criticism was the conflicting nature of feedback received from the informal panels and from the formal panel which advised the Minister. This led to concerns about a lack of joined-up policy and increased the workload for networks. The Gateway structure was therefore already a subject for review by policymakers at the time this report was drafted⁴.

From Standards to detailed assessment

In light of the technical detail necessary to develop assessment plans, Trailblazer networks often made use of experts and specialists, such as awarding organisations, training providers or experts supplied by the Department. While this aimed to reduce the burden on employers, it also sometimes highlighted problems with the Standards, which could mean they required some reworking. The use of technical working groups was valued in sectors where small companies predominated. More generally, employers could find the level of technical detail in assessment development challenging to understand. This aspect of the work was more protracted and more complex than those involved had envisaged. This was often attributed to a lack of clarity in the national guidance.

As specified by the guidance, all Standards include an Assessment Plan detailing the end-point assessment. While early guidance stipulated that the end-point assessment would constitute a minimum of two-thirds of the overall assessment for the Apprenticeship, this was a temporary policy. Newer versions of the guidance set out the expectation for 100 per cent weighting on the end-point assessment⁵. Consequently there is variation in the structure of the assessment plans. End-point assessments typically involve a variety of methods which can include production of a portfolio, reflective statement, a practical skills assessment, knowledge tests such as a role simulation or scenario based exercises, panel interviews, and journals evidencing core behaviours. This adheres to national guidance that states that the end-point assessments must be synoptic and demonstrate an apprentice's competency across the Standard. Some employers had reservations about end-point assessment and its ability to distil an 18-to-24 month training experience into a single assessment. Others believed that apprentices needed interim assessment milestones in order to provide a better indication of their on-going performance. However, another group of employers were enthusiastic about the opportunity to integrate licence to practice accreditations into the end-point assessments which provided the opportunity to improve assessment options.

Employers held mixed views regarding the requirement for apprentices' performance to be graded (e.g. pass and distinction or pass, merit and distinction). Some saw grading as a

⁴ While this report was being finalised, the Department confirmed that the review has been completed. From August 2015 there will be monthly opportunities for interested parties to submit expressions of interest to take forward development of new Standards, and for Trailblazers to submit Standards and/or assessment plans for approval

⁵ On the basis that the end-point assessment is synoptic and holistically examines the range of skills, knowledge and behaviours (if specified) required to achieve the Standards.

useful exercise in helping employers differentiate between new employees, while those developing Standards for highly-regulated occupations and/or occupations that require professional accreditation were uncomfortable with notions that competence can be graded. In such cases, an exemption could be granted to allow only certain parts of the Apprenticeship to be graded (such as the knowledge and/or behavioural element).

Achieving independence in the assessments was a key stumbling block, and Trailblazer networks believed there was a lack of clarity on this point, although by the time of this final round of research, all understood that assessment arrangements must be open to the wider market. There appeared to be some tensions between what employers believed would be a credible assessment approach and what the Department saw as an independent approach. Beyond this, in some sectors interest from assessment bodies had been limited; a few Trailblazers' networks developing Standards in small, niche sectors did not foresee other assessment organisations entering the market. Other concerns related to uncertainties about how assessors would be recruited, trained and quality assured for consistency across the different assessment organisations that would be involved.

Moving into delivery

Four of the Trailblazer networks had progressed to delivery at the time of the research with one additional Trailblazer expecting to start in Spring 2015; the remainder typically anticipated delivery starting within the next one or two years. Therefore, the number of apprentices registered on Standards, at 200-300, was lower than originally expected. However these figures may represent a subset of actual apprentices going through the new programmes as some employers had adopted a 'soft launch' approach, meaning that while apprentices were trained to the new Standards, they were assessed against the old framework, and suggests that the individual learner record will not show these as apprentices trained against Trailblazer Standards.

Delays to the start of delivery were not necessarily due to any particular constraints; rather, the magnitude of change brought about by the Trailblazers was believed to necessitate a long lead time. It would take training providers a significant length of time to design the overall training programme, develop new learning materials and provide any development needed to ensure that teachers and assessors were able to deliver and/or assess the new components. However, there were indications that providers were unaware of and unprepared for the changes. Many employers believed that publicity would be needed to bring providers up-to-date with future requirements. Despite these reservations, those employers that were training to the new Standards were pleased with the early results.

Views on the reformed funding model

The funding model being trialled for training against the new Apprenticeship Standards in 2014/15 and 2015/16 will see £2 core government funding awarded for every £1 invested by employers with incentives for small businesses, taking on a young apprentice (16-18) and successful completion by the apprentice. While the co-investment ratio was viewed by employers as being simple to understand, there were concerns over how the model would work in detail and in practice and this may have discouraged employers from committing further resources to the Trailblazer development process. Within the Trailblazer networks, there were fears that the changes to funding arrangements might see small firms exit from

Apprenticeships. The changes to funding and the increased training requirements within the new Standards were seen as potentially causing challenges for providers as well: through the potential drop in learner numbers if fears about exit of small employers were borne out; and because of the costs of acquiring the equipment needed in some sectors for delivery. There were suggestions that providers might form consortia to deliver the qualifications, but at present there is no formal means of brokering such arrangements.

Nearly half of the survey respondents believed that the incentives for training 16-18 year olds would be sufficient, and a similar proportion believed that the incentives for completion would encourage employers accordingly. However, a far smaller proportion thought that the incentive was sufficient to encourage small firms to engage. The research with Trailblazer networks indicated that issues on funding were more prominent in sectors where small firms predominated. There were concerns over whether these companies would have capacity to deal with the added administration involved in the funding model, and that the cash flow constraints would make Apprenticeships unattractive to them. In contrast, larger employers were thought to do well – in some cases, because the training had been redesigned based on their needs and because the government investment would contribute to training costs they would previously have incurred.

Strengths and risks

Allowing Trailblazers to pursue diverse approaches in order to explore what will work best for their sectors has been positively received. It can be said with some confidence that employers believe there has been genuine progress towards improvements in quality and that employers now feel that they have greater ownership of the training. Thus the Trailblazers must be viewed as having the potential to have a positive impact. For some, impact will arise from the creation and uptake of new vocational pathways to higher level occupations. For others, it will be through transfer to the new, improved training model. The flexibility to determine the training route at all levels appears to be particularly valued. Employers were seeking to develop Standards across their industry that would allow training to be provided at much higher levels than previously would have been seen. In time, this may impact on the parity of esteem between vocational training and full-time education routes. The addition of Degree Apprenticeships to the suite of developments has particular potential in this regard since these blur the distinction between academic and vocational routes, while also highlighting the vocational nature of many higher education degrees (such as engineering or information technology).

In assessing the strengths of the Trailblazers, employers' investment in developments must be highlighted. Many have dedicated a significant amount of time in a context where there is no funding, which speaks to a high degree of engagement. Employers are driven by the belief that, by being involved, they can help to drive up and assure the quality of Apprenticeships, and furthermore be assured that the skills and competencies gained through that training are relevant to their organisation. By building the Standards around industry-identified skills shortages and skill needs, employers anticipate high quality programmes that will result in development of the skills they need.

However, the process has indicated some areas of risk in the short-to-medium term that policymakers may wish to address. These include: the potential for overlap and duplication as more networks are involved in developments; this also raises risks in terms of quality assurance across Standards and there may be insufficient consistency for Standards to

support learner transfer across sectors.⁶ A second issue is that with the current low numbers registered on the Standards there may be a lack of information on the impacts of the funding model, particularly on small firms ahead of the funding system change in 2017.

Conclusions and progress towards the reform ambitions

Overall, the opportunity for employers and other stakeholders to form Trailblazer networks to take forward the development of the new Apprenticeship Standards has received broad support. Employers (and others) have embraced the chance to work on improving the quality and fit of Apprenticeship training, and the results have the potential to put Apprenticeships at the forefront of vocational training and lead in time to parity of esteem between vocational training and other education routes. Employers believe they now have new or adapted training and assessment models that better meet the needs of their industries. While the numbers of starts may be low at this point, the figures may represent an under-estimate. Overall, those involved are very pleased with the potential impact of the new Apprenticeships and where there are delays to the start of delivery these are not necessarily viewed as problematic: rather employers are seizing the opportunity to get the configuration of training and assessment right, in order that it achieves greatest traction.

There is much to commend about the processes and the outcomes of the Trailblazers' developments; however some of the challenges encountered were believed to have weakened employers' ownership. Key concerns surrounded the assessment plans, the rejection of which was a cause of significant frustration. While the original philosophy may have been to 'let a thousand flowers grow', those involved wanted assurance that their interpretation of policy was correct. The policy focus on getting the steady state arrangements appropriately set is therefore valuable.

Reflecting on the key aims of the reform agenda, the Trailblazers indicate that much progress has been made, although the impact in respect of some points will only emerge with time. Table 1 sets out a summary of the progress made by Trailblazers to the aims of the reform programme.

⁶ As part of the Gateway 1 process UKCES now checks all proposed Standards for overlap with National Occupation Codes and other Standards either existing or in development. From August 2015 all Expressions of Interest are also put out for comment through an online survey – this includes a specific question about any concerns relating to overlap with existing job roles, to help prevent duplication.

Table 1: Progress made by Trailblazers towards the aims of the reform programme

Aim of the reform programme	Progress towards aim and issues raised
Redefining Apprenticeships in order that they are targeted at those who are new to a job or require substantial training to perform the job	Developments to date achieve this. Raises the question of whether an Apprenticeship is the appropriate form of training for each career progression an individual makes.
Focusing on the outcome of the Apprenticeship rather than the process of developing competency	Developments achieve this. Tensions regarding the weight given to end-point over 'on programme' assessment, with some believing that apprentices and employers need to understand progress throughout training experience.
Introducing trusted, independent assessment	A work in progress, with a range of models for independence having emerged linked to changing guidance. Unclear that there is trust that operating an open assessment market will enable independence or be practicable.
Recognised industry Standards as the basis of Apprenticeships with links to professional registration	Developments achieve this. Aim has the support of employers. Important to involve all professional bodies operating in each sector.
Requiring all Apprentices to achieve Level 1 in English and maths and to study for and take the test at Level 2 before completion	Achieved. The Standards at Level 3 ⁷ often include this level as desirable in entry criteria. Employers offered little commentary on this: may suggest it is uncontroversial or low priority.
Ensuring funding creates the right incentives, with purchasing power lying with employers	Too early to tell. Support for the 2:1 ratio for co-investment but concerns about impact on small firms, as well as for their purchasing power.
Greater diversity and innovation in training with employers and government safeguarding quality	To a degree. Employers have designed training that is appropriate (i.e. diverse) but not necessarily innovative (not clear that innovation was necessary). Future governance arrangements, and the means to safeguard quality, are still in development.

Source: IES 2015

⁷ The Standards selected by the Department for the research case studies were Level 3 or above

1 Introduction

The Apprenticeship Trailblazers were introduced as a means to address recommendations arising from the Richard Review (2012), which had noted that employers are *'best placed to judge the quality and relevance of training and demand the highest possible Standards from training organisations'*.

Particular recommendations that the government highlighted as important to address were:

- Redefining Apprenticeships in order that they be targeted at those who are new to a job or role that requires sustained or substantial training
- Focusing on the outcome of Apprenticeship – what the apprentice can do – rather than the process of developing that competency
- Introducing trusted, independent assessment
- Recognised industry Standards as the basis of every Apprenticeship with links to professional registration where this exists in sectors
- Requiring all Apprentices to achieve Level 2 English and maths before completion of training
- Ensuring funding creates the right incentives, with the purchasing power for training lying with employers
- Greater diversity and innovation in training - with employers and the government safeguarding quality.

Source: The Future of Apprenticeships in England: Implementation Plan (2013)

Since then, employer ownership has become a central theme of Apprenticeship policy in England, and is a response to growing recognition of the importance of engaging employers in the content of Apprenticeship training and assessment. By expanding the role of employers, policy makers believed that more robust linkages could be created between Apprenticeships and the skills required by the labour market. The Trailblazer Standards have also provided the opportunity to strengthen links between training and professional registration (including licence to practice) which the outgoing frameworks had failed to address.

Policymakers recognised that the points set out above constituted significant reforms to the Apprenticeship programme. If examples of the new system could be developed and demonstrated to be working effectively in practice then this would support further developments in Apprenticeships. Thus the Trailblazer initiative was born, to take forward these reforms.

The Trailblazer initiative required rapid development work amongst the Apprenticeship Trailblazer networks, the means through which these objectives are being achieved. As well as providing new models of effective practice in the development and delivery of training and assessment, Trailblazers were intended to help policymakers understand the support structures that employers would need to take forward these developments.

The Trailblazers were phased in from October 2013 with an initial eight employer networks participating. The Apprenticeship Standards created by these eight networks were launched as part of National Apprenticeship Week in March 2014. Following the launch of those Standards, a further 29 employer networks began the task of developing new Apprenticeship Standards for occupations in their sectors; these Standards were launched in August 2014. In addition, many of the original eight networks started work on additional Apprenticeship Standards. After this point, developments accelerated with proposals from many more networks accepted.

1.1 The Trailblazers' progress

The Trailblazer Quality Statement⁸ reports that since October 2013 over 1,300 employers nationwide have engaged in the process. Over 300 apprentices have already begun training against the new Standards', with the earliest entrants having started in September 2014. In total, 187 Standards have been published and more than 160 new Standards are in development. The new Apprenticeships are in a broad range of sectors from nuclear to fashion, law, banking and the armed forces and range from intermediate to higher levels with the majority of developments being at Level 3 (Advanced) and above. The new Higher and Degree Apprenticeships range from Level 4 (e.g. Foundation Degree or Higher National Diploma) to Level 7 (e.g. Masters degree and postgraduate certificate and diploma).

Trailblazer activities are intended to continue through 2014/15 and into 2015/16.

Standards and assessment plans produced by employers and agreed by Government are published at: www.gov.uk/government/collections/Apprenticeship-Standards

Standards being developed by employer groups across the Trailblazers can be viewed here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/Apprenticeship-Standards-in-development

1.2 About the evaluation

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) was commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to evaluate the implementation process adopted by the Trailblazer networks and identify lessons to assist with future developments. The evaluation fieldwork commenced in January 2014 and concluded in March 2015. The

⁸ Statement on Apprenticeship Quality for the Trailblazer Trial, Downloaded May 2015 from: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/411872/Quality_Statement.pdf

current report is the third and final output from the evaluation⁹. The next stage for Trailblazers' evaluation is an impact assessment which the Department has commissioned separately from the process study.

The process evaluation was tasked with reporting on:

- How Trailblazer networks are established, organised and structured – including employers' motivations to get involved, and the implications of being involved.
- The processes involved in Trailblazer developments – covering the creation of the new Standards and outline assessments, as well as detailed assessment plans.
- Responses to key national principles including end-point and synoptic assessment as well as grading.
- Views of the funding mechanisms and reforms, including the allocation of the government funding cap made in respect of each Standard and the general principles of the new funding model¹⁰.
- Perceived impact of the Trailblazers in respect of employer satisfaction with the process and outputs including the views of large employers and small-to-medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

To do this, the evaluation team sought to involve 16 employer networks selected by BIS as the focus for the research activities. These included the original eight Trailblazers plus a further eight drawn from the second tranche of employer networks. The Trailblazers involved in the research covered, by sector and occupation(s):

- Accountancy (Professional Accounting Technician; and Professional Accountant)
- Adult Social Care (Adult Social Care Worker)
- Aerospace (Aerospace Manufacturing Fitter)
- Automotive (Mechatronics Maintenance Technician)
- Butchery (Butchery)
- Conveyancing (Conveyancing Technician; and Licenced Conveyancer)

⁹ The first interim report was internal to BIS, the Agency and members of the Trailblazer development groups; the second interim report was published in March 2015 and can be downloaded at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/Apprenticeship-trailblazers-evaluation>

¹⁰ Details of the reformed funding programme for those involved in training apprentices to the new standards in 2014/15 may be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/324526/Apprenticeship-Funding-Reform-Briefing.pdf

- Craft (Craftperson)
- Digital Industries (Software developer; and Network engineer)
- Electrotechnology (Installation Electrician; and Maintenance Electrician)
- Energy and Utilities (Power Network Craftsperson)
- Financial Services (Relationship Manager; and Financial Services Administrator)
- Food and Drink manufacturing (Food and Drink Mechanical Maintenance Engineer; and Food and Drink Multi-skilled Maintenance Engineer)
- Golf Greenkeeping – horticulture (Golf Greenkeeper)
- Hospitality (Senior Chef: Culinary Arts; and Senior Chef: Production Cooking)
- Life and Industrial Sciences (Laboratory Technician; and Science Manufacturing Technician)
- Nursing (Adult Nursing)

1.1.1 Methodology

The evaluation was conducted over three rounds of research. The evaluation research activity involved:

- A review of documents, including the draft and finalised Standards and outline assessments, along with workshop packs and other documents shared with the team by the Department.
- Telephone discussions with all of the Apprenticeship Unit (BIS and DfE) and Skills Funding Agency relationship managers involved in supporting developments.
- A limited number of discussions with other national stakeholders (c.10) (such as Gatsby Foundation, unionlearn, assessment experts, and provider bodies as well as policy leads for key tasks, such as quality assurance).
- Attendance at the two Relationship Manager meetings where progress to date was reviewed along with implications for the national support required.
- Attendance at national workshops for Trailblazer networks designed to support the early cohorts of the Trailblazer networks.
- Discussions with employers, Trailblazer facilitators and other stakeholders relevant to the selected networks.

- Attendance at meetings associated with the Trailblazer networks – some of these were working groups while others were steering groups; some covered the development of Standards whereas others concerned the assessments plans.
- An online survey of employers which was launched in autumn 2014 and remained open to responses until the end of December 2014. There was no sample for this survey; rather Trailblazers were asked to forward it within their networks, and the survey was also promoted on twitter and LinkedIn.

The nature and extent of the research within the Trailblazer networks is shown in Table 2 below along with the achieved sample for the online survey.

The number of employer and other Trailblazer stakeholder interviews completed in the final round was somewhat less than had been hoped. Several factors contributed to this: firstly, this round of interviews was completed in two months (February and March 2015), whereas the earlier phases were conducted over around three to four months. Second, election purdah meant the research could not be extended for any additional period to improve the achieved sample. Thirdly, some fatigue amongst interviewees may have set in as the pace of development slowed and there was little to add to feedback gained as part of previous discussions. However, despite the smaller than hoped for sample, the quality of interviews and data gathered remained high and provided useful insights into the later stages of Trailblazer developments.

Table 2: Fieldwork completed related to each Trailblazer network

Round 1 Research (involving 8 Trailblazer networks)	Round 2 Research (involving 16 Trailblazer networks including longitudinal research with 8 networks)	Round 3 Research (involving 16 Trailblazer networks in longitudinal research)
58 interviews with employers, Trailblazer facilitators and other stakeholders	95 interviews with employers, Trailblazer facilitators and other stakeholders	68 interviews with employers, facilitators and other stakeholders
Attendance at four meetings associated with Trailblazer developments	Attendance at 11 meetings associated with Trailblazer developments	Attendance at four meeting associated with Trailblazer development
6 interviews with Relationship Managers	12 interviews with Relationship Managers	11 interviews with Relationship Managers
		Online survey of employers, which gained 127 valid responses

Source: IES 2015

1.3 About this report

The first, published interim report drew together findings from the first two rounds of research and highlighted issues concerning how Trailblazer networks formed, their

membership, how they undertook consultation with wider industry as well as their development approaches to the specific Trailblazer tasks.

The current report builds on those findings and widens out to include employers and stakeholders with lesser involvement as well as tracks Trailblazers as some have started delivery.

Chapter 2 explores trends in network development, and provides information on how these were formed, the composition of membership and consideration of resources. In Chapter 3 the process to develop Standards is captured.

The national support offered to Trailblazers is the theme of Chapter 4 and this looks at evolving arrangements to support a steady state of the new Standards. In Chapter 5 the process of developing the detailed assessment plan is examined.

Chapter 6 captures the progress made in respect of delivering the new Standards, while Chapter 7 examines responses to the new funding model.

The outcomes of and lessons learned by Trailblazer networks are elaborated in Chapter 8. In Chapter 9, the strengths of the models and developments are explored, along with the risks raised for the future.

Chapter 10 draws together some early conclusions on the process of development and maps the developments against the ambitions of the Apprenticeship reform programme.

2 Trends in network development

This chapter elaborates the findings about network formation and membership as well as the tasks entailed in being part of the Trailblazers during the early stages of the networks. It then goes on to explore how networks have developed and changed in the final stages of their work.

2.1 Network formation and early tasks

The interim evaluation report¹¹ supplied information on how the Trailblazer networks examined by the evaluation had formed, and how they were organised. This showed that in the early stages, established employer networks predominated. These networks had a range of origins including the industrial partnerships formed for the 'Employer Ownership of Skills' programme and sectoral bodies of various types (professional bodies, training councils, regulatory bodies as well as sector skills councils).

The intensity of the work and the '*need to build the bridge as it was walked across*' (a phrase that was used by policymakers to reflect that they were developing policy regarding the new system and its infrastructure as the early Trailblazers progressed) meant that established networks were best placed to deal with the uncertainties about what was involved as well as the intense activity required. The ambition for the earliest Trailblazers was that training for the Standard would start in September 2014, i.e. in under 12 months from their work commencing.

This picture, of established networks predominating within the early Trailblazers, held true for the two 'cohorts' of networks examined in this evaluation. However, as part of more recent developments, employers and sector stakeholders have been able to express interest in developing the new Apprenticeship Standards to the Department; this has reportedly led to the establishment of new networks to take forward Trailblazer developments. It has also meant that the Department has been able to facilitate contact between existing Trailblazers and those expressing interest where there appears to be overlapping proposals. Evidence from the online survey suggests that this has had some effect: more than half of the respondents (55 per cent; see page 72 in the appendix) stated that they had proactively contacted the Department about the Trailblazers, with the remainder saying they had not.

For the earliest Trailblazers the work was staged, requiring firstly development of the two-page Standard for their selected occupation(s); secondly, an industry consultation to ensure wider support for the Standard as defined and to engage and capture the views of small-to-medium sized enterprises; following this they developed a 'high level' assessment model, sometimes leading to further consultations; and finally, development of a detailed assessment plan. Each of these stages broke new ground: for example, in developing the Standard the Trailblazer networks were required not just to draft the Standard itself (which

¹¹ Newton B, Gloster R, Miller L, Buzzeo J (2015) Research Paper 213, Evaluation of the Apprenticeship Trailblazers: Interim report Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, published in March 2015: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/Apprenticeship-trailblazers-evaluation>

involved defining the role in terms of knowledge, skill and behaviour) but also the format and lay-out for this.

These stages – and the extent of the work required - were not made clear to employers from the outset, with some believing that their task was completed once the two page Standard had been developed. The uncertainty regarding the requirements perhaps unsurprisingly led to calls for a roadmap to be established so that the whole task was clear from the start.

In practice, the work of these Trailblazer networks started to set in place the basis for what that roadmap would look like. Those joining the Trailblazer process now are able to benefit from being able to see an outline of the full set of tasks from the outset.

2.2 Membership

To take forward the Trailblazer tasks, networks typically implemented a model that involved a larger oversight group with smaller operational, task-focused sub-groups. Some Trailblazers envisaged the strategic group becoming the coordinating or governing body for all the Standards their sector intended to develop.

A common feature of membership was that a chair would be appointed – in all cases an employer – along with a facilitator to manage the administrative demands of the developments, including ‘back office’ tasks such as making arrangements for meetings and brokering relationships with assessment and training experts at crucial stages. The facilitator role could extend to developing draft documents (Standards and detailed assessments) based on discussions at employer network meetings.

Three facilitator models emerged. The least common had an employer facilitating. More frequently, a member of staff from a sectoral body did so (eg. sector skills council, professional body or charitable body associated with the sector). Finally, a consultant could be employed to lead this role. Initially, sources of funding for facilitators were the sectoral bodies (by giving staff time to the process) or the Gatsby Foundation (which provided some seed funding if certain, specified conditions could be met¹²). Employer Ownership Funding supported the developments in some cases since the two policies were closely aligned and networks overlapped for the two. An additional funding stream to support facilitation was noted in the final round of the research in one network. Once the Gatsby Foundation ‘seed funding’ had been spent, employers provided the monies for the facilitators to continue in their role.

In respect of employer membership, the operational groups typically comprised company managers with responsibility for training and development and/or managers with oversight of Apprenticeship training. The oversight group was often attended by more senior strategic managers, particularly where large companies dominated the sector or an Industrial Partnership had been formed as part of the Employer Ownership of Skills initiative. In some cases these managers had experience of developing assessments and

¹² These conditions were linked to the aims of Gatsby Foundation as a charitable body. Section 2.4 covers views of the financial support available to Trailblazers.

in many groups, participants had themselves been an apprentice. In all cases, there appeared to be considerable expertise in the delivery of training.

The spread of company sizes involved broadly reflected the typical firm-size composition of the different sectors and all had support from relevant large and well-known employers with medium- to-large organisations tending to be particularly active in the networks. While engagement with small firms was apparent, this could be indirect, through a mediating or representative organisation. In some Trailblazer networks, particular group members took responsibility for consulting small businesses as they recognised the heavy resource burden that fuller engagement implied. However, in sectors where small firms predominated, their active engagement in Trailblazer networks was stronger although few of the Trailblazers were in this category. Perhaps reflecting the tendency for larger companies to be more involved in developments, two-thirds of the survey respondents (66 per cent) were employed by large companies, with a fifth (19 per cent) working in medium-sized enterprises and the remainder in small companies (15 per cent).

There were mixed messages regarding the expected make-up of the Trailblazer networks. For example, some interviewees believed that, because the Trailblazer initiative was driven by the concept of employer ownership, they were not to involve their Sector Skills Council. However, policymakers noted that this was a misinterpretation of their guidance: they were concerned that employers should set the agenda, not sector skills councils or other sectoral bodies, but that this did not preclude the councils being members of the networks. Similarly, interviewees stated that policymakers had initially discouraged assessment organisations and experts, and training providers, from participating in networks. Again, policymakers commented that this was never the intention.

This latter point had particularly emerged in accounts of the challenges some Trailblazers had experienced in developing an assessment plan that was acceptable to policymakers (see Chapters 5 and 6). Some stakeholders believed that this task was particularly challenging for employers to take forward; without input from assessment and awarding organisations employers had struggled with this task.

‘Just because you’re a really good [example occupation], you don’t necessarily know what the best method is to assess [example occupation]. I think it is completely right that they develop the Standard, but for the assessment process they should have input.’

Relationship Manager

2.2.1 Membership in practice

Across the Trailblazer networks membership was quite varied, with some involving awarding organisations, professional bodies and training providers from the outset, while for others the network comprised employers and facilitator bodies. The longitudinal research model enabled the research to track membership and this demonstrated that the make-up of networks changed over time for several reasons.

The first reason for change concerned resourcing. In these examples, sometimes the chairing role moved to a different employer, either because the original chairperson moved away from the Trailblazer, (which could happen because they needed to return to their job or because their company could no longer resource the amount of time entailed) or because the individual moved to take up a role on the emerging governance group. This

usually followed on from a shift in the strategic group from oversight to governance. In one case, the original employer chair moved to a role leading the operational group for a particular Standard.

Another driver for membership changes was the development of the assessment model. Trailblazers discovered that they needed either additional members to assist them, as employers typically would not have this specialist expertise, or a different mix of members. This change of membership affected the working groups more than the strategic, oversight or governance groups.

The survey supplied some data on the extent to which individuals had been involved in developments. It revealed that most of the respondents had actively engaged in the development of the Trailblazer Standards relevant to their organisations and that where they had been involved, their involvement typically covered multiple elements. This had included sitting on either the strategic group (72 per cent) and/or the operational groups for the development of Standards or assessments (78 per cent and 73 per cent respectively). Perhaps as a result, 72 per cent indicated that they had been part of face-to-face consultations. Lower numbers indicated involvement in online or other forms of consultation (66 and 64 per cent respectively¹³) (see Table 12 in Appendix).

What was notable was that more employers wanted to be involved: there was a consistent gap (of around 20 per cent) between the proportion of respondents declaring they had been involved and the proportion stating they would like involvement in future. Hence, while 78 per cent and 73 per cent of the respondents had been involved in the operational groups for Standards and assessment, 91 and 90 per cent of respondents respectively indicated that they would welcome involvement in the future. This may indicate greater interest in the developments than Trailblazers have been able to capitalise on in the time available to them.

Those who had been involved were largely satisfied with their experience. Two-thirds of respondents (67 per cent) were either satisfied or very satisfied. Just 15 per cent of respondents expressed dissatisfaction while 18 per cent were neutral on this point (Table 13 in Appendix). Moreover, three-quarters (77 per cent) indicated that they believed they had a great deal or at least some influence over the Standard. The fifth of respondents (19 per cent) who said they had little influence over development of the Standard were often those who had expressed dissatisfaction about their level of involvement.

2.3 Resources need for Trailblazer developments

Being part of Trailblazer developments was resource-intensive for all types of organisation involved. Meetings were typically frequent, at least once a month, often more, and extensive i.e. a half or full day and this remained the case throughout the process. Some employers estimated that they had dedicated a very high resource to the process – several days each month in some cases. Consequently, detailed involvement was particularly

¹³ It must be noted that Trailblazers were able to decide the consultation mechanism they would use, and not all, for example, offered online approaches.

challenging for smaller employers and there were reports that the intensive work required – as well as the costs involved in attending meetings - was a barrier to these organisations. In addition, the extent of work required did not appear to reduce over time, with the assessment model requiring even more detailed input than the Standards.

As work continued into development of the assessment plan, the size of some networks dwindled. After that stage, though, membership tended to hold relatively steady. Where membership had dwindled, Trailblazers had sought to adopt approaches that, to a degree, could mitigate the resource requirement; these included drawing on experts (awarding bodies, training providers etc.) to provide specialist input. In order for employers to truly have ownership of developments however, it is crucial that they have final ‘sign off’; consequently, while there are strategies that can reduce the burdens placed upon them, being part of a Trailblazer entails a certain level of continuing involvement and, hence, resource input from employers. In light of the perceived high level of resource required, this may raise questions about maintaining employer buy-in in the longer term.

Feedback from employers indicated that the expertise of the specialist organisations had proved valuable.

‘I don’t think that involving the awarding organisations and training providers has diluted the employer ownership of the Trailblazer – they are helping to cement the best way to get a good outcome. The group can draw on their expertise to get something that is robust and fit for purpose.’

Trailblazer employer

In addition, their accounts suggested that bringing in expertise from awarding organisations and training providers had not undermined employer ownership and employers have been able to hold these organisations to account to ensure that what emerged was appropriate for the sector.

It has remained the case throughout the research that employers have broadly welcomed the reformed system, which is demonstrated by the numbers who continue to be involved in Trailblazer developments.

2.4 Financial support for developments

As noted, being part of a Trailblazer is resource intensive and for the Trailblazers examined by this research, there had been no government funding to support their development¹⁴. However, in some cases Trailblazers had been able to access other sources of financial support.

¹⁴ The latest guidance, which was issued while this report was being finalised in July 2015, makes provision for a support fund to reduce barriers to the participation of small businesses. It indicates that reasonable travel costs in relation to attendance at Trailblazer meetings will be covered.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/447413/BIS-15-355-guidance-for-trailblazers-standards-to-starts-July-2015.pdf

Targeted financial support has been offered to the Trailblazers by Gatsby Foundation. This is a charitable organisation that supports innovative work in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), including that related to the development of the technician workforce. It offered financial support to Trailblazers within the STEM sector and where the Trailblazer development work was viewed as being aligned with the Foundation's charitable objectives and included an alignment between the new Apprenticeship standard and their sector's professional registration requirements. The Gatsby Foundation guidelines for applications to support the development of the Trailblazers¹⁵ stated that funding can be used to support Trailblazers in any way that employers determined was appropriate, and this might include support for research, consultation with the wider sector, co-ordination costs (such as procuring a project manager) or to cover the participation expenses of smaller organisations.

Four of the Trailblazers examined by the evaluation successfully applied for this funding to help in developing their standards (or the associated processes, such as the development of an assessment tool). Those that were not successful in their applications or who did not apply attributed this to a lack of synergy between their Trailblazer sectors and the STEM and professional registration objectives of the Gatsby Foundation.

Where Gatsby Foundation funding had supported the Trailblazers involved in the research, the most frequent use was to fund consultants to provide administrative and operational co-ordination to the Trailblazer, although in one example, the funding was used to assist the Trailblazer to engage with the relevant professional body and to develop an independent assessment service. In respect of the first model, employers stated that this had enabled their participation, as they would have been unable to lead and resource this detailed role themselves. In other examples, the funding had enabled smaller employers to be part of developments, by covering the costs of travel to meetings and so forth. However, some of those involved viewed the funding as unresponsive to the pace of developments and stated that if it had been released earlier it could have covered the direct and other costs the network members had incurred.

Overall, while the funding from the Gatsby Foundation was welcomed and seen as valuable it was not viewed as a major source of support to developments. The amount of funding released to the Trailblazers concerned was, in their view, relatively small and hence provided support for a limited duration. Once it had been used, employers themselves in some cases funded consultants to continue in their roles or released them from their duties. Support to cover the costs of small firms was simply discontinued.

Indirect financial support for Trailblazer developments could be accessed through the Employer Ownership Pilots which overlapped with the networks taking forward Trailblazers in some sectors. The funding criteria for these pilots allowed Trailblazers to be supported since many of the Pilots involved reworking the Apprenticeship model. Other benefits emerged from working within the umbrella of the Employer Ownership Pilots. The Industrial Partnerships formed for the Pilots could provide the oversight body for the

15

<http://www.gatsby.org.uk/en/Education/Projects/~~/media/Files/Education/Guidelines%20for%20Gatsby%20Support%20of%20Trailblazers%20Phases%201%20and%202.ashx>

Trailblazer and the costs of employers participating in these, or other Trailblazer working groups, could be covered by the Pilots' funding. A picture emerged of cross-subsidisation as well as cross-fertilisation between the two initiatives with the Industrial Partnerships and Employer Ownership Pilots able to connect Apprenticeships in an overall picture of workforce training including continuing professional development as well as studies in Key Stage 4 and 5¹⁶.

1.1.2 Difference made by financial support

On the basis of the data gathered for the process evaluation, it is hard to assess the specific impact of the financial support available to the Trailblazers because those that had access to funding do not appear to be in a particularly different position to those that did not. For example, all the Trailblazers that were successful in developing Standards and that were examined by the research have continued on to develop further Standards, whether or not they had accessed some support funds. In addition, the scale of their developments, i.e. the number of Standards they are seeking to develop, is linked to industry needs rather than any funding available.

It is particularly challenging to unpick the difference made by Employer Ownership Pilot funding as opposed to the impact of these Pilots in establishing an infrastructural for industry and Apprenticeship training management and quality assurance.

In contrast, it is possible to say that the Gatsby Foundation funding had a direct, enabling effect for those that accessed it, although, the longer term impacts are harder to assess. However, the value of the Gatsby Foundation funding, which remains open to application by Trailblazer, is likely to be that it supports 'start-up' and allows for the creation of the momentum for these further developments to flourish.

¹⁶ Key Stage 4 describes the final two years of schooling in England, Wales and Northern Ireland when young people are aged 14-16 years. Key Stage 5 denotes the two years of education for students aged 16-18 which may take place in a college, sixth form or work place (as part of an Apprenticeship for example).

3 Trends in the development of Standards

This chapter examines the findings about the process of developing Standards and explores how the initial Standards have been received as well as intentions for future Standards development.

3.1 Standards development

For many Trailblazer networks, the opportunity to develop a new Standard represented a chance to continue their previous work refining the Apprenticeship model in their sector. Many saw the existing training as high quality and in such circumstances it was unsurprising that an evolutionary development model was adopted. For others, the chance to work from a clean sheet was welcomed and in others, where no training model existed, the Trailblazer had provided the opportunity to innovate to rectify this. This spectrum of approaches indicates that the Trailblazer approach is responsive and adaptable to differing contexts.

While there may be some criticism of the networks employing an evolutionary approach to the development of the new Standards (rather than innovating and starting from a blank sheet), this typically reflected the sectors' broad satisfaction with their current Apprenticeship Framework training model. For example, 73 per cent of respondents to the online survey reported that they had trained apprentices in the last three years and of these over three quarters – 77 per cent – expressed satisfaction with the current training model (36 per cent were highly satisfied and 41 per cent were satisfied). Just seven per cent of the survey respondents expressed any dissatisfaction with the former training model. Factors that drove satisfaction included the quality of training delivered, as well as the skills, competency and behaviour of successful apprentices (see Appendix Table 7).

The extension of the Trailblazers to regulated occupations¹⁷ provided the opportunity to learn about how the work could be taken forward in this context. Experiences within the Trailblazers in this category differed widely. For one sector, it had not been possible to build consensus on the new approach to occupational training and at the time of the

¹⁷ The term regulation is typically used to denote a Licensed or Regulated profession, i.e., that which requires an individual to be licensed or registered. The requirement for an individual to be licensed applies to work roles for which practicing a specified range of activities is unlawful without a licence to practice, which confirms competence by meeting minimum prescribed skills standards. (Based on Forth et al. (2011), Tamkin P, Miller L, Williams J (2013) *Reviewing Occupational Regulation*, UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES)). In the closely-related situation in which an individual is required to be in *Registered* it is unlawful to practice without prior registration with the relevant regulatory body but the entry requirement does not necessarily include a test of skills competence. Registration is most often seen in the health sector, where health professionals are typically required to be registered; they are then 'regulated' through their professional body, with regulation being enforced in the case of misconduct through removal of their registered status (Source: Miller, L. Williams, J, Marvell, R and Tassinari, A (2015) *Assistant Practitioners in the NHS in England*. Skills For Health)

research it was unclear whether this Standard would be finalised. In contrast, in other sectors where regulation applied, bespoke arrangements had been reached with regulatory bodies that enabled the Standard to be approved.

Throughout the developments there was variation in the approach taken by the various Trailblazers to describe job roles and the skills, knowledge and behaviours that each role requires as well as any entry criteria. This may have implications for the transferability of the qualifications across different sectors and for parity of the training provided for similar roles in different sectors.

There had also been differing stances adopted in respect of the incorporation of qualifications into Standards by the earliest Trailblazers. However greater uniformity on this emerged as the Department tightened up on guidance to Standards developers over time.

A core and options model gained increasing levels of support over time. This approach allows several similar job roles to be combined into one Standard since specialisation could be pursued through the optional elements with a common core of knowledge, skills and behaviour applying to all roles. Combining a number of job roles within one Standard has the potential to limit the overall number of Standards required and this might provide greater simplicity and efficiency as developments expand. However, the number of roles that can be covered by a core and options approach is limited by the number of roles with similar 'core' activities.

In contrast to the current 'framework' approach, a Standard cannot represent a range of pathways within occupations which require training at different levels. Therefore the eventual number of Standards required will be higher than the existing number of framework Apprenticeships. The current 'live list' of Apprenticeship frameworks¹⁸ indicates that 210 are available and that these cover 334 levels of training while Unionlearn estimates that Apprenticeship frameworks cover 1,200 occupations¹⁹.

There were predictions amongst some of the stakeholders interviewed that the eventual number of Apprenticeship Standards could easily reach 1,600-1,700. This scale of development indicates a need for robust systems for quality assurance and governance. The Department has turned its attention to the issue of quality assurance and in March 2015²⁰ published the Quality Statement for the Trailblazers. This document sets out the existing and new measures for quality assurance that will apply to the Trailblazers and how these will interact to promote quality delivery and assessment²¹. More broadly, there

¹⁸ Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/Apprenticeship-frameworks-live-list>

¹⁹ See: <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/Apprenticeship-frameworks>

It should be noted that there was not a perfect match between frameworks and occupations, which the Standards are seeking to overcome

²⁰ Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/Apprenticeship-trailblazer-quality-statement>

²¹ As an aside, it is interesting to note that in this document the Trailblazers are described as a trial whereas more usually they are described in terms of a firm commitment.

is an awareness now at national level that attention needs to be focussed on the quality assurance arrangements that will be needed to underpin delivery.

The evaluation explored the future intentions of the Trailblazer networks, regarding the number of Standards that they planned to develop to meet the requirements of their sector. As noted in the interim report, some networks had believed that being approved to develop one Standard meant they had been granted a licence to develop future Standards²². In these cases, the networks typically had scoped the training needed in their sector and started work on the range of Standards this entailed. This could be in the range of 10-15 Standards, with the maximum identified by any of the researched networks being 18 Standards; in that instance the network already had 12 under development.

In one such case, a network had developed 'shadow Standards' alongside their original one, and used the original Standard as a template for these 'shadow' developments. While this initially speeded developments, the downside was that when the guidance for developers issued by the Department changed, approaches that had originally been viewed as acceptable were now no longer seen in this way and hence the 'shadow' standards needed significant revision. This led the Trailblazer network to feel that their time had been wasted in undertaking that early work and that subsequently the workload for developers had been increased.

Other Trailblazers that had taken a longer time to develop their Standard(s) were also critical of the impact that guidance changing over time had had on their work. The status of subsequent changes to guidance had led to confusion, particularly amongst the earliest Trailblazers. Some of these had been granted the freedom and flexibility to develop Standards in line with their sector's wishes and had expected to continue developing new Standards under those arrangements; they subsequently discovered that they were now expected to develop the new Standards using the current guidance which was neither aligned with their earlier Standards²³ nor to employers' wishes in their sector. This increased the work for Trailblazers' networks and formed a point of criticism in respect of the Department's management of the process; some stakeholders also believed that this put the concept of 'employer ownership' at risk.

'There was a great deal of flexibility early on that enabled innovative models to emerge that were consistent with employers wishes. However the movement to steady state arrangements has meant that policymakers are imposing [new and different] structures on employers. What was previously permissible is no more. The integrity of the Trailblazers and employer ownership is under threat. There is the potential that the national structures will defeat the purpose of Trailblazers and the reforms with the result of a reversion to the old model – simply rebranded as Trailblazers.'

Trailblazer stakeholder

²² From the Department's perspective, it must approve each new Standard approved for development hence no such licence exists.

²³ The Department however states that each new Standard must be developed under the most recent guidance.

3.2 Views of the Standards

The online survey provided an opportunity to explore wider views of the Standards selected for the research. In this part of the survey, only those respondents who had reviewed the Standards concerned were invited to answer. This sample was skewed towards some sectors (see Appendix) although the number of responses was too small to provide a sectoral breakdown. Consequently, the results must be considered as indicative only. Despite this, they present a very upbeat picture.

For example, 93 per cent of the survey respondents agreed that the Standard(s) they had reviewed described the job in their company, and 90 per cent stated they would train their apprentices to the Standard. In addition, 85 per cent would be willing to recruit an individual who had been trained in another organisation to the Standard (see Tables 15 and 16 in the Appendix).

The commentary provided by these respondents indicated broad support for employer ownership and the new approach. For example, some described how the new Standards' focus on attitudes and behaviours as well as skills and knowledge gave employers confidence and allowed them to '*grow [their] own*' apprentices. Others stated that the job description aligned well with anticipated career paths of trainees and employees, and that the Standards matched company job descriptions even across sectors. A few positive comments surrounded the wider effect of the reforms with respondents stating that their Trailblazer development activities had raised the profile of difficult-to-fill positions (this is a potential impact indicator), increasing their attractiveness to young people.

However, some comments were more negative, with some respondents saying that the new Standards offered no advantages over existing Apprenticeship frameworks, that some of the new job roles were not sufficiently defined (nor their training), and that some Standards continued to require GCSE completions that were irrelevant to the role/sector. Other respondents stated that greater attention was needed to the details within the Standards, particularly assessment and grading criteria.

3.3 Responding to the challenge to scale up

The most recent evidence from the evaluation indicated that some challenges have arisen in attempting to manage the Standards as the number in development accelerates. After the first cohort of Trailblazers, the Department established three 'Gateways' to support developments. At the time of the research, each Gateway was scheduled to meet three times each year. Two of these gateways evaluated the draft Standards ('Gateway 2') and assessments ('Gateway 3'), operating through an informal panel that offered feedback for interpretation and communication back to Trailblazers by Relationship Managers. The formal panel provided final feedback on the Standards or assessments to the Minister to assist in his decision about whether to approve them or not. The experience of the panel process in respect of assessment is explored in Chapter 5.

Another gateway, known as 'Gateway 1', has oversight of the expressions of interest to develop Standards and assists in the decision as to whether these proposals for new Standards may enter development. Evidence on this part of the process was limited at the time of the research as this gateway had only recently started operation. There were indications that while this was viewed as a crucial facet of the national infrastructure

required, it also needed further development and refinement. For example, some interviewees noted that a Standard approved for development by a different Trailblazer network appeared to conflict with an existing Standard that covered the same occupation. While there were differences in the fine detail of the two job roles there remained concerns over whether the two Standards could – or should - co-exist. In a similar vein, there were two examples where multiple Trailblazer networks operating within the same broad sector claimed the right to develop the Standard for a particular role(s). In one case, despite attempts by the Department to encourage collaboration between these two Trailblazer networks, none had been established. In another, the Relationship Manager raised the concern that with multiple networks operating to develop Standard – but not liaising about them – transferability was not assured.

While in the early stage of developments such difficulties might be expected, these issues point to the challenges that may be faced in the future unless some system of occupational classification can be found to assist the Gateway 1 process and ensure clarity for all concerned²⁴. The Gatsby Foundation raised this point in its submission to the House of Commons Educational Committee²⁵, where it noted the risks raised by a proliferation of large numbers of overlapping Apprenticeships. These include problems in maintaining rigour and quality and the risk of Apprenticeships becoming too narrow and not supporting transferability between job roles and sectors. This latter concern was raised by employers in the last stage of this research too. In addition, questions were being asked about the parity of grading between sectors and whether gaining a merit or distinction awarded in one Standard would have equivalence with the same grade in another. Given the varied approach to the positioning of grading and to the end-point assessment and/or the knowledge element, there is little to suggest that equivalence or transfer is supported at the moment (see Chapter 5).

Another concern raised by the Gatsby Foundation and by responses to the evaluation is how quality can be assured over time and Standards updated to keep pace with industry developments. It will be important to address this if the process is to be successfully scaled up. The Department recommends at minimum a review every three years but there is no clarity as yet on who should lead this review. As the interim findings indicated, Trailblazers are developing their thinking on this; those with Industrial Partnerships often see these as potentially able to fulfil the role of governance body. Some employers feel highly invested in their Standards and want to be at the heart of any review process. However, there are concerns that the individuals who have been engaged in the detailed work to date may move posts or employer, or their company may decide to end their support for the work. Continuity may therefore become an issue.

²⁴ As part of the Gateway 1 process UKCES now checks all proposed Standards for overlap with National Occupation Codes and other Standards either existing or in development. From August 2015 all Expressions of Interest are also put out for comment through an online survey – this includes a specific question about any concerns relating to overlap with existing job roles, to help prevent duplication.

²⁵ Available from this link:
<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/education-committee/Apprenticeships-and-traineeships-for-16-to-19-year-olds/written/13305.pdf>

By the final round of research some in the original cohort of Trailblazers were already reviewing their Standard(s) and seeking changes, for example to the list of accepted qualifications or to the assessment model. The review process entailed a process of resubmission, although this was light touch in nature (i.e. the original decisions applied by the panel remained in place with the changes being seen as updates).

A growing concern for the Trailblazer networks was how any national governance model or system would interact with the varied approaches that are emerging from the Trailblazers. The Trailblazer networks believed that a firm, national strategy was needed now that delivery was underway.

Some stakeholders at the national level suggested that professional bodies could be the future custodians of the Standards, since training to the Standard should be linked where at all possible to professional registration. However, this role for professional bodies was not defined at the outset, and has not organically emerged. Consequently, professional bodies may not have expectations of taking on this role. There was no particular indication that employers believed that professional bodies should have this oversight of the Standards. However, if their role in this regard is perceived to be desirable, then it must be clarified as a priority so that such expectations can be incorporated at an early stage, as well as solutions found in those sectors where several professional bodies operate.

Overall, the research revealed an emerging picture of Trailblazer networks wishing to transition from the period of uncertainty that had characterised their early work, to some steady state for the management and delivery of the Standards developed. However, balancing this were concerns that any future national infrastructure should neither constrain innovative approaches nor restrict employer ownership.

4 National support

This chapter explores the national systems that have been introduced to support the Trailblazers, the views of the Trailblazers on the support they have received and views on future policy directions.

4.1 Arrangements in place to support Trailblazers

Given their importance to policymakers, as well as the need to learn from the early developments, the Trailblazers have enjoyed significant national support. This has entailed the provision of a Relationship Manager assigned to each, as well as national workshops to bring cohorts together to hear direct from policymakers about the next steps and thinking on future directions as well as to share practice between the networks.

At the time of the research, the Relationship Manager varied with the different stages and tasks involved²⁶. Relationship Managers from the Apprenticeship Unit provided support to networks in the early stage of their work, namely the development of the Standards up until the point of their approval²⁷. Once the Standard was approved, Trailblazers were handed over to Relationship Managers at the Skills Funding Agency who supported the development of the detailed assessment plan.

Two Gateways (Gateway 2 and 3) are relevant to this stage of work. Gateway 2 looked after the Standards, ensuring that roles were clearly defined within the two page document and requirements on issues such as training being sufficiently stretching were met²⁸. Gateway 3 had oversight of the detailed assessment plans and again ensured that national principles for Trailblazer assessments were complied with and assessments were sufficiently robust. Each Gateway is supported by an informal panel that provides feedback to Trailblazers (via Relationship Managers) on their draft Standards and assessments. In addition, at the time of the research, each Gateway has three formal panel meetings annually which provide feedback to the Minister to assist his decision on whether to approve Standards and assessments²⁹.

²⁶ Subsequently this has been changed and the same Relationship Manager provides support throughout the development process

²⁷ Not all Standards are approved on their first submission; where they are not, Trailblazers have the opportunity to respond to the feedback they receive from the Gateway process, which their Relationship Manager communicates to them, and to resubmit at the next Gateway meeting date of their choosing

²⁸ For more information, see P12 of the developers guidance, available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-of-apprenticeships-in-england-guidance-for-trailblazers>

²⁹ As this report was being finalised, a new approvals process for Gateway 2 was being put in place, including closing the formal panel and introducing a public survey to gather feedback on draft Standards from a wide range of organisations before final approval recommendations are made.

The Department also funded assessment experts to work with the earliest Trailblazer cohorts to help them to identify effective and robust methods of assessment that would also provide the independence that is required by the developers' guidance. While these experts provided direct support to Trailblazers, their involvement also provided an opportunity for the Department to learn more about effective assessment plans in different contexts in order to further inform the developers' guidance. The experts will not necessarily be commissioned to work with later Trailblazer cohorts.

4.2 Working with Relationship Managers

For the most part, Trailblazer networks indicated that they were content with the support that they had received during the early stages of their work. While Standards were being developed, it was common for the Relationship Managers to attend meetings and provide a steer and guidance to the ideas coming through. It was apparent that support had been very 'hands on' and this was felt to be important given that Trailblazers were encouraged to innovate and national guidance was not fully fleshed out at that time (it has tightened over time on the basis of learning arising from the Trailblazers' work).

Over time, the amount and nature of support from Relationship Managers had changed, but typically Trailblazers were content with the changed role. For example, once Trailblazers transitioned to Skills Funding Agency Relationship Managers (i.e. once they were developing their detailed assessment plan), it was less likely that these staff would attend their meetings; rather they would provide support by telephone and email. For most Trailblazers concerned, this was deemed appropriate and they did not see that they needed the intensive support previously available once they were dealing with the 'nuts and bolts' of assessment and training delivery. However, other networks found it harder and appeared to struggle with Relationship Managers who referred them to the developers' guidance and did not help them to interpret it in their particular context.

Overall, there was significant support for and appreciation of the Relationship Managers who did not simply support but also challenged the decisions that were reached by the Trailblazer networks. This was believed to help strengthen the eventual outputs. Most indicated that their Relationship Manager was responsive and was available when needed by telephone or email and had a good grasp of the issues they were grappling with.

'We've been really impressed by the support we have had from our Relationship Manager. She replied very quickly to any queries and we've had regular telekits and she's been very good at feeding back policy developments and so on.'

Trailblazer employer

'[Relationship Manager's] great support, impartiality and flexibility was absolutely critical in getting the Standards out, and if we hadn't had that, a lot of the employers would have faded away.'

Trailblazer employer

While the Relationship Managers viewed their role for the large part as interesting and enjoyable, those working within the Skills Funding Agency had concerns about future resources and capacity. Whereas Relationship Managers in the Apprenticeship Unit could

hand over Trailblazer networks once the Standards were approved, and therefore were freed up to support new entrants, the same did not happen for those in the Agency. Instead, given the slower pace of getting the assessment model approved (see chapter 5), compared to the Standard, Trailblazer networks did not move into delivery and off the support caseload with any speed. Moreover, where these networks developed new Standards following their initial ones, the Agency Relationship Managers supported these as well (rather than the Apprenticeship Unit).³⁰ This led to a heavy workload and an inability to offer as detailed support to Trailblazers, despite some expressing a need for more support.

With the number of networks approved by Gateway 1 to develop Standards accelerating, but no increase in the speed at which assessments are approved, there is a risk that bottlenecks may increase. There is a need to ensure that the developers' guidance adequately supports the end-to-end experience in sufficient detail to allow Trailblazers to more accurately apply it within their contexts and developments.

Further changes are likely to be seen in the future, as an aim for the Department is that the guidance for developers is made sufficiently directive and clear that there is less need for direct support. For example, a policymaker discussed a trial where a small number of Trailblazers were given the option of working with limited Relationship Manager support to develop their standards. There was, however, a belief that Trailblazers might struggle without any support from Relationship managers, and some interviewees believed that attempting to do so would have an impact on both the speed and quality of developments. For example, one Trailblazer network that had already developed several Standards did not feel ready to work on Standards independently and believed there would remain a need for on-going support.

4.3 National workshops

National workshops had been held at regular intervals for both early cohorts of the Trailblazers. For the most part, employers broadly welcomed the opportunity to meet the wider group of employers involved in Trailblazers and to discuss and share their approaches, especially where they share common ground.

'The BIS events and interventions were well timed and kept inertia in check and allowed for comparability across steering groups.'

Trailblazer employer

However, they also had some criticisms. For example, some believed that notification of the workshop dates was much too short, making it difficult to clear the diary to attend. In addition, it was challenging for some employers to take a full day out of work to spend in the national workshop. For employers in areas distant from London, being able to resource attendance was particularly problematic. In essence, attending a whole day meeting in London meant taking two days out of work (i.e. including travel time) and entailed

³⁰ The Department has since introduced a new processes whereby Trailblazers retain the same RM from inception through to delivery

considerable expense without any funding to support this (i.e. to cover travel and hotel costs). For this reason, many employers were content for their facilitators to attend the workshops in their place and to report back on the latest national developments.

While these criticisms existed, it was also apparent that employers did not perceive a need for the workshops on a continuing basis. It was clear that meeting as part of a wider group had been beneficial initially although less so once the detailed work on assessment and planning for delivery became the focus. Contact with the Relationship Managers could provide the level of support they needed at this point.

4.4 Views of the introduction of the Gateways

Having three fixed dates for the Gateway meetings was viewed as having benefits and drawbacks. Employers believed that they provided greater flexibility than previous arrangements where all Trailblazers had to work to one fixed date which the Department determined e.g. for the Standard to be assessed. With the newly scheduled meeting dates, each Trailblazer network could decide which of the meetings it would submit to. This allowed the networks to take control of the pace of their developments rather than pace being determined by policymakers.

However, where a Standard or assessment was not passed by the minister the fixed meeting dates could impede the pace of developments. There were complaints from Trailblazer networks that the process of gaining feedback – necessary before the process of redrafting could commence – took considerable time. This was particularly frustrating where feedback indicated only minor issues with the original draft that could be quickly tackled. Having to wait for the next panel meeting was felt to be unsatisfactory and a drag on progress, particularly since there was no recourse to an extraordinary meeting to deal with such situations, meaning a wait of some three to four months.

‘So when we put [job role] Standard in in October, we didn’t hear back until nearly the end of November... and if you’d had employers in the room, the feedback could have been dealt with in five minutes – really minor things of misunderstanding. The idea of having to wait for a couple of months [for feedback] and then having to wait again to be able to resubmit is just massive administrative overkill and it sets everyone back.’

Trailblazer facilitator

Where feedback was slow to emerge from the approval process and significant change was required, it could mean there was insufficient time remaining to allow the changes to be made in time for the next scheduled meeting. This meant that the following meeting then had to be aimed for, increasing the delay by another three-to-four months.

From the perspective of policymakers’, the fixed meeting dates were already subject to review. With the number of active Trailblazer networks accelerating, each meeting had

faced a huge volume of documents to review. This appeared to have led to the delays in feedback being shared. For this reason, the arrangements were under review.³¹

In addition to this criticism on timeliness, other criticisms were voiced that had been raised in earlier rounds of the research. For example, while Trailblazers appreciated the insight they now had into the composition of the panel, concerns remained that the panel did not fully understand the nature of their sectors. This could mean, for example, a Standard being rejected on the basis that the panel did not believe it described the job role, whereas employers reported that it was the panel's concept of the job role that was adrift. Having to put together the arguments on this and resubmit was felt to be wasteful of networks' resources.

The other main criticism made by some networks was that conflicting feedback had been given by the informal and formal panels (see Chapter 5). This again increased the workload for networks, and raised concerns about a lack of consistency in the policy arena. The root of these conflicts in feedback appeared to be that national policy principles contained in the developers' guidance had been updated, sometimes between the informal and formal panel meetings, but these changes had not been brought to the attention of the networks.

Consequently, a point of feedback was that a greater steer could be offered about the changes to the developers' guidance, particularly for the earliest cohorts, since these had enjoyed greater freedoms earlier on. There is also a need to refine and clarify the assessment plan requirements in order that more submissions would pass through Gateway 3 the first time. One Relationship Manager noted that only a third of the 33 assessment plans recently submitted had passed. There was a concern that the guidance was currently insufficient to support better outcomes in the future.

It might be possible to address the first point through providing an addendum to the guidance that highlights changed elements of the guidance. The second would be better addressed through examples of good practice (recognising that a good practice model must be aligned to current and not former guidance on assessment plans). Policymakers will need to consider these points urgently to ensure a smooth transition to steady state.

4.5 Future governance

At the time of the research, no clear picture emerged of future governance arrangements. As noted in Chapter 3, some Trailblazer networks were already starting to establish these arrangements within their sectors in the absence of a national steer on this issue. Some contacts raised concerns that governance arrangements were still 'pending' and needed to be addressed as a priority. Some proposed that any future arrangements should be employer led and as a corollary to this there were fears that a national model might be imposed that tightened guidance further, limiting employer ownership and innovation.

³¹ While this report was being finalised, the Department confirmed that the review has been completed. From August 2015 there will be monthly opportunities for interested parties to submit expressions of interest to take forward development of new Standards, and for Trailblazers to submit Standards and/or assessment plans for approval

Others pointed to the likelihood that personnel within Trailblazer networks would change within the timescales for review (two to three years) hence the custodians of the Standards would be gone. There also appeared to be a lack of clarity on who would provide the governance, with some networks setting up their own arrangements and others looking to policymakers; they believed that since the Crown has copyright³² of the Standards this implied state responsibility for the review task. There were also concerns that the speed of new developments was running ahead of the governance model being established and that this situation needed to be reversed.

³² Crown Copyright is intended to enable a diversity of providers and employers to be involved in delivery but is understood to have implications for future governance by some Trailblazers

5 From Standards to detailed assessment

This chapter explores the findings about the process followed in developing the detailed assessment and the main features of those plans, as well as the approach taken to estimating the costs of delivery. It expands on these findings by exploring Trailblazer networks' plans for ensuring independence in assessment, and their views on how they see the wider assessment market working.

5.1 Processes followed to develop a detailed assessment

The interim report described the processes followed by the earliest Trailblazers in developing detailed assessment plans based on the high level assessment approach that they had submitted following the approval of their Apprenticeship Standard(s). These assessment plans were required to show the various methods that would be used to evaluate the performance of learners against the skills, knowledge and behaviours that each occupational role requires. They also had to adhere to several criteria outlined in the Department's guidance for Trailblazers. As with the development of the Standards, designing the detailed assessment and reaching consensus among Trailblazer members and national stakeholders had required several meetings and repeated iterations and reviews.

The findings showed that in order to develop the technical detail of the assessment it was often necessary for Trailblazer networks to make use of external sources of expertise as well as those within the network. Use of external experts also had the advantage of helping to reduce the burden on employers. Nonetheless, some employers nominated themselves to be part of an assessment sub-group that would take forward the development of the detailed assessment and consult with other members of the Trailblazer network at key intervals.

The decision to be part of an assessment sub-group was typically based on previous experience of assisting in the design of vocational qualifications. In several instances, the facilitator of the Trailblazer network led the drafting of the detailed assessment and sought the input of employers on interim outputs. In other cases, awarding bodies fulfilled this role. The involvement of awarding bodies allowed Trailblazers to access specialist and technical expertise, and the awarding bodies to raise their profile among members of the network³³.

Some Trailblazer networks also involved staff from education and training organisations in developing the detail of assessment. These bodies either operated as a technical working group, which devised the content of the assessment plan and kept employers informed of

³³ It is a legislative requirement that the end-point assessments can be led by any assessment organisation on the Agency's Register of Apprentice Assessment Organisations (RoAAO) and that no assessment organisation can be granted exclusive rights to assess apprenticeship standards.

their progress, or as a reference group to help employers make sense of the technical language associated with assessment. The use of technical working groups and a 'resource-light' arrangement was particularly valued in sectors that were largely composed of small-to-medium-sized enterprises.

Some Trailblazer networks that were more heavily involved in the process of determining how each of the skills, knowledge and behaviours listed in the Standard would be tested had on occasions found the level of technical detail required to be challenging. However, in such cases, employers viewed their involvement as ultimately worthwhile as it provided them with an in-depth understanding of how the Standard should be applied in practice, which they believed would aid them in communicating to training providers what was expected in terms of delivery.

'It really made sure we understood what that Standard meant in practice so that when it goes on to training providers developing the training it's much clearer what the expectation is'.

Trailblazer employer

In the majority of cases employers did not believe that the involvement of external sources of expertise, such as awarding bodies and training providers, had diluted the Trailblazer networks' ownership of the Standard; they reported that these organisations had been keen to take on board employers requirements while seeking to produce a plan that would work in practice and that was robust and fit for purpose.

In addition to awarding organisations and education and training providers, a few Trailblazers made use of the assessment experts commissioned by the Department. Those networks that had used these experts were typically positive. In one instance, a network had received guidance and direction from an assessment expert on several occasions and stated that the objective viewpoint of the expert had provided assurance that the assessment plan was feasible. Some though had found that the guidance offered had not been as helpful as expected because the assessment expert lacked industry insight. Policymakers indicated that the provision of these experts was to assist exemplar assessment plans to emerge and it was not known whether they would be commissioned to assist future Trailblazer networks.

Despite the various forms of support drawn upon in developing assessment plans, many Trailblazer networks had found development of the assessment to be a protracted process and far more complex than originally envisaged. This was largely attributed to a lack of clarity in the national guidance; for instance, some employer networks believed that during the early stages they were encouraged to work with a single awarding body in order to address independence, impartiality and consistency. However, as Trailblazer networks began to draft the detail of their plan they received guidance from the Department that their assessment plan should be open to the wider assessment market³⁴. Employers were frustrated at this and some stated that policy-makers were 'shifting the goal posts'; they

³⁴ It is a legislative requirement that assessments can be led by any assessment organisation on the Agency's register of apprentice assessment organisations and that no assessment organisation can be granted exclusive rights to assess apprenticeship standards.

understood and appreciated the reasons underpinning the requirement, but those that had planned to work with a single body to deliver the assessment had to amend and develop further iterations of their plan. Moreover, some employers believed that working with one organisation provided greater assurance of consistency and quality which would be diluted by opening up assessment to the wider market.

The earliest Trailblazers had been critical of the short time-frame they had in which to develop their assessment models. In one instance, it was believed that these time restrictions had limited the extent to which they had been able to be innovative in their approach, while employers from other networks stated that the short time-frame had impacted negatively on the quality of the plan they submitted. By the final round of the research the pace of development of the assessment plans had greatly diverged, with Trailblazer networks working at very different speeds to finalise them. For example, some networks planned to develop the assessment model over the course of around one year, whereas others envisaged a quicker approach of three to six months. In addition, some of the earliest cohorts were revisiting their assessment plans and planning to consult on them further. These were considering resubmission in due course.

5.2 The content and format of detailed assessments

In line with national guidance, the assessment plans developed by Trailblazer networks all included an end-point assessment. The earliest versions of guidance stipulated that this end-point assessment would constitute around two-thirds of the overall assessment for the Apprenticeship. However, the more recent guidance does not include this requirement, and as such there is greater variation in the structure of the assessment plans submitted more recently compared to the earliest submitted plans. To illustrate the variety now in place, some plans indicate that end-point assessment will carry 100 per cent of the Apprenticeship assessment, while others do not state the weight that will be placed on each part ('on programme' and end-point) of the planned assessment.

There were questions, remaining, too, regarding how consistency would be assured between different organisations – while the older NVQ-based model utilised external verifiers to provide external quality assurance and consistency across organisations, it was not clear if this role would continue to exist under the new approach and if not, who or what would replace this function. A further question was the extent to which it would be possible to ensure parity in assessments between the various different awarding organisations likely to be involved in some of the Apprenticeships, especially given the absence of qualifications in some³⁵. One sector had reached agreement between three awarding organisations regarding the cut-off points for pass, merit and distinction, but other sectors did not appear to have considered this issue.

The end-point assessments typically involve at least three main components, and a variety of methods have been proposed across Trailblazer networks. These include the production of a portfolio alongside a reflective statement, a practical skills assessment, knowledge tests such as a simulation or scenario based exercise, trades tests, panel interviews, and continuing professional development journals evidencing core behaviours.

³⁵ This appears to represent a wholesale reworking of the role for awarding organisations.

The range of assessment methods proposed adheres to national guidance that states that the end-point assessments must be synoptic and demonstrate an apprentice's competency (i.e. the skills, knowledge and behaviours that learners have acquired) across the Standard.

In designing their assessment plans, some Trailblazers had attempted to integrate these into existing assessment practices within their sector as far as possible. For instance, some networks based their end-point assessment on pre-existing, established, industry-led assessments that previously were required, after completion of the outgoing apprenticeship, to demonstrate workers' competence to perform their jobs. Other sectors that had a long tradition of assessing apprentices on-the-job included portfolios as part of their end-point assessment, which were composed of materials and evidence collected throughout the duration of an apprentice's training. Nonetheless in this latter case, some employers had reservations about the emphasis placed on the end-point assessment by the Department, and were sceptical about how well a training programme that would last between 18 to 24 months could be distilled into a single assessment event. Others believed that apprentices needed interim, 'on programme' assessment milestones in order to provide them with a better indication of their on-going performance and areas where they needed further development. For this reason, some Trailblazer networks had incorporated into their assessment plan some element of continuous, on-the-job based assessment during the final phase of the Apprenticeship, such as line manager and appraisal feedback. In these instances, their plans included practical observations, case studies, presentations, peer group and line management feedback, and appraisals. Many also included tests or examinations, either conducted internally or for external qualifications.

A few Trailblazer networks were enthusiastic about the opportunity provided by the initiative to make the end-point assessment more relevant to the day-to-day work of the occupation in question than the previous framework model had allowed. Such networks were developing Standards for occupations that required professional accreditation and saw the current examinations as too abstract and theory-based. The Trailblazer provided them with the opportunity to create options for an integrated, work-based assessment or a more practical final examination, although in some cases, employers had concerns about whether these assessment plans would eventually be approved by the relevant professional bodies. If they were not, this would be a major barrier to implementation of the Apprenticeship. However, other networks had managed this by making clear that the Standard did not require apprentices to obtain professional membership; rather apprentices would simply need to achieve the competencies the Standard outlines, which provided the basis for professional registration if the individual chose to pursue this.

Employers also held mixed views about the requirement that apprentices' performance should be graded. This led to grading models that showed considerable variation between Standards. For example, some include three grading points while others had only two, e.g. pass and distinction or pass, merit and distinction, and some intended to grade the end-point assessment while others were applying grades only to the knowledge and/or behavioural elements. The reasons for these different approaches to grading typically centred on the question of what it means to be competent – specifically, whether competency is an absolute (i.e. someone either is, or is not, competent) or is viewed as something that can be graded.

Some employers saw grading as a useful exercise that would assist them to differentiate between new employees, while others developing a Standard for occupations that were highly-regulated and required professional accreditation were uncomfortable with suggesting that one employee was 'more competent' than another. As such, in the latter cases, only certain aspects of the Apprenticeship were graded. Some had overcome this philosophical divide by agreeing that individuals could only be assessed as competent or not, while their behaviours and attitudes could be graded and therefore form the basis for further, more finely delineated, assessments. Perhaps in light of these varied views, the likely effects of grading on recruitment practises appeared minimal, with many employers claiming that they were unlikely to consider the grade achieved by the apprentice as part of their future recruitment decisions.

5.3 Quality assurance, third-party assessors and the assessment market

Many of the Trailblazer networks planned to work with a third party, such as an assessment organisation or professional body, to operationalise their assessments. By the conclusion of the research, most networks were aware that assessment arrangements had to be open to the wider assessment market, but some noted that interest from assessment bodies had been limited to just one organisation, despite attempts to raise the profile of the Standard with the wider market, for instance, through assessment body forums. A few Trailblazer networks developing Standards in small, niche sectors also could not foresee many additional assessment organisations entering this market.

In some instances, organisations that were interested in delivering the assessment had led the drafting of the assessment plan on behalf of the Trailblazer. Some employers expressed frustration that such organisations were unable to act as the main assessment body for the Standard after having worked so closely with the network in developing the plan, although it was clear that those bodies had secured brand loyalty from the employers involved. In addition, comments from assessment organisations suggested that they hoped the work would lead employers and other interested parties in similar sectors to enlist their support in future to develop and deliver assessments for their workforce. There was continued criticism that ensuring consistency within an open market remained problematic.

'They want you to outline how QA [quality assurance], consistency of services will be ensured, but they don't want you to absolutely dictate who does that, so we have to play a bit of the game with the terms we can and cannot use'

Trailblazer stakeholder

One network had originally planned to work with a single organisation (the main professional body for the sector) in delivering the assessment in order to help ensure consistency and restore employers' confidence in the quality of apprentices' preparation. In light of the Department's guidance they were now developing criteria that they would require any prospective assessment bodies, competing in an open market, to adhere to in order to meet the needs of the sector. They believed that this was an acceptable compromise, although reiterated their preference for an assessment model in which the professional body played a more central role.

However, this model did not necessarily have national support. For example, one relationship manager believed that in this situation a professional body could have undue influence, particularly if it was closely affiliated to the network, and this was seen as potentially compromising the independence of the process somewhat. As such they believed that alternate assessment models should be considered. The Relationship Manager also believed that the networks would benefit from the involvement of multiple awarding organisations and professional bodies, which would prompt employers to consider in more detail the cost implications and practicalities of their planned approaches. However, this is practical only in sectors and occupations where it is possible for multiple bodies to operate. In the case of registered occupations³⁶, there is likely only to be a single regulator.

Other concerns raised in relation to the assessment market related to uncertainties about how assessors would be recruited and trained. Again, employers in niche sectors were concerned about the practical feasibility of the proposed assessment model in case learner numbers were too low to make it commercially viable.

'I'm very aware that we may not be able to get there because there is a fear that there isn't going to be enough people wanting to do Apprenticeships, and because of that no one within industry will want to be assessors, and then we're back to square one'

Trailblazer employer

5.4 Views of the panel approval process for assessments

The detailed assessment plans developed by Trailblazers are independently reviewed by an advisory panel before the Minister decides whether to approve the plan. This enables the assessment plans to be published alongside the Apprenticeship Standards with confirmation that Standards are ready for delivery. In preparation for this formal submission, Trailblazer networks receive comments and feedback on their detailed assessment plans from an informal panel. The submission to, and subsequent feedback from the panels is handled by Relationship Managers, and Trailblazers do not have the opportunity to present the assessment plan to either panel in person.

In the early stages, Trailblazer networks were not aware of the panels' composition but this information is now published in the developers' guidance. The formal panel includes:

- Representatives from employer organisations, such as the Confederation of British Industry and Federation of Small Businesses.
- Academic experts in vocational education and professionals from the vocational education sector.
- Experts in professional registration.

³⁶ Which form a very small minority of current Trailblazer Standards

- Experts in assessment, including from the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation.

Source: The Future of Apprenticeships in England: Guidance for Trailblazers – from Standards to starts, March 2015

Commenting on the process, Trailblazer networks stated that they had received little guidance from the Department beyond the nine assessment criteria detailed in the national guidance about what the panel would be looking for in the plans and the level of detail that was required. This point was recognised by Relationship Managers who said that Trailblazers had been heavily reliant on support from individuals such as themselves in developing their plans because of the lack of detail in the guidance. Because Relationship Managers from the Agency oversaw several networks and their work spanned various stages of the developments, this could lead to them feeling over-stretched³⁷. Some had been unable to attend all of their Trailblazers' meetings and this had meant that they could not, in all cases, prevent Trailblazers from taking an approach that was likely to conflict with the guidance, the views held by colleagues within the Department or those of the advisory panel. Being on hand to assist Trailblazers to correctly apply the guidance to their contexts and developments was viewed as an important part of the Relationship Manager role.

The changes to the developers' guidance on assessment were a further source of criticism from the interviewees. Some employers who were in the process of developing their assessment plans were frustrated that the earliest Trailblazer networks did not have to develop their plans in accordance with the current criteria, which some viewed as constituting preferential treatment for the large, high-value sectors (e.g. STEM sectors) which, for pragmatic reasons had dominated the earliest cohort of Trailblazers. This issue aside, the implications of the changed guidance means that a great variety of assessments models has emerged but no clarity on which are the most acceptable or which should be used as exemplars.

Trailblazer networks were also critical of the feedback they received from the panel process. Some believed that the feedback was limited and lacked specificity, while others commented that there were inconsistencies between feedback received from the informal panel and subsequently the formal advisory panel. The latter point was attributed to the differing views of colleagues within the Department about how the policy should be implemented, which were believed to vary as that this is still a relatively new initiative. Again, the need for policy to learn from the Trailblazers' developments was a cause of frustration for employers.

Those involved from the policy side recognised these issues and related them back to the necessity of developing the guidance and structures for the Standards on the basis of the work of the 'early innovator' Trailblazers. Moreover, as a large proportion of assessment plans were not gaining approval in the first instance, some noted a need for greater clarity and more detail in the guidance to encourage more consistent approaches as Trailblazers

³⁷ It must be noted that the Department has increased the Relationship Manager resource since the fieldwork for this study was completed

move towards steady state arrangements³⁸. However, the ambition for some exemplar assessment plans to act as templates for current developments was some way off, since guidance had changed a number of times between the earliest Trailblazers and the current ones.

'They [the employers] were in the policy tent with us while things were being developed, but we're moving out of that now and things need to be tied down more in black and white so it's more open and transparent'

Relationship Manager

In the meantime, Relationship Managers said that they would advise Trailblazers to continue to ask questions and seek clarification where necessary and to bring in external sources of expertise (such as training providers and awarding organisations) to help them develop the assessment plans.

In addition to the lack of clarity and detail on what constitutes an acceptable assessment model, employers complained that it took too long for feedback to emerge from the panel process and to be shared with them. This meant that even if only small changes were needed, employers still had to wait for the next panel meeting to submit them, and if more major changes were required, delays could mean that there was insufficient time to address them ahead of the next panel. Hence there were reports that finalising an assessment plan could take up to eight months.

There was also not always support for the independent assessment approach that the Department said was necessary. Introducing independence meant that employers could not sign off on the competence of their apprentices to perform safety critical tasks, and yet believed themselves to be the only ones able to do so given the specialist equipment and specialised tasks involved. In such cases, Trailblazer networks were being advised that some form of external, independent assessment would need to be involved. From the point of view of the employers, however, this requirement added cost but no value. They saw this requirement as a further area where employer ownership under threat.

Overall, and undoubtedly, getting an assessment plan in place has been the most complex task for the Trailblazer networks and the cause of the most frustrations. The freedom to innovate meant that the earliest networks pursued models that are no longer acceptable and cannot act as examples for others, and the steady-state arrangements (the new guidance and the panel process³⁹) are said to constrain employer ownership. There have been considerable bottlenecks in the approval process, and this has been a cause of delays in the pace of developments; it has led to increased workload for networks, and in some cases has contributed to deferred starts of delivery.

5.5 Estimating the costs of delivery

³⁸ In response to this request the guidance has been updated with the latest policy decisions and a template included to support the development of Assessment Plans. In addition there are now monthly deadlines for submissions

³⁹ Trailblazers were not aware of policymakers' intention to review the panel process

Of those Trailblazers finalising detailed assessment plans, many had yet to undertake any systematic exercise to estimate the costs of delivering the Apprenticeship Standard. This represents a distinct difference from the earliest Trailblazers which were required to estimate these costs prior to developing their assessment plans. This change in guidance meant that only a sub-group of the more recent Trailblazers (in the research) had started to engage training providers in a discussion about delivery and received some broad, 'ball-park' figures on possible costs. Costs were said to be 'ball-park' (i.e. rough estimates) because it was not possible to ask providers for formal quotations until detailed assessment plans were approved and the nature of the services that providers would need to charge for was clear.

On the point of costing, some Trailblazer networks stated that they had been asked to determine the highest cost option so that the Department could calculate the funding cap that they would be allocated. However, they commented that the actual costs of delivery would vary considerably depending for example, on scale and where in the country the training would be delivered amongst some other factors. Often, employers were concerned that training should be affordable for such organisations otherwise take-up of the Standard would be limited.

6 Moving into Delivery

At the time that the final round of evaluation research was conducted several of the earliest Trailblazer networks had started to deliver the new Apprenticeships. This chapter describes their experiences and gives an account of the factors that had delayed implementation elsewhere.

6.1 Progress

Four of the Trailblazer networks had progressed to the point of delivery at the time of the research, with one additional Trailblazer expecting to start in Spring 2015 (after the point at which the final round of fieldwork was completed). For some, failure to pass through the 'assessment gateway' had meant that their plans for delivery had come to a halt and in some of the affected Trailblazers, some interviewees believed they were not likely to be agreed or implemented in the foreseeable future.

Six of the remaining networks were planning for – or at least expecting to commence - delivery in September 2015. Two did not anticipate starting until sometime in 2016 (with one commenting that a launch in 2017 might be more realistic), while the challenges encountered in one Trailblazer leading developments in a regulated occupation meant that no-one was expecting this to launch or even to be finalised in the near future.

6.1.1 Numbers starting on the new Standards

Where Trailblazer networks had apprentices who had started on the new training programme, in some cases the number of apprentices was far lower than initially anticipated. The Departmental estimates suggested that around 300 Trailblazer Apprenticeships had commenced by the time of this report. It should be noted that employers involved in the Trailblazers were not asked to commit to offering apprentice starts nor do they have a duty to promote the Standard within their sectors. These points may have contributed to the low numbers of starts seen.

However, it is also the case that these figures may represent only a subset of actual apprentices going through the new programmes (i.e. being trained to the new standards). According to some interviewees, the uncertainties surrounding the date by which the Apprenticeships would be available, the qualifications that would be gained and the funding process that would be in place had led some employers to adopt what was being called a 'soft launch' approach. This meant that while apprentices were trained according to the new Standards, they were assessed against the old Apprenticeship qualification in order to ensure that their Apprenticeships could be certificated. Unfortunately, this meant that they were not registered on the individual learner record as Trailblazer apprentices, meaning it was impossible to gain an accurate picture of the numbers enrolled on the Trailblazer Apprenticeships; nor, will it be possible to monitor their future progress as a discrete group.

6.2 Planning

6.2.1 Involving Providers and Awarding Organisations

It should be noted that delay in starting delivery was not necessarily viewed as being due to any particular constraints affecting Trailblazer planning; rather, many interviewees recognised that the magnitude of change brought about by the Trailblazers would necessarily require a long lead time. Those stating this recognised the significant amount of development time that training providers would need in order to turn the new Standards and assessment schedule into a learning programme, especially given the expansion in knowledge and skills - and, hence, increase in guided learning hours - required by the new Apprenticeships in comparison with the framework Apprenticeships.

'The size of the Trailblazer units has trebled compared to [framework] units. Now there is e.g. six weeks on [this subject]. A lot of the traditional skills have come back into the Trailblazer Standards. Guided Learning Hours have increased, it's 1400 hours just for the foundation.'

Training Provider

Training providers would therefore need significant amounts of time to design the overall training programme, develop new learning materials and possibly to provide development to ensure that teachers and assessors were fully equipped to deliver some aspects of the new Standards. In particular, the new behavioural components and 'soft skills' were frequently alluded to in this respect, as these were components that many tutors and assessors had not had to deal with previously. Some organisations had arranged workshops for staff to help them to understand and accurately grade the behaviours contained in the new Apprenticeships; they stressed the time that is involved in ensuring staff are competent in this regard. In one of the Trailblazers a stakeholder reported that they were still working out how to assess the behaviours when 120 apprentices had already started on the programme.

In light of the lack of awareness, there were also concerns about the impact of the differing funding models on training provider preparation and behaviour ahead of the switchover to the Trailblazer Standards. Under the current framework, the employer contribution is potentially much less than anticipated under the new funding arrangements for the Standards; additionally, employers currently may receive a grant (in the form of a cash payment) if they take on a young person and have not provided training in the past 12 months. For this reason, there were fears that the rational choice for training providers would be to promote the current framework rather than the new Standard in the short term, particularly as learner volumes were likely to be small. This, in turn, could mean that providers fail to invest in preparation for delivery of the Standard until there is no choice (i.e. at switchover). In turn, this would have an impact on capacity to deliver at this crucial point.

'If a provider is able to pick a framework off the shelf and deliver that and sell that to an employer and the employer is happy with that, why would the provider want to change to something more bespoke?'

Trailblazer stakeholder

It was clear from both the interviews and from events attended that many providers were only belatedly becoming aware of the Trailblazer Apprenticeships and would need to undertake significant amounts of work – and in some sectors invest significant amounts of money in specialist equipment. Examples of training providers' lack of preparedness were cited by several interviewees: in one instance, a large employer had approached their local training providers to gauge their awareness of and interest in the Trailblazer Standard but found that the provider had limited knowledge of the policy, and anticipated that they would not be able to start delivery until the next year (2016/17) or perhaps the year after that. The timescales for delivery – to develop a programme of training from scratch by April 2015, with the Department signing it off by May and for it to then go out to tender to providers – had been far too ambitious in the view of this employer.

'You're not asking for a box of sweets, you're asking for something complicated and sophisticated [...] providers won't have the equipment or people in place to deliver this training [...] we're not going to achieve anything this year.'

Trailblazer employer

Similarly, in another sector, where the pace of developments had fallen behind that initially set out by the Department, it was argued that speed was not and should not be the priority; rather effort was better spent to 'get it [the Standard] right, not fast'. This was linked by stakeholders to the potential for reputational damage – if the Standard was not fit for purpose from the point of its initial delivery, it would lose credibility with industry and therefore fail to gain traction. Conversely, getting it right from the outset would mean that the impact arising from the resources employers (and others) had invested in the process were maximised. If they did not get it right, then stakeholders would feel that their investment had (to some extent) been wasted. Consequently, members of this network did not expect delivery to commence until 2016.

As indicated, many employers were confronting challenges arising from training providers having in many cases been kept 'in the dark' about developments. Some interviewees believed that keeping training providers out of the Trailblazer discussions until late in the day had been a sub-optimal approach, since this left sectoral and other supporting bodies (sector skills councils, professional bodies, industry groups etc.) with the task of trying to bring them up to speed on what employers would want, with very little lead time.

'Employers believe providers should have been brought on board at an earlier stage – the provider market may be behind on the developments. The [sector skills council] is organising some [provider events in March because] Training Providers are a long way behind.'

Trailblazer employer

Notably, some Relationship Managers recognised that the Department could not reasonably expect Trailblazers to do more to engage with training providers, through developing a provider briefing or similar. Relationship Managers were aware that employers' (and other stakeholders') goodwill might ebb away should further demands be put on their time which in turn, might risk their future engagement with the developments.

In addition to training providers needing time to gear up to deliver the new qualifications, awarding organisations also needed to make significant changes to their administrative

and quality assurance arrangements to take account of the new Standards. While several of the Trailblazers had involved the awarding organisations from an early stage this had not always been the case. Even for those who had been involved from an early point it was recognised that design and implementation of the final arrangements would take some time, which could mean that in some cases there may be a less than smooth transition between the old and new qualifications.

'The department has learnt that the Awarding Organisations cannot turn on a sixpence, but nonetheless there may be a gap between the end of the old qualifications and the start of the new Trailblazers.'

Trailblazer Lead

Within the Department the early view had been that once assessment plans had been approved the Standard was ready for delivery but by the final round of research there was recognition that further work was required. For some Trailblazer networks that had developed assessment plans based on completely new Standards⁴⁰, a realisation had emerged that much more detail was required to enable a training and detailed assessment plan to be drawn up in readiness for delivery. Where the new Standard was based on adaptation of the existing framework, moving rapidly towards training was viewed as more feasible.

Consequently, there were concerns about capacity amongst training providers and assessment organisations. Trailblazer networks that had involved training providers and/or awarding organisations from an early stage pointed to the benefits of having done so, while those that had not done so with hindsight realised that this had been a mistake.

'The lesson is to starting involving providers and Awarding Organisations at an earlier stage. They've given such good advice on what they realistically could do with the Apprenticeship that we wish they had known sooner.'

Trailblazer employer

An example of particularly good practice in ensuring development and delivery was captured by the evaluation research. Here, the network had ensured the involvement of all the interested parties from early on and this had helped them gauge likely demand and optimal delivery mechanisms for their sector (see Box 1).

⁴⁰ those where there was no previous apprenticeship model or that involved a substantial change of practice in the definition of training

Box 1: Good practice in consultation and estimating demand

After each sector Standard is agreed in principle by the Department; it is then given to the Trailblazer Network's assessment and delivery side, which at that stage bring in small-to-medium-sized enterprises for consultations. The delivery side also approach awarding bodies and arrange meetings with interested training providers to gauge interest levels on the supply side. Once these are established employers are approached to gauge potential levels of demand, and desired mechanisms for delivery (e.g. onsite; classroom based etc.). All these data are used to produce a consultation paper, which goes out to small-to-medium-sized enterprises and once the consultation paper has been seen and responded to the results are correlated and any changes made, along with any insight from the Department, after which the steering group sign off and send it back to BIS who sign it off for a final time.

1.1.3 Interpreting policy guidance

The previous section described some fairly pragmatic issues that could serve to delay delivery and which may explain why delivery was at a small scale at the time of this research. In addition, however, some of the Trailblazer networks identified a lack of clarity in some areas of policy which had subsequently served to impede their delivery planning. While these networks had their assessment plans approved, they nonetheless encountered problems in agreeing the interpretation of specific points of policy, which had implications for implementation. For example, several of the more advanced networks were still grappling with the concept of 'independent' assessment. Others though were happy that they had found a way of ensuring independence.

'We are involving the Professional [Subject] Institutes in the final sign off through the viva. So impartiality and independence will be built in at that stage but also setting and marking by the Awarding Bodies either through them marking all of them or through sending a sample of papers for checking.'

Trailblazer stakeholder

Nonetheless some expressed concerns that although they had arrangements in place for ensuring independent assessment and had apprentices registered for the Standard, they remained unaware of any confirmed definition of 'independent assessment', or of what counted as 'synoptic'. They therefore were still unsure – even at this advanced stage in the process – whether their proposals would be considered sufficient. There also remained real uncertainty over whether the agreed methods of synoptic assessment would actually work when the Trailblazer apprentices reached that stage.

6.3 Trials, pre-pilots and soft launches

Given these issues it may be unsurprising that often Trailblazers had seen slower starts to delivery than originally anticipated by the Department. In some cases, it appeared that all employers were waiting to see which other organisation 'jumped' first (and to see how they fared) with none individually prepared to commit to large scale delivery.

Some employers were implementing small scale tests of the new Standards. For example in one Trailblazer network, an employer was considering conducting an autumn trial with a

quarter of its usual cohort in order to compare outcomes between the framework and Standard. Another was undertaking a 'pre-pilot' proof of concept trial of the first two Standards for this sector – this would involve training apprentices to the Standard over the next two years but certification against the outgoing framework qualifications. Employers in another sector were adopting a similar approach, conducting what they referred to as a 'soft launch' with companies training apprentices to the new Standards but with apprentices registered on and awarded the traditional Apprenticeship. Such arrangements had been prompted by the desire to ensure that the learner would not be left without a qualification to show for their effort, should any difficulties arise with the new programme.

A range of other issues was viewed as contributing to the limited sign-up by employers for delivery. These included the failure to resolve cross-border issues, for those with employees in the devolved administrations as well as England; some employers having taken part in developments for altruistic reasons and with no intention to deliver; and those who were planning to deliver the new qualifications in future years but not at present or until the Trailblazer became the only option.

6.4 Big qualifications, small cohorts

It appeared that it was mostly larger companies that were involved in piloting the new Standards in the four active sectors. These were typically the companies that had strong, existing relationships with multiple training providers and/or an in-company training function. These employers had not encountered any difficulties in gaining access to the training that was required. However, for the new Standards to succeed there would need to be significant ramping up of numbers and in particular the engagement of smaller firms. There was concern that this could be inhibited by the imposition of the new funding model alongside the roll out of the Standards. In addition, some believed that the Minister had recognised that the change to the funding regime might have an unwanted effect.

There was recognition that if this situation was not rectified then there could be difficulties in delivering the Standards cost-effectively, especially in sectors that required sophisticated – and expensive – equipment. Where this was the case then many training providers would be unable to afford the costs of the range of equipment required to cover all of the new requirements of the Trailblazer Standards, which has implications for the types of delivery arrangement that may be seen in future.

'They need to have enough [learner] numbers to have a business case for delivering a completely new, and quite specialist training programme.'

Trailblazer stakeholder

The expanded breadth of coverage of the new Trailblazer Standards in some sectors could lead to employers having to contract with more than one training provider (and, possibly, the formation of training consortia) in order for all the training requirements to be covered. The cost of specialist equipment – and as providers would not necessarily be able to afford to buy the full range of equipment needed – was seen as a major driver of this partnership approach. While initially training providers might not welcome having to 'share' their clients, this approach could bring benefits for training organisations, as it could help increase the volume of learners for each and thereby increase the return on their

investment in specialist equipment. Such a model could build on existing prime and sub-contractor relationships in the skills sector.

'We are exploring a "hub and spoke" approach, because some providers could not justify buying [equipment]. So we look to create partnerships to deliver across the units, play to their strengths. And if apprentices from several areas are shipped to the specialist kit owner then they [training providers] get a better return on their investment, as there is no support or funding for capital investment.'

Trailblazer Lead

7 Views of the funding model

As part of the Trailblazer developments the government decided to trial the newly reformed funding model for Apprenticeship training. This chapter explores the early feedback from Trailblazers on the model as well as the evolving policy on the funding mechanism and proposed voucher system.

7.1 Broad views of the funding model

The funding model for the training to the new Standards will see £2 core government funding awarded for every £1 spent by the employer, alongside incentives for small businesses, taking on 16-18 year olds and successful completion. This applies across all levels of the new Apprenticeships, i.e. from intermediate to higher and degree Apprenticeships. While this 2:1 ratio was viewed by employers as being simple to understand in principle, in reality employers had concerns over how the model would work in detail and in practice. Relationship Managers reported that concerns and questions about the funding model were raised at almost every meeting they had with Trailblazer networks. The networks from the different phases shared many of the same concerns about how the model would work. There was a suggestion that this uncertainty had discouraged employers from committing further resources to the Trailblazer development process.

A minority of respondents to the survey (30 per cent) were able to comment on the anticipated changes to apprentice funding⁴¹ and of these, equal numbers felt that employers would, or would not, find the new funding model easy to understand (42 per cent respectively) (Table 19 in Appendix). Furthermore, similar numbers (broadly a third each were positive, negative and unsure) thought that employers would continue to recruit apprentices when co-investment at this level was required. Only a third of respondents believed that the proposed level of employer co-investment would encourage employers to negotiate over training costs, with more than a half of respondents being unsure on this point (Table 19 in Appendix).

These survey respondents were then asked to respond to the funding model and specifically about the additional government funding that would be invested as an incentive to encourage recruitment of 16-18 year olds, training completion as well as small firms to engage. Nearly half believed that the incentive for employing 16-18 year olds would be sufficient to encourage businesses to recruit this group, and a similar proportion believed that the completion incentive would encourage employers to ensure apprentices completed the training requirements for the Standard. However, a far smaller proportion (16 per cent) thought that the incentive would be sufficient to encourage small-to-medium-sized enterprises to engage with Apprenticeships (see Appendix Table 20).

⁴¹ The Department requested that only respondents with knowledge of the earliest eight Trailblazer standards be invited to comment on the funding model because at the time of the survey, it applied only to these standards.

Respondents were invited to give further comments on the funding reforms. Those that did tended to be negative particularly on the issue of co-investment: they felt this would be off-putting to businesses, with the cash flow constraints and administrative barriers likely to particularly deter small firms.

Some of the proposed solutions suggested by respondents included leaving funding unchanged and allowing companies to make staged rather than upfront contributions. Some respondents were concerned that there was a lack of clarity regarding the audit process that would be implemented by the Skills Funding Agency, and in regard to 'admissible costs'⁴². It was also suggested that incentives should be offered to those companies engaged in over-training or training for the supply chain (where large employers train more apprentices than they need in order to ensure a supply of suitably qualified labour to smaller firms)..

7.2 Issues raised by the funding model

In the qualitative research, one of the concerns about the funding model related to cash-flow and how feasible it would be for employers to pay 'up-front' for training and then be reimbursed at a later date. While this was considered to be an issue across all sizes of company it was believed to be an issue for small employers in particular. While larger employers could comment directly on the problems that they might experience, with few small employers represented directly on Trailblazer networks, it was left to bodies representing them to put forward their points of view. It was anticipated that concerns over cash-flow could lead to smaller companies being able only to proceed with small cohorts of apprentices and that for some employers there might be a trade-off between scale and costs or affordability.

Another concern raised on behalf of smaller companies was that they would lack the 'buying power' of larger employers with training providers and this would make them less-well placed to negotiate with providers. In addition, in some sectors it was noted that as they could not use government funding to pay for brokerage they would be negotiating with training providers on their own unless they could form consortia. There was very little evidence at this stage of smaller companies coming together in such ways, other than in one sector where an Industry Partnership already existed.

'It's very different for one employer to go to a provider and get best value, it's much better if there's a group going. So I still think having some facility or some organisation like we have in the [sector] industry partnership, where you can go to and they can act on your behalf and leverage others who want the same training to get a better price will help. It will be very difficult for just one company to go to a provider and get the best deal because as well the provider needs at least ten to make it viable for a group.'

Trailblazer employer

In addition to other concerns relating to size of employer, the proposed 2:1 funding model with incentives was thought to be a bigger change for smaller companies who may have

⁴² This was likely to refer to interim arrangements while the funding model was trialled

previously received an apprentice at no cost and, in addition, may have received an incentive grant payment of £1,500 through the Apprenticeship Grant for Employers scheme. Under the new model employers invest, with the fee then being adjusted depending on the amount of incentive to which they are entitled. Therefore, while government money will be used to help reduce their overall spend there will be no upfront cash payment from government to encourage employers to take on an apprentice.

'With the small firms it wasn't previously just a question of getting it for nothing, it was getting it for nothing and having £1,500. So in a way we're clawing back from a very favourable position to a position where the £1,500 is part of getting their money back rather than actually an acknowledgement, or incentive for them to actually do it'

Trailblazer employer

In contrast, some thought larger employers were likely to do well under the new model; they would now receive two-thirds funding from the public purse for the training apprentices to Standards that have been largely tailored to their interests. The Relationship Managers could also see benefits of the new model for their Trailblazer employers, giving them greater control over how the money was spent.

More generally, views on how far employers should go in terms of negotiating on price with training providers varied, with some employers concerned that a reduction in price might lead to a reduction in quality of provision. However, training providers and employers associated with Trailblazers also raised concerns that the costs of training would increase with the new Standards due to increased administration, assessment and, in some cases, the requirement to invest in new equipment.

Some Relationship Managers believed that issues around the funding model have been more prominent in sectors where small companies predominate and in these, there were concerns about whether small firms had the capacity to deal with the added administrative burden. Some Trailblazers also believed that the model would increase the administrative load on employers and the possibility of being audited was off-putting; this could have the result that some employers were deterred from launching the new Standards.

'I genuinely think that the employer commitment will reduce and they will introduce a whole new level of bureaucracy and invoices and a whole new industry'

Trailblazer stakeholder

For the earliest Trailblazers, the lack of clarity over the funding model had caused some to delay piloting the new Standards or to choose to deliver the new Standards while using the old funding model. There was a general consensus amongst the Trailblazers that employers will be reluctant to move to a new funding model until they have to, given that the previous funding model did not require them to contribute to the costs in all circumstances⁴³. Where employers had started delivery of training to the new Standards

⁴³ Training for 16-18 year olds was free; employers of 19-24 year olds were expected to pay 50 per cent of costs but in many cases providers did not charge the fee, preferring instead to off-set it against other contracts; for apprentices aged 25+ employers were meant to pay but typically received training to Level 2 free.

some were using funding from other sources such as the Industrial Partnerships formed under the Employer Ownership Pilots. Therefore, while this will enable the Trailblazers to learn how the Standards operate in practice, it will provide no information on how well the proposed funding model works. It is also important to note that discussions with employers on the funding models, were for the large part, not based on experience.

Trailblazers' stakeholders expressed a desire to see greater clarity over the funding model. This would allow greater certainty for future planning. Concerns were raised that the funding model may transpire to be the decisive factor that determines whether employers do or do not get involved, which runs counter to the aims of employer ownership and the development of new training models.

'I am concerned that the funding model may drive companies away from actually taking apprentices just because of the extra burden they perceive it puts on them.'

Trailblazer employer

It should be noted that the announcement regarding a proposed 'voucher' mechanism was made at the end of the research period and so very few respondents were able to comment on this. Those who were able to comment welcomed the announcement; it was thought it was a reflection of the government listening to concerns that had been raised about money being directed via employers. However, questions were raised about whether a voucher was the appropriate mechanism and whether it would communicate the policy aims of helping employers to understand the investment that government also makes in training.

There was also criticism from some Trailblazer networks that the Trailblazer agenda now centred on the funding model and mechanism with the original ethos of innovation and employer ownership being lost in this debate.

8 Outcomes and lessons for future developers

This chapter explores the outcomes that employers believe will emerge from their investment in the Trailblazer process, as well as the lessons they have learned from their involvement.

8.1 Perceived outcomes and impacts of the work to date

The findings from all phases of the research indicate that employers and stakeholders have welcomed the opportunities for greater networking and collaboration within their industries that the Trailblazers have brought, as well as the opportunities for cross-industry collaboration facilitated by the national workshops. However, the main measures of success (impact) that the Trailblazers identified for their work related to the anticipated outcomes: primarily the expected improvements to the quality of training and the achievement of qualifications. These would only be demonstrated with time.

Few employers saw the number of enrolments on the Standards as a measure of success or impact. This stemmed from the evolutionary approach adopted in some sectors, which aimed to enhance and refine the existing Apprenticeship model to tailor it to better meet employers' needs. While these employers were not necessarily looking for an increase in enrolments, equally success was construed in terms of no loss of Apprenticeship volumes within their industry, which suggested an eye to outputs. In other sectors, where training did not previously exist for job roles, then output measures were of greater importance although in some of these, employers did not necessarily anticipate particularly high volumes of apprentices.

Exploring their success measures in greater detail suggested that employers foresaw potential benefits arising from their work which included addressing skills shortages, as well as addressing the challenges of an ageing workforce. In their view their work could lead to widened labour market entry routes, clearer progression pathways and through this to increased social mobility with vocational training now being available for occupations across the hierarchy, thus opening up opportunities for those young people not destined for higher education⁴⁴.

Their work was often motivated by a desire to improve the quality of training, which they believed would be demonstrated through professional registration opportunities as well as delivery of the skills that employers want. With Degree Apprenticeship opportunities also being introduced, employers anticipated opportunities to tackle the lack of parity between academic and vocational routes since these new Apprenticeships blur the distinction between the academic and vocational routes and also allow an opportunity to highlight the

⁴⁴ Young people not destined for higher education is likely to include those who are not attracted by higher education as well as those who are not capable of pursuing higher-level academic studies. Both groups may respond better to study contextualised to the work place and hence to vocational higher education courses.

vocational focus of many higher education courses (such as engineering and nursing for example).

On the point of parity of esteem however, regarding Apprenticeships at lower levels, universities may remain the final arbiter. Entry into higher or degree apprenticeship programmes - or transfer between higher education institutions – is dependent upon the accreditation value or points awarded to an individual's qualifications at application. If institutions assess apprenticeships as worthy of fewer points than traditional academic awards (i.e. primarily A levels) then there may still be barriers to progress for those coming through the vocational route.

For employers and their industries, the benefits were thought to mainly arise from increased employer engagement – because the training was better tailored to their needs – as well as from the development of an effective secondary market for apprentices and skills (i.e. employers can be confident in the ability of an apprentice trained elsewhere because training to the Standard provides assurance that individuals have the right skills for the job, irrespective of where they trained or whichever company they worked for). It was also believed that this might encourage training for the supply chain or 'over training' models amongst larger employers.

In terms of increasing and widening demand for Apprenticeships, employers believed that the Standard offered an accessible description of the content of training and jobs that would enhance the information available to young people, parents, teachers and careers advisers, and which would help to engage high quality prospective candidates. The options for Degree Apprenticeships were believed to create alternative pathways that would prove particularly attractive to those young people concerned about using student loans to fund higher education.

Other outcomes were identified which aligned with some of the aims of the reform programme. Some employers discussed a changed relationship with awarding organisations and training providers as a result of their developments. This included having greater control because they had defined delivery and assessment requirements. This made them able to hold these organisations to account to ensure the training and assessments were right for the employer. Some employers also argued that their new approach ensured greater consistency in training delivery and assessment which again would provide the assurance needed by industry that skills requirements were being met.

Further benefits may result from the collaborations that were established to lead developments. The Trailblazer provided a tangible project on which to work jointly and managed to avoid the problems often associated with competition or confidentiality between businesses. Consequently, employers learned from each other and developed a better understanding of sector-wide requirements and this in turn had led to ideas for future collaborations on skills issues such as the delivery of Traineeships, sector benchmarking, or developing additional Trailblazer Standards. These relationships may serve to forge the governance structures needed to manage the Standards within sectors in the future. However, the picture on governance was uncertain at the time the research concluded, particularly in sectors without Industrial Partnerships and/or where there was no obvious body to take forward this role (for example, in industries where multiple professional bodies operated or sector skills councils or other industry bodies did not have traction).

8.2 Lessons learned and recommendations for future developers

Reflecting back on their experience of developments, it was apparent that employers remained enthusiastic about their involvement although the level of resource and investment required of them had been considerable. On the basis of their experience, they also had recommendations for employers involved in these developments in the future. Their lessons included:

- Involving experts and specialists (by which was meant awarding organisations and training providers) at an early stage. Clear messages arose that while employers had the right expertise to define the Standard, there is a need to draw on assessment and training expertise for the latter stages of work, to keep the process manageable. Once involved, employers indicated that these organisations had provided useful support and that there were no tensions with employer ownership.
- Involve all regulators or relevant professional bodies in developments (in sectors where several operate) to ensure the Standard and assessment has the broadest traction. Given that links must be made to professional registration where possible the involvement of all relevant parties can assist in decisions about whether to, and which, qualifications to include within the Standard.
- Having an employer to act as the chairperson is important but this role requires a considerable resource. Successful chairs were said to share some attributes: they were accessible, provided honest input, allowed everyone to speak, and ensured there was sufficient time for discussion and reflection. On top of this, when quick turnarounds were required, successful chair people provided clear guidance on the timetable.
- Being clear about the expectations for commitment from the outset. While this was an unknown for the earliest networks, there is now a considerable repository of data on the time needed. This varies with the complexities of developments but in the earliest stages of the work employers can expect to spend up to a day per month in meetings, with additional time spent on reviewing outputs.
- Other advice focused on supporting the network to be effective, particularly when strategic and operational groups were newly formed. Taking the time to support relationships and rapport to establish was said to pay dividends as the work intensified and become more complex.
- Again, for the networks, there was encouragement to take a questioning approach and to not accept things because they were traditional. Employers encouraged others to look beyond their sectors to learn lessons and replicate or build on effective practice elsewhere. However, there was also advice to retain a sharp focus on the goal – which could be a tweak of the existing model or the creation of something new.
- In terms of composition of networks, the advice was that this should be as diverse as possible and representative of employers in the sector. While it was challenging for small companies to be involved, there needs to be a clear mechanism for their voice to be heard. While no single model for this emerged, many Trailblazers shared concerns that small firms' engagement still had to be gained.

In respect of policymakers, employers expressed some concern about the impact of changes of personnel which for the earliest Trailblazers affected the Minister responsible for Apprenticeships, as well as changes to lead operational staff and the transfer between Apprenticeship Unit and Skills Funding Agency Relationship Managers. Employers indicated that the handovers could put the original intent of the policy at risk of being lost as intentions were weakened as the policy was passed on.

The specific driver of these concerns appeared to be the freedom and flexibility granted to the earliest Trailblazers which many employers felt to have narrowed over time, with the result that employers had less say. While it is impractical to keep the same personnel in post across the duration, retaining the ethos through sharing of mission, purpose and approach is likely to be important for those already involved to remain engaged. A further fear of many employers was a change of policy and the withdrawal of support for the Trailblazer model, although there is little sign that this would come to fruition.

9 Strengths and risks

This chapter draws together the findings from the evaluation to highlight the strengths that have emerged from the new approach to Apprenticeship development. It also considers the risks that have emerged which may have implications for the continued roll out of Trailblazers.

9.1 Strengths of the Trailblazer model

For the large part, the evidence to date points to the Trailblazer model being seen as an improvement on previous Apprenticeship frameworks. While some stakeholders saw little change resulting from the Standards and criticised Trailblazers for taking an evolutionary rather than revolutionary stance to development, evolution – building on the best of what was already in place – was believed to be the best way forward in many sectors. It was largely in those sectors that did not have a tradition of successful Apprenticeships that ‘revolution’ was the norm.

What is highly positive is that Trailblazers have been allowed to pursue these diverse approaches in order to explore what will work best for their sectors: consequently, some have welcomed starting from a blank sheet, some have had to do so because there was no foregoing training model, and others have tweaked the previous model to improve it and bring it into the format required of the new Standards. It can be said with some confidence that employers believe there has been genuine progress towards improvements in quality and that employers feel greater ownership now of the training.

Thus the Trailblazers must be understood as having the potential to have a positive impact; however, the nature and cause of that impact are likely to vary by sector. For some, impact may arise from the creation and uptake of new vocational pathways to higher level occupations. For others, it may be through transfer to the new, improved training model (although given the funding situation, the speed of this transfer may take longer than initially anticipated).

The flexibility to determine the training route at all levels appears to be particularly valued. Employers were seeking to develop Standards across their industry that would allow training to be provided at much higher levels than previously would have been seen. The introduction of Degree Apprenticeships was expected to make vocational training a credible alternative route to studying in full time higher education and access to professional level occupations. This should serve to raise the esteem with which vocational training is held.

In assessing the strengths of the Trailblazers, the first point to note is the extent of employers’ investment. The large majority have dedicated a significant amount of time in a context where there is no funding to cover this or any expenses involved. This speaks to their high degree of engagement with the process. Employers are driven by the belief that, by being involved, they can help drive up and assure the quality of Apprenticeships and hence the skills and competencies that apprentices will gain, and furthermore be assured that these skills and competencies are relevant to their organisation. By improving the training provided and competences developed, the Trailblazers are viewed as a key route

through which employers will help to re-establish the credibility and value of Apprenticeships and their role as a platform for progression within the workforce. By building the Standards around industry-identified skills shortages and skill needs, employers anticipate high quality programmes that will result in development of the skills they need.

9.2 Potential risks

While there are many positives about the Trailblazers implementation, there are also some risks that policymakers and others need to be aware of. Some of these were identified during the interim stage of the evaluation and have yet to be resolved. Equally, though, there are some lessons that have emerged from the latest round of the research that can help policy makers reduce those risks in future. In other cases, the additional evidence strengthens the basis for concern regarding those risks previously identified.

In the following section some of the issues and risks along with their potential consequences are elaborated. Recognisably, some are of a more longstanding nature and may be viewed as applying in general to policy on Apprenticeships and not specifically to Trailblazers. However, given that Trailblazers were introduced to address national concerns about shortcomings in the Apprenticeship route it is proper to record all these.

Failure to confirm viability of new funding model: Two sets of funding rules are in operation while the Trailblazer Standards are trialled by employers. As such it is likely that employers will make a rational choice and select the one that is most beneficial to them (which may be the outgoing model since it does not require co-investment to the same degree). Consequently, there is a risk that the new model could remain largely untested, limiting evidence on its impact especially in relation to small firms' use of Apprenticeships.

Uncertainty over whether assessment models are affordable: The early cohorts of Trailblazers were required to design their assessment models prior to receiving their funding band allocation⁴⁵. While Trailblazers were encouraged to consider the affordability of their assessment proposals, it was not possible for many Training Providers to supply an accurate estimate of costs. Some have moved into delivery despite there being no clarity on the costs involved. This raises the risk of funding gaps emerging. Care needs to be taken to ensure an unfeasible funding gap does not emerge. **Standards or assessments may require further refinement:** Some Trailblazer networks pointed to their desire to 'get it right' rather than meet a short timescale for development which was the case for the early Trailblazers. Some that had produced drafts of their assessments to the initially very tight timescales were now reviewing them ahead of starting delivery. Policymakers may want to consider the regularity of review points as a paucity of these may pose a risk to the fine-tuning of the assessment and training

Potential for confusion and duplication: The existing Trailblazer networks have continued to develop Standards while the opportunity to develop has been expanded to new networks. This brings a risk of duplication of Standards for the same (or very similar) job roles in different sectors. Different Standards of differing rigour or accuracy may be

⁴⁵ The developers' guidance now indicates that the two can now be developed in parallel

attached to similar sounding activities. A corollary to the risk of developing overlapping but non-identical Standards (or parts of Standards) is that differing assessment methods may be created, leading to further confusion regarding the equivalence (or not) of qualifications for similar areas. These issues indicate a need for an increased focus within the Department on the management of proposals to create new Standards and a system for reaching agreement over occupational categorisations where overlap is evident, in order to prevent duplicate or overlapping Standards being created.

Lack of clarity over status of different phase Trailblazers and process for future reviews:

The changing guidance for developers means that different phases of Trailblazers worked towards different proportions of end-point assessment and had different agreements on grading. Trailblazers are not assured that Standards will be reviewed against the guidance under which they were defined. This needs to be clarified before the first Trailblazers move to review.⁴⁶

Trailblazers are unlikely to achieve unsupported working in the near future: The increasing number of Trailblazers and of Standards in development may mean that the current level of Relationship Manager resource, and detailed support offered, cannot be sustained but many of the Trailblazer networks do not feel they are in a position to work without support. Additionally, several Relationships Managers believed the developers' guidance was currently insufficient to fully support networks' activities. Without Relationship Manager support there is a risk that some networks may flounder and, possibly, fail to complete their development activities. There is a need to capitalise on the Relationship Managers' learning to expand on the information in the developers' guidance⁴⁷.

An open assessment market, parity and quality of assessment: The Department is encouraging an open assessment market to flourish however many sectors were concerned this might be in conflict with their attempts to increase quality of assessment. While the major awarding organisations have similar (if different) ways of verifying and assuring the quality, consistency and correctness of assessment decisions there may be concerns about the ability of smaller and newer organisations to do so. Employers wanted to control the selection of organisations who may assess in order to restrict this only to those that have demonstrated they can meet specific quality criteria and see this national principle as limiting their ability to manage and assure quality. The perceived risk amongst some Trailblazer employers is that if assessment operates through an open market then quality may suffer⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ The latest guidance (July 2015) states that the policy and processes set out in the most recent version of the guidance applies to all standards and assessment plans, including existing standards and plans as and when they come up for review. From August 2015 this is also being supported with a new online survey seeking feedback on new bids, including any concerns about duplication or overlap

⁴⁷ It must be noted that a new update to the guidance was published subsequent to the drafting of this report which has sought to provide greater clarity and detail on the processes entailed by developing Standards and build on the expertise developed by Relationship Managers in the course of their work

⁴⁸ Operating an open assessment market is a legislative requirement

Failure to resolve assessment issues may lead to differentiated treatment of learners: There were indications that Trailblazers were unsure how poor performance in end-point assessments (where it does not reflect an individual's general ability and performance in 'on programme' assessments) would be addressed. Some believed they would be able to offer 're-takes' whereas others said they would not. This suggests the potential for different treatment of learners across Standards. The impact of a 'one-off' poor performance for an individual and issues such as whether 're-sits' are allowed requires debate and policy decisions at national level.

Risk of loss of provider base: The expanded breadth of coverage of the Apprenticeships may cause problems for training providers who may not be able to cover all of the expanded syllabus. In addition, volumes may be insufficient to drive the purchase of additional equipment needed to cover the entire syllabus. Should some providers decide that they can no longer offer Apprenticeship programmes because of the increased demand in terms of expertise and/or technology this will have the result of reducing the pool of providers, rather than expanding it. This in turn is likely to have an impact on the numbers of employers and apprentices involved in the new training model.

Loss of momentum: While it is laudable that some employers have pointed to the value of taking the time to ensure that they 'get things right', nonetheless there are signs that loss of momentum is occasionally setting in. Some Trailblazers have attributed this to the changeover to steady state arrangements which has constrained developments to fixed Gateway dates. Some estimated that this can result in a delay of between four to eight months to the planned start of delivery. If the process becomes unduly lengthy then it will prove increasingly difficult to keep employers engaged and enthused. Finding ways to provide more flexibility, particularly in the assessments' Gateway process is likely to be valuable.⁴⁹

Risks to impact assessment: There are several issues for the impact assessment that has been commissioned by the Department to consider. First, there are very real differences in the approaches from different Trailblazers ranging from revolution to evolution. It will be imperative to examine each sector to determine impact on those with and without a tradition of Apprenticeships. However, even in sectors with a tradition of Apprenticeships, employers have exhibited caution in their dealings with the new Apprenticeships, couching their engagement in terms of soft starts and pre-pilots. In some cases, elements of the Trailblazer training are being trialled under the outgoing model (i.e. training is focussed on the new Standards while assessment is based on the existing Apprenticeship model) with apprentices registered on the old framework. When impact is evaluated there will need to be consideration of the effect of these soft starts and in particular their impact on the data available for evaluation.

⁴⁹ From August 2015 there has been a move to a monthly deadline for Trailblazers to submit documents at all three Gateways.

10 Conclusions

This final chapter offers some brief concluding thoughts on the findings that have emerged from the evaluation research and maps the process and achievements of the Trailblazer networks against the reform agenda which underpinned their implementation

10.1 General conclusions

Overall, the opportunity for the formation of Trailblazer networks to develop the new Apprenticeship Standards has received broad support. Employers and other organisations supporting developments have embraced the chance to work on improving the quality and fit of Apprenticeship requirements and training, and the results have the potential to put Apprenticeships at the forefront of vocational training. This in turn should bring benefits in terms of increased parity of esteem for Apprenticeships with other education and training options. The new Standards have allowed the incorporation of training elements that some employers had previously funded (separately to the Apprenticeship) in order to ensure training to the Standard they required, or that were necessary as a licence to practice in industries. This has placed the new Apprenticeships in a more central role in determining occupational competence than the foregoing model.

While there is much to commend about the processes and the outcomes of the Trailblazers' developments, some challenges were encountered which employers believed weakened their ownership. A key concern in this regard surrounded the assessment plans. The rejection of assessment plans was a cause of frustration amongst employers who in many cases believed the reasons given lacked validity or were due to changes to the developers' guidance that (in their view) were being retrospectively applied. While the original philosophy may have been to 'let a thousand flowers grow' by this (late) stage in the process those involved wanted assurance that their interpretation of policy was correct. The other point on which Trailblazer networks would like clarity is on future governance and this remains uncertain. The policy focus now on getting the right guidance in place as well as thinking through governance in readiness for steady state is therefore valuable.

10.2 The Future of Apprenticeships in England: review of progress and lessons

As noted in the introduction to the report, the Trailblazers were the means to take forward the recommendations that the government highlighted as important to address, in *The Future of Apprenticeships in England: Implementation Plan* (2013). This final section of the report maps the findings from the evaluation against these ambitions.

- **Redefining Apprenticeships in order that they be targeted at those who are new to a job or role that requires sustained or substantial training.** Demonstrably, the new Standards are job specific and set at a level that requires substantial training. In this respect, the Trailblazers have achieved their goal. However, there are issues that arise from Standards being job-specific rather than pathway based. There are predictions for a very large number of Standards being required, upwards of 1,500, which means quality assurance as well as avoiding duplication is crucial. This new

approach also raises the question of whether an Apprenticeship is needed at each level in a career pathway to support progression (and if so, will former Apprenticeship achievement be accredited to reduce the assessment and accreditation required for progression to the next level), or whether other forms of continuing professional development (i.e., other than a full Apprenticeship) are more appropriate to help individuals advance in their chosen professions. Some consideration should be given to this point, since in the view of Richard (2012), an Apprenticeship for every step on the career path was unnecessary.

- **Focusing on the outcome of Apprenticeship – what the apprentice can do – rather than the process of developing that competency.** The guidance from the Department has meant that end-point, synoptic assessment is the key method for assuring competency within the new Standards. However, this has not been wholly accepted by all involved and the balance between end-point versus ‘on programme’ assessments has been the cause of tension. There are many employers who believe that interim assessments across the course of training have value and should be retained to provide accreditation to individuals who, for whatever reason, leave training before completion, as well as providing more timely feedback to apprentices on their strong and weak points and to employers on the individual apprentice’s performance and potential. The weight of ‘on programme’ to end-point assessment has changed over the course of developments but the full feasibility of the model will only be apparent in the future, when the first tranche of apprentices enters the final stage of assessment.
- **Introducing trusted, independent assessment.** This is the issue that the Trailblazers have struggled to address and notions of acceptable independence appear to vary between policymakers and employers. The Department’s guidance is such that only an external assessor, with no connection to the employer or training provider, is suitably independent. However, employers have concerns about such unknown personnel and have yet to find the means to be assured of the validity of their judgements. In addition, other approaches have greater credibility with employers than such notions of independence such as their own judgement or that of another employer in the sector. The requirement that an open assessment market must operate has also raised concerns amongst employers, as they believe that this limits their ability to oversee the quality and consistency of assessment providers, which indicates that trust has yet to emerge. This is an issue on which employer ownership is believed to be challenged. As yet, exemplar models for independence have yet to be found and the picture is one of continuing experimentation; however examples are needed to guide future Trailblazers’ work.
- **Recognised industry Standards as the basis of every Apprenticeship with links to professional registration where this exists in sectors.** This has gained broad support and is seen to add to the credibility of the Apprenticeship route and to be a signifier of high quality training. The early involvement of professional bodies helped to ensure that developments meshed with the requirements for registration. Where there are several professional bodies relevant to the Standard it is important that all are involved to ensure the Standard can allow the apprentice potential entry to each.

- **Requiring all Level 3 and above Apprentices to achieve Level 2 English and maths before completion of training.** This was not an issue that many employers focused on in discussions although one network believed that the option to achieve these subjects at Level 2 in a Level 3 Apprenticeship was valuable and a small number of survey respondents believed these qualifications were unnecessary. The lack of commentary (generally) on this topic may be because employers believe it is uncontroversial, or because these skills are listed as desirable or typical in the entry criteria for Standards (particularly those at Level 3 which for the most part was the minimum Level explored by the evaluation). A further point may be that the Standards may be designed such that maths and English are highly contextualised meaning that they are inextricably linked to the skills required by the job, and therefore the training and assessment.
- **Ensuring funding creates the right incentives, with the purchasing power for training lying with employers.** It was too early in the implementation process to tell whether the funding model will achieve this aim. For the large part, there is support for the co-investment ratio but this, and the incentives, had not been tested to any significant degree during early delivery. There are concerns that while the buying power of larger employers (with larger Apprenticeship volumes) will be assured, the same cannot be said for small firms who may need to collaborate in order to put forward the volumes that would allow this goal to be achieved. There are also concerns that seeking to drive down costs, may drive down quality. A fear existed that the upfront co-investment model would serve to discourage small firms' involvement. While increasing the volume of Apprenticeships overall may not have been a goal for the Trailblazers, ensuring no drop to current volumes is. The funding model may put this at risk. Such an effect will only be observable once there are more employers, and a range of employers, using new funding model in practice.
- **Greater diversity and innovation in training - with employers and the government safeguarding quality.** The opportunity to develop the Standards with significant freedom and flexibility, particularly in the earliest phases, has ensured a great diversity within the training proposed. However, the degree of innovation that may eventually be seen may be rather more limited, since many of Trailblazers have followed an evolutionary rather than revolutionary approach. There are fears that national guidance may serve to constrain innovation in future as becomes more clearly defined. In many cases the Standards are both broader and more specialist than the outgoing Apprenticeships frameworks which may act to limit the range of providers who are able to deliver them. A consistent message in the later rounds of the research was the uncertainty of future governance, which remains to be resolved. Employers believe that policy makers are lagging behind this agenda and while employers had begun to consider the solutions for their quality assurance, they have no concept of how this will link to the national systems that will be put in place.

There are then remaining issues raised by the Trailblazers and the reform agenda that require further attention from policymakers. Some of these will only resolve with time as the new model is rolled out and tested in practice. These concerns however should not undermine perceptions of the progress that has been made to date. The Standards enjoy excellent support amongst key employers and other stakeholders in their sectors; it is

imperative that policy-makers now act quickly to resolve the remaining issues and hence optimise the likelihood of future implementation of the Trailblazers.

Appendix 1: The online survey

This appendix provides the full descriptive analysis of the online survey conducted for the Trailblazer evaluation. As such it examines the 127 valid⁵⁰ responses that IES received for the survey. The survey was forwarded to the 16 Trailblazer networks within the scope of the evaluation, which were requested to send the link to their constituencies. In order to reach as many organisations with a potential interest in the new Standards as possible, the survey was also promoted on Twitter and through LinkedIn Apprenticeship groups.

The survey sought to gather feedback on the recently developed Standards, and the anticipated effects of related Apprenticeship reforms.

Survey analysis

Respondents' experiences with apprentices

All survey respondents were asked to indicate whether they had any experience of training apprentices in the past three years. Of the 119 that answered this, approximately three-quarters had trained apprentices, see Table 3. Of the organisations involved in training apprentices, 56 were large enterprises, 14 medium enterprises, and 10 were small-to-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Table 3: Whether organisations trained any apprentices within England over the last three years

	%
Yes	73
No	23
Don't know	4
Base	119

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

Respondents with recent experience of training apprentices were asked to indicate how many they had trained, and to what level (Table 4). This showed broadly similar numbers had offered training at Level 2 and 3, and fewer involved in Higher Apprenticeships. Some large Apprenticeship cohorts at Level 2 and 3 were noted by large employers.

⁵⁰ Fully completed survey returns were considered valid. For partially completed surveys, responses were considered valid if respondents submitted data for at least one question regarding apprentices and/or related policy reforms: this excluded a number of returns which only contained data concerning the respondent's organisational details.

Table 4: Number of apprentices trained, by Apprenticeship level

	Intermediate (Level 2) %	Advanced (Level 3) %	Higher (Level 4 and above) %	Other %
0	5	5	21	54
01-09	20	17	29	8
10-49	13	21	32	0
50-99	11	12	0	0
100+	48	41	3	8
Don't know	3	5	15	31
Base	64	66	34	13

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

In terms of how Apprenticeship training was organised, a quarter of the employers indicated that they used in-house schemes and trainers, while half used training providers. Apprenticeship Training Agencies (ATAs) and Group Training Agencies (GTAs) were less often used, (Table 5).

Table 5: How training was organised

	%
My organisation employs apprentices and uses an education or training provider to train and assess them	49
My organisation employs and trains apprentices through our in-house scheme, using in-house trainers	27
My organisation employs apprentices and trains them through a Group Training Association (GTA)	26
My organisation trains apprentices in the workplace; the apprentices are employed by an Apprenticeship Training Agency	10
Other	11
Base	79

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

The other practices noted by just over 10 per cent of the sample consisted of hybrid methods with some respondents using a combination of training providers/assessors and in-house resources. One company indicated that it used other firms within its business group to train apprentices. Perhaps unsurprisingly, large enterprises were more likely to use in-house trainers, and SMEs were more likely to use ATAs and GTAs (see Table 6).

Table 6: How training was organised by company size

	Large enterprise (250+ employees) %	Medium enterprise (50-249 employees) %	Small enterprise (10-49 employees) %
My organisation employs and trains apprentices through our in-house scheme, using in-house trainers	35	8	13
My organisation employs apprentices and trains them through a Group Training Association (GTA)	2	0	13
My organisation employs apprentices and uses an education or training provider to train and assess them	48	46	50
My organisation trains apprentices in the workplace; the apprentices are employed by an Apprenticeship Training Agency	4	38	13
Other	11	8	13
Base	54	13	8

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

Respondents were asked how satisfied they were with current Apprenticeship training and assessment processes. Three-quarters said they were satisfied – 40 per cent were satisfied and over a third were very satisfied - while just seven per cent were dissatisfied (to a lesser or greater degree; see Table 7). Close to a fifth however said they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Table 7: Satisfaction with the training and assessment of apprentice(s) over the past three years

	%
Very satisfied	36
Satisfied	41
Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied	17
Dissatisfied	5
Very dissatisfied	2
Base	64

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

Where respondents expressed dissatisfaction, a lack of quality in the training delivered and poor success rates were the most commonly cited problems. In contrast, factors driving satisfaction included the perceived good quality of the training delivered, and the resultant skills, competence and behaviour of successful apprentices (see Table 8). Notably, on average, respondents selected five success factors (out of the seven offered) which suggested that satisfaction was driven by a relatively wide spectrum of Apprenticeship processes and outputs.

Table 8: Satisfaction with the training and assessment of apprentice(s) over the past three years

	%
Quality of training delivered	18
Skills, competence and behaviour of successful apprentices	18
Support and communications from the training provider/training manager	16
Success rate of apprentices	16
Flexibility in terms of training and assessments	16
Ability to influence the structure, content, delivery and duration of training	15
Other	1
Base	228

Multiple responses

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

Respondents' experiences with the Trailblazer Standards

All survey respondents were asked to indicate which Trailblazer Standard(s) being explored as part of the evaluation they were aware of (Table 9). Most respondents were aware of several Standards, and many Standards were known about by more than ten respondents. Responses to the 'other' category indicated that respondents knew about Standards in development that were not part of the evaluation research.

Table 9: Awareness of the new Apprenticeship Trailblazers

	%
Aerospace Manufacturing Fitter	32
Installation Electrician	27
Maintenance Electrician	26
Senior Chef: Culinary Arts	26
Senior Chef: Production Cooking	25
Golf Green Keeper	22
Software developer	22
Financial Services Administrator	20
Butchery	19
Food and Drink Mechanical Maintenance Engineer	19
Network engineer	19
Power Network Craftsperson	19
Food and Drink Multi-skilled Maintenance Engineer	16
Mechatronics Maintenance Technician	15
Relationship Manager (Banking)	15
Professional Accountancy Technician	14
Laboratory Technician	13
Adult Social Care Worker Level 2	12
Professional Accountant	12
Science Manufacturing Technician	12
Adult Social Care Worker Level 3	11
Conveyancing Technician	10
Licensed Conveyancer	9
Craftsperson	8
Other	17
Base	100

Multiple response

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

Respondents were invited to select up to two Trailblazer Standards most applicable to their organisation, and were then invited to provide fuller details on their experiences and perceptions of the development of these Standard(s).

Sixty-seven respondents indicated that one Standard was relevant to their organisation while 24 respondents indicated that two Standards were relevant. However, as Table 10 shows, responses were relatively concentrated on Senior Chef, Installation Electrician, Software Developer, Social Care Worker, and Golf Green Keeping Standards.

Table 10: Standard(s) most applicable to respondents' organisations

	%
Senior Chef: Production Cooking	9
Golf Green Keeper	6
Installation Electrician	6
Senior Chef: Culinary Arts	6
Software developer	6
Power Network Craftsperson	5
Adult Social Care Worker Level 2	4
Financial Services Administrator	4
Butchery	3
Conveyancing Technician	3
Licensed Conveyancer	3
Network engineer	3
Relationship Manager (Banking)	3
Science Manufacturing Technician	3
Maintenance Electrician	2
Craftsperson	1
Food and Drink Multi-skilled Maintenance Engineer	1
Housing Management	1
Laboratory Technician	1
Mechatronics Maintenance Technician	1
Retailer	1
Adult Social Care Worker Level 3	1
Aerospace Manufacturing Fitter	1
Hospitality Manager and Supervisor	1
Maritime	1
Maritime Apprenticeships	1
Professional Accountancy Technician	1
Professional Accountant	1
Property Maintenance Operative	1
Other	4
None of the above	18
Base	141 ⁵¹

Multiple responses

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

⁵¹ Here, respondents that selected two options were counted twice in analyses.

Respondents were first asked whether they had proactively contacted BIS to express an interest in joining the relevant Trailblazer Network. Of those responding to this question, 55 per cent (N=53) had proactively contacted BIS, while c. 43 per cent (N=42) had not.

They were then asked whether the Standard in question could replace the existing apprentice training in their organisation. Three-quarters said it would replace the existing framework, with less than 10 per cent said it could not, although 16 per cent were unsure (Table 11).

Table 11: Whether the Standard [in question] replace existing Apprenticeship training in organisation

	%
Yes	76
No	8
Don't know	16
Base	89

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

Involvement in developing the Standards

Most respondents had been actively engaged in the development of the Trailblazer Standards most relevant to their organisations (Table 12). A large majority of respondents had engaged in the consultations as well as sat on strategic and operational groups for the Trailblazer networks. The proportion of respondents involved in each development channel ranged from 64 to 79 per cent.

Table 12: Percentage of respondents which have participated – and would like to participate – in the development of the Trailblazer Standard(s) most applicable to their employing organisation

	Participated in	would like to participate		
	Yes %	Yes %	Base (1)	Base (2)
Trailblazer-led Consultation - Online	66	84	85	77
Trailblazer-led Consultation - Face-to-face and/or workshop	72	89	86	82
Trailblazer-led Consultation - Other	64	88	70	73
Active involvement in Strategic Group that developed the Apprenticeship Standard	72	88	88	82
Active involvement in Operational Group that developed the Apprenticeship Standard	78	91	89	85
Active involvement in Operational Group that developed the Apprenticeship Standard assessment outline	73	90	81	81
Active involvement in other Operational Group	72	91	79	79
Other	33	58	21	19

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

However, there was a consistent gap (around 15-20 per cent) in each the participation channels between the proportion of respondents who had some kind of involvement, and the proportion that would like to be involved in the future. For example, 78 per cent said they had been involved in the operational group that developed the Standard and 91 per cent were willing to take part in this group in the future. This suggests that Trailblazers' networks may have missed opportunity to capitalise on the full support available to them.

While the reasons for non-participation were not explored, the survey captured satisfaction with the extent of involvement. While two-thirds of the respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied, 15 per cent of respondents reported being dissatisfied with the level of involvement they had with the Trailblazer Networks and 18 per cent were neutral on this point (Table 13)

Table 13: Satisfaction with the level of involvement with the Trailblazer programme

	%
Very satisfied	27
Satisfied	40
Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied	18
Dissatisfied	11
Very dissatisfied	5
Base	83

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

In terms of what their participation had meant, more than three-quarters of the respondents indicated that they had had at least some influence over the development of the Standard(s) in question and most (four in ten) noted they had a great deal of influence. Around a fifth noted they had very little influence (see Table 14).

Table 14: Amount of influence over the Standard for Apprenticeship

	%
A great deal of influence	40
Some influence	37
Very little influence	19
Don't know	4
Base	91

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

Involvement and satisfaction were, unsurprisingly, closely linked such that the group who claimed to have had little influence expressed dissatisfaction about their level of involvement (see Table 15).

Table 15: Amount of influence over the Standard for Apprenticeship, by satisfaction with the level of involvement with the Trailblazer programme

	Amount of influence over the Standard for Apprenticeship				Base
	A great deal of influence %	Some influence %	Very little influence %	Don't know %	
Satisfied %	59	37	0	4	54
Dissatisfied %	0	8	92	0	12

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

The utility of the new Standards

Sixty-four respondents indicated that they had seen a finalised Trailblazer Standard, and 93 per cent of these said the Standard described the job within their organisation (Table 16).

Table 16: Whether the Standard [in question] described the job

	%
Yes	93
No	6
Don't know	2
Base	63

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

Nine in 10 of respondents noted that they would consider training an apprentice to the Standard in question and 85 per cent said they would employ an apprentice trained in another organisation to the Standard in question (Table 17).

Table 17: Willingness to train to the Standard and to employ someone trained by another organisation to the Standard

	Train %	Employ %
Yes	90	85
No	2	2
Don't know	8	13
Base	63	64

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

Respondents were invited to provide further comments on the Standards produced through the Trailblazer Networks. Several described how the new Standards' mixed focus on attitudes and behaviours gave employers confidence and allowed them to 'grow [their] own' apprentices. Others stated that the job description aligned well with anticipated career paths of trainees and employees, and that the Standards matched company job descriptions even in across sectors. A few positive comments surrounded the wider effect of the reforms: with respondents stating that their Trailblazer development activities had raised the profile of difficult-to-fill positions, increasing their attractiveness among young people.

Some of their comments tended towards the negative however, with some claiming that; the new Standards offered no advantages over traditional Apprenticeships, that the clarity of some roles was unclear, and some Standards continued to require GCSE completions that were irrelevant to the role/sector. Others stated that greater attention was needed on the details of the Standards, particularly assessment and grading criteria.

Views on the key principles of Apprenticeship reforms

Respondents were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with some of the key elements introduced by the reform programme (Table 18). A mean score was produced for each element by assigning a score of five to strongly agree and a score of one to strongly disagree. This showed that the introduction of the two-page summary document for the Standards was the most strongly supported element of the reform. In addition, the low Standard deviation on this indicated there was a strong consensus amongst respondents on this point. Similarly, synoptic assessment and alignment with

professional registration were broadly welcomed. The grading of performance and employer routed funding were the least well supported elements of the reforms however, the higher Standard deviations on these indicated that there was less consensus on these points.

Table 18: Mean average levels of support for proposed Apprenticeship reforms.

	Mean	Standard Deviation
A 2-page document (the Standard) describing the Apprenticeship	4.1	1.1
End-point assessment	3.6	1.3
Synoptic assessment	3.9	1.1
Grading apprentices' performance	3.1	1.4
Alignment of Apprenticeship completion with readiness for professional registration	3.8	1.1
Employer-routed funding for Apprenticeship training	3.3	1.5

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

Respondents were invited to provide further comments on the proposed reforms respondents who took this opportunity raised some criticisms. For example, some said that employers did not have sufficient control over the reform programme, and that the intentions of the Richard Review (2012) had been lost in translation by policymakers. Some believed that large corporations were dominating the agenda and SMEs' voices were not being heard. Several respondents said that Trailblazer network meetings needed to be held in a more central location, in order to allow stakeholders from across England to participate. A small number indicated that the mandatory elements to the Apprenticeship Standards –English, Maths and ICT skills – were not seen as necessary by employers.

Respondents' views on Apprenticeship funding reforms

In total, 38 respondents elected to provide views on the proposed reforms to apprentice funding. Respondents were given the following brief summary of the proposed co-investment funding model's intent.

Explanation of co-investment proposals

The reforms to Apprenticeship funding are intended to give employers a greater stake in the training of their apprentices by freeing up the price of training and enabling them to negotiate with providers, requiring employers to contribute to the cost of external training and ultimately routing the funding via employers. All except the latter element will be trailed on starts on the new Standard in the 2014/2015 academic year. The government plans to give employers more responsibility for negotiating the costs of training while also expecting them to co-invest in the costs of training.

For every £2 of core government funding, employers will be expected to invest £1.

There was not a clear view on whether employers would find this model easy to understand as equal numbers said they would and would not, (see Table 19). As to

whether respondents thought that employers would continue to recruit apprentices when co-investment was required, similar numbers (broadly a third each) of respondents were positive, negative, and unsure (Table 19). Finally on whether the proposed level of employer co-investment would encourage employers to negotiate over training costs, a majority of respondents (more than half) were unsure (Table 19).

Table 19: Employers' perception of proposed funding model

	Yes %	No %	Don't know %	Base
The funding model would be easily understood by employers	42	42	16	38
Employers will continue to recruit apprentices co-investment is required	29	37	34	38
Employer co-investment will be sufficient to ensure employers negotiate the best value training	30	16	54	37

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

The respondents were then given further details of the funding model, including the caps for the first year of the delivery of the earliest Trailblazer Standards as well as the incentives for SMEs, recruiting young people aged 16-18 years and supporting and enabling apprentices to complete their training.

Explanation of incentive payments

The government intends to offer some incentives as part of its funding model. The value of these incentives will be related to the overall cost of the Apprenticeship training and the CGC Cap to which the relevant Standard is allocated. A summary of the incentives is provided below:

Core Government contribution (CGC) Cap £2 for every £1 from employer		Cap 1	Cap 2	Cap 3	Cap 4	Cap 5
		£2,000	£3,000	£6,000	£8,000	£18,000
Additional incentives	Recruiting a 16-18 year old	£600	£900	£1,800	£2,400	£5,400
	For a small business (<50)	£500	£500	£900	£1,200	£2,700
	For successful completion	£500	£500	£900	£1,200	£2,700
Maximum Base government contribution		£3,600	£4,900	£9,600	£12,800	£28,000

Nearly half of the respondents thought that this incentive model would be sufficient to encourage businesses to take 16-18 years olds into Apprenticeships, with similar numbers believing that the model would encourage employers to ensure their apprentices completed the requirements of the Standard. However, a far smaller proportion thought that the incentive would be adequate to encourage SMEs to engage with Apprenticeships (Table 20).

Table 20: Views of the incentives in the funding model

	Yes %	No %	Don't know %	Base
Encourage businesses to offer apprentices to 16-18 year-olds	46	24	30	37
Encourage small employers to engage with the Apprenticeship programme	16	38	46	37
Encourage employers to ensure that their apprentices are sufficiently well trained to meet the requirements of the Standard	46	32	22	32

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

Respondents were invited to provide further comments on the funding reforms. Where they did, their comments tended to be negative and this largely related to the issue of co-investment. Their commentary indicated that they felt this would be off-putting to businesses and especially SMEs due to cash flow constraints and administrative barriers.

Some proposed solutions including leaving funding unchanged, allowing companies to make staged rather than upfront contributions. Some responses indicated that Skills Funding Agency's audit process was unclear, as were 'admissible costs'. One respondent stated that incentives should be offered to companies 'over-training' or 'training for the supply chain'.

Respondents' details

This section provides fuller details of respondents' employing organisations.

Respondents were asked to indicate which economic sector (top level SIC code) they principally operate within. Organisations principally operating in the Education and Accommodation and Food sectors were best represented, with (secondary) industrial, ICT, and financial organisations also well represented. Full details of responding organisations' principle areas of activity can be seen in Table 21.

Table 21: The sectors that respondents' organisations principally operated within

	%
Education	19
Accommodation and food service activities	16
Manufacturing	9
Electricity, steam, gas and air conditioning supply	8
Financial and insurance activities	8
Information and communication	8
Arts, entertainment and recreation	4
Administrative and support service activities	3
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	3
Human health and social work activities	3
Transportation and stowage	3
Professional, scientific and technical activities	2
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	2
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	2
Construction	1
Real estate activities	1
Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation action	1
Other service activities	1.0
Other ⁵²	7.7
Base	

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

⁵² Including, but not limited to: the Armed Forces, legal organisations, social housing projects, and residential activity centres.

Over 70 per cent of survey returns came from commercial enterprises, with the majority of these coming from large firms with over 250 members of staff (see Table 22).

Table 22: Respondents organisations by size and type

	%
Large enterprise (250+ employees)	45
Medium enterprise (50-249 employees)	13
Small enterprise (10-49 employees)	10
Sector skills council	9
Professional body	6
Self-employed	5
Micro enterprise (1-9 employees)	4
Trade body	2
Union, social partner, etc.	1
Other ⁵³	6
Base	100.

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

Table 23 demonstrates that individuals with direct responsibilities for training and/or apprentices, or organisational strategy, were the most likely to complete the survey.

Table 23: Respondents' job roles

	%
Apprenticeship manager	30
Strategic manager	23
Training manager	22
Operational manager	16
HR manager	14
Owner-manager	5
Skilled worker	3
Supervisor	2
Other ⁵⁴	13
Base	127

Source: Trailblazer survey 2014

⁵³ Including, but not limited to, educational establishments and Apprenticeship training providers, a regulator, and an awarding organisation.

⁵⁴ Including, but not limited to, lecturers and educational professionals, policy and research staff, a general manager, an educational manager, a top-level director, a HR director, a qualifications developer, a Trailblazer facilitator, a qualifications assessor, and administrative support staff.

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