Apprenticeship reforms: Five lessons from the Trailblazers

Introduction

In October 2013, in response to the [Richard Review of Apprenticeships (2012)](#), the government set out its plans to reform Apprenticeships in England by replacing the existing Apprenticeship frameworks with employer-defined standards, putting employers in control and giving them a high degree of freedom to develop these standards to best meet the needs of their occupations and sectors. To support this reform, they established Trailblazers – groups led by employers and professional bodies – to develop the first of these new Apprenticeship standards.

Given here are five key lessons based on the experiences of the Trailblazers. Additionally, the annex offers four short case studies that illustrate how Trailblazer employers undertook their initial organisation and development work to draft Apprenticeship standards in the following sectors:

- Digital Industries
- Accountancy
- Energy and Utilities
- Science

Lesson 1

Before you start, invest time in planning, briefing and getting the right structure in place.

As this is a new initiative, initial development work can be somewhat ad hoc and, while this can stimulate innovation, employers are in danger of working with little reference. Additionally, as new employers join a working group, there will be much repetitive activity to bring them up to speed on the task and the scope of the project.

Start with the end in mind!

- Have a full-time project manager to coordinate meetings and communications to ensure that the project stays on track.
- A structure with a Chair and Deputy Chair will ensure that there is always strong leadership at the meetings.
- Ensure representation of the sector through the membership of both the steering groups and any sub-groups involved in detailed development.
- Smaller working sub-groups can work more effectively, feeding findings into the steering group.
- Clearly define the terms of reference and the role of each group to ensure everyone knows what their aims are.
- It is essential that small employers are represented in both the lead and working groups to provide their particular perspective on Apprenticeships.
- Explore what each of the employers/bodies want to achieve by being involved in the steering group and to avoid hidden agendas.

- Large, well-resourced employers can dominate and overwhelm the voice of small businesses. Find ways to ensure that the micro and small employer voice is heard and has weight in decision making.
- Work with professional bodies to develop each standard. They are essential to support linkages to professional recognition. They will also facilitate access to large numbers of employers of all sizes to support consultation.
- Be prepared to adjust membership of the employer lead and working groups to reflect the need for expertise, especially during the second phase of development work (developing detailed plans for assessment, training and governance of the standard).

Lesson 2

Do not underestimate the time commitment required.

There is a significant time commitment for employers involved in the development of a high quality standard that is fit for purpose.

- Initial development of the standard is likely to require weekly or fortnightly meetings, over a 4-6 month period. In between the steering group meetings, there will be sub–group meetings, each usually 3 hours in duration.
- Don't forget the impact of travel time and expenses when attending meetings. Many meetings have been held in London as a central location.
- There is more to this commitment than simply turning up at the meetings, voicing opinions and then walking away – a lot of work is necessary to define the detail of the competencies, and to draft and re-draft the text, sending it back and forth between the steering group and sub-groups for further debate and development.
- The second phase of development work – that of the implementation details (assessment, training and governance requirements) – for each standard will require similar levels of commitment from employers and their development partners.

Lesson 3

It can be challenging to keep employers actively engaged in the development work.

This is closely linked to the previous lesson.

- It can be difficult to maintain links with employers based outside of London;
- The small size of some employers makes it almost impossible for them to engage in the same kind of way as the large corporates.

While no complete solutions to the above have been found, possible ways forward include:

- Offering remote communication through dial-in facilities to facilitate debate and challenge and to put forward ideas. However, it has been found that most employers prefer face-to-face meetings.
- Minimising disruption to the working day by arranging meeting times over lunch periods or after work hours (4.30 - 7pm).
- Finding a system to reimburse small employers for travel expenses.

Lesson 4

Define each occupation at the start of the development work.

It is important to understand the 'big picture' of current and future jobs in your industry or sector and how the occupations requiring Apprenticeship standards fit into this. See the case study from the Digital Industries sector (overleaf) for an example.

- Reviewing job descriptions, person specifications and advertisements for jobs in the sector can be very useful in addition to discussion with employers.

- Take into account the differences in job titles and how the breadth of a role can differ between employers.

- Review the standards that have already been approved, especially those that are similar in occupation to the standards being planned, to avoid duplication and for ideas on formats and expression.

Lesson 5

Consult as widely as you can.

It is critical that the developed standard meets the needs of the sector as a whole, particularly those of smaller businesses who may not have been able to fully engage with the resource-intensive development activity.

- Consultation is likely to be required on more than one occasion. Build a consultation database to facilitate the necessary range of employer input.

- Use consultations as an opportunity to raises awareness of the Apprenticeship reforms across the sector.

- Utilise communication channels offered by sector skills councils, professional bodies and employer membership bodies to facilitate consultation and to maximise input.

- Consider creating a web-based online forum where employers might be invited to add views and comments and even vote via online polls on key issues.

- Analysing consultation results takes time; delving into the detail, identifying similarities, accepting that there are differences because this is about a minimum standard, and recognising that there are things that will be different in terms of individual employers.

FISSS resources

FISSS are offering resources to support employers with the development of their new Apprenticeship standards. Current resources include a Facilitator toolkit and a Consultation toolkit. New resources are regularly developed. Visit: FISSS resources to support development of Apprenticeship standards

Useful links

- Future of apprenticeships in England: guidance for trailblazers
- Apprenticeship Reforms - Apprenticeship standards

Annex: Case studies

The Digital Industries sector

This case study illustrates how Trailblazer employers in the Digital Industries sector realised that, before they could develop sustainable Apprenticeship standards, they needed a 'big picture' covering the totality of their Apprenticeship occupational areas.

Employer leadership

To form the Trailblazer group, the membership of an existing Industrial Partnership was developed and extended, taking into account geography and the different sizes of businesses, to ensure it was representative of the sector while keeping the number of members low enough to ensure the group remained an effective decision-making forum. The sector's professional body was invited to join the group to ensure that the new standards would be mapped to entry level professional membership. The sector skills council, e-skills UK acted as secretariat.

The development activity was divided across sub-groups, each focused on a particular occupational area. The responsibilities of the sub-groups were to:

- Ensure clear definition of the occupational area.
- Develop the draft standard in preparation for consultation.
- Make any changes as a result of this wider sector engagement.

Each sub group consisted of different employers with a particular interest in that occupational area. In addition to the two sub-groups developing the (trailblazer round 1) standards for Software Developer and Network Engineer, sub-groups were also put in place for the next five standards – Digital Marketers, Internet TV Technicians, Cyber Security, IT Technician and Software Tester.

There were 22-24 employers on the steering group. Each sub-group had at least one member of the steering group in it plus a further 10 (typically) employers. The steering group met every two weeks with sub-groups meeting between these. The development work proved enormously time-resource intensive for employers.

Developing the standards

One of the first issues the steering group had to tackle was defining the difference between an occupation and a job role.

Concept of occupation

At the time of writing, the Trailblazer employers did not have a definition of an occupation or a job role. Emerging understanding is focused on three areas to help determine whether something is an occupation, a job role or a specific job:

1. Focus on broader roles not job titles –what is the heart of the role and are there commonalities across roles? There may be a variety of job titles used for the same role but ignore these and try to group the roles based on level of commonality to identify an occupation.
2. Focus on transferability – what are the core elements that **any** employer would expect as a minimum for somebody working broadly in that area?
3. Focus on careers and progression – what are people trying to become in that role, as opposed to what do they do in that specific job?

Digital Industries is a relatively new sector and very fast moving with no tradition or culture of defined occupations or roles. There is no consistent language for job titles – so somebody called a 'Software Developer' could actually be doing a range of things. Nor is there consistency on the level of a particular role – a Software Developer could be employed at level 3, level 4 or higher. Another factor is that IT professionals and IT apprentices are employed in every size of company (large companies, and very small businesses), and in every sector. The extent to which the role of an IT professional is general or specialist will also depend on whether they are employed in an IT company or in a non-IT company, such as retail or a bank etc.

Because roles in this sector change rapidly, employers want the new Apprenticeship standards to be able to flex and respond quickly as new occupations and roles appear with changing technology.

The steering group put a massive emphasis on consultation (see below) for the first draft standards across different size, geographies and types of employer. While this proved helpful, they had difficulty analysing the feedback because each respondent was commenting on their own, slightly different, interpretation/understanding of 'Software Developer' and 'Network Engineer'.

The consultation raised questions such as 'When is a role a generalist one and when is it specialist?' and 'At what level should that job title be used?' etc. These, in turn, led to questions about what should make up the core of the standard, in particular what should an apprentice be expected to cover within the standard and what should they be expected to have covered previously. These then led to questions around where each standard fit in terms of levels and progression.

Until employers could answer these, they couldn't be clear about:

- transferability – i.e. whether any competencies developed for a role would be transferable to another employer;
- positioning of a role as specialist or generalist;
- the foundation competencies that every apprentice in the sector needs and that help define what is core for a standard and where any options fit;
- aligning with the professional body in terms of their language and their requirements for certification.

The steering group was also keen to balance the many requests for niche, specialist, and high-level roles with the need to avoid a plethora of standards, few of which would be viable or sustainable. For example, there were a lot of requests early on for a separate standard for Web Developer and another one for Application Developer but the commonalties of these roles led the group to subsume these within the single standard for Software Developer.

The steering group has become much more challenging about whether a role is something that needs a separate occupational standard or whether it is a role within a broader occupational area. They intend to build a sustainable suite of Apprenticeship occupations where each has sufficient demand to justify its existence.
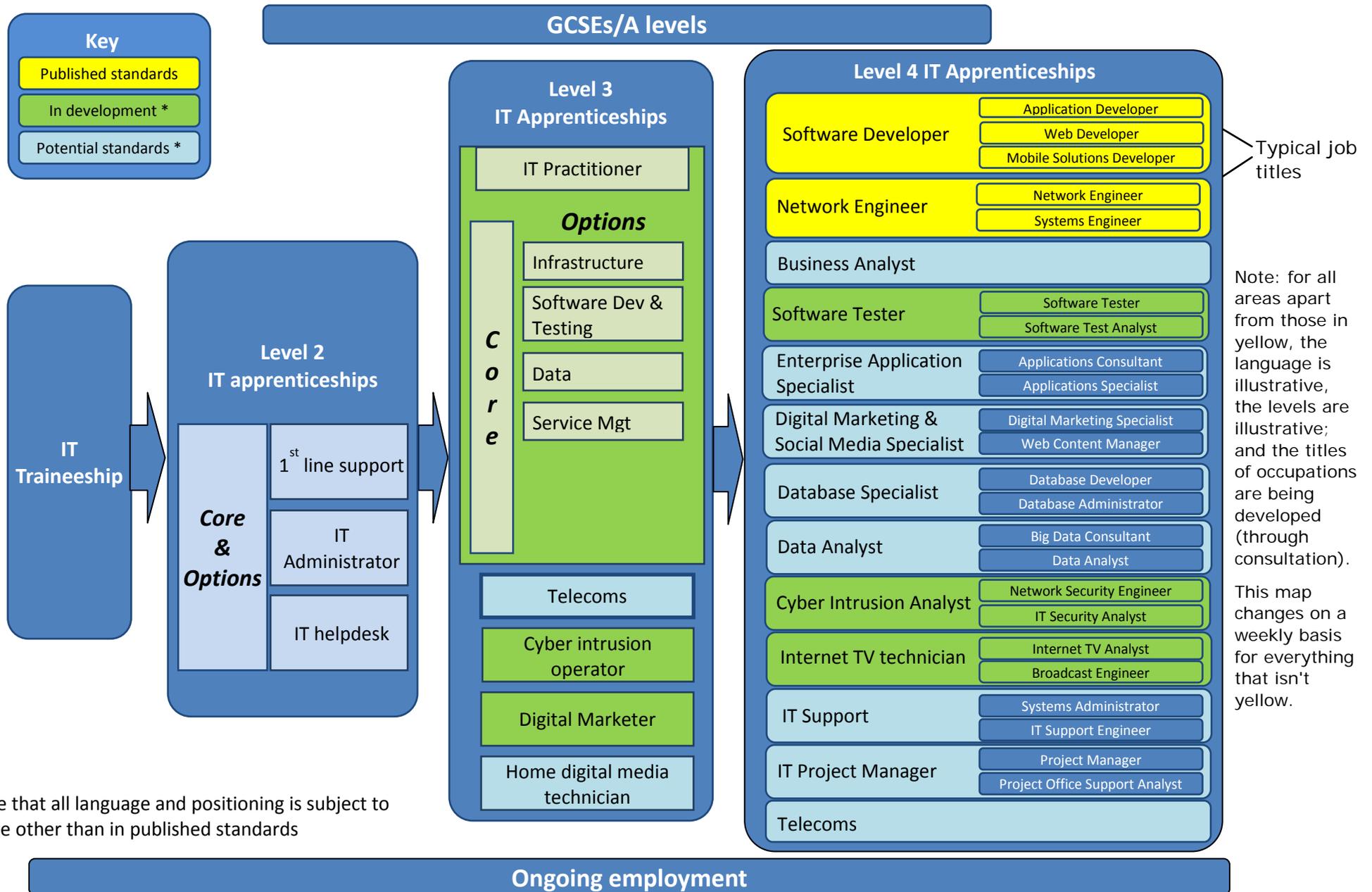
The 'big picture'

Employers decided that they needed something that would illustrate the totality of Apprenticeship occupational standards and that they could continually evolve; something to provide a map of where employers should be at the end of the whole process rather than looking at one or two standards in isolation.

The resulting 'big picture' (see overleaf), although a simple representation, proved to be a very helpful tool for clarifying entry points, progression routes, step-on and off points into real jobs and how specialist and generalist roles fit together. It is a work in progress and is constantly evolving

Without the 'big picture', the steering group would find it very difficult to position each standard appropriately. This tool has helped employers challenge their language, avoid the use of 'junior' this or 'senior' that and to capture what is at the heart of the particular occupation. It has helped align terminology and levels with BCS and it has become the central plank in all Trailblazer communications and consultations and now, whether talking to employers, providers or awarding organisations, this illustrative picture is the start point of any discussion helping people understand how what is being developed fits in with their vision of the Apprenticeship landscape. Ultimately, it will also be a useful tool for young people and employers when making decisions about what type of role/occupation they wanted to develop.

It was only when employers started to illustrate the map around the two round 1 standards (shown in yellow on the diagram overleaf) that they could move into meaningful consultation about what the content of those standards ought to be and position them as specialist roles at level 4.

The big picture: A suite of IT Apprentice occupations (work in progress: May 2014)

GCSEs/A levels

Key
- Published standards
- In development *
- Potential standards *

IT Traineeship

Level 2 IT apprenticeships

Core & Options
- 1st line support
- IT Administrator
- IT helpdesk

Level 3 IT Apprenticeships

IT Practitioner

Core

Options
- Infrastructure
- Software Dev & Testing
- Data
- Service Mgt

- Telecoms
- Cyber intrusion operator
- Digital Marketer
- Home digital media technician

Level 4 IT Apprenticeships

Occupation	Job titles
Software Developer	Application Developer
	Web Developer
	Mobile Solutions Developer
Network Engineer	Network Engineer
	Systems Engineer
Business Analyst	
Software Tester	Software Tester
	Software Test Analyst
Enterprise Application Specialist	Applications Consultant
	Applications Specialist
Digital Marketing & Social Media Specialist	Digital Marketing Specialist
	Web Content Manager
Database Specialist	Database Developer
	Database Administrator
Data Analyst	Big Data Consultant
	Data Analyst
Cyber Intrusion Analyst	Network Security Engineer
	IT Security Analyst
Internet TV technician	Internet TV Analyst
	Broadcast Engineer
IT Support	Systems Administrator
	IT Support Engineer
IT Project Manager	Project Manager
	Project Office Support Analyst
Telecoms	

Typical job titles

Note: for all areas apart from those in yellow, the language is illustrative, the levels are illustrative; and the titles of occupations are being developed (through consultation).

This map changes on a weekly basis for everything that isn't yellow.

* Note that all language and positioning is subject to change other than in published standards

Ongoing employment

Core and options at different levels

As they defined the two roles, employers also started to map out what needed to precede them and realised that they would need to develop a core and options approach at level 3. The steering group achieved agreement on the core - the foundation competencies that most employers would expect someone going into a role at this level to have –and put it out to wider consultation.

There has also been recent agreement on the six (currently) options – but only at headline level; at the time of writing, the content has still to be defined. Level 3 apprentices will complete the core and one of the six options. Once options have been defined, there will be wider consultation.

Level 3 standards

The level 3 definitions are for more generalist roles and are very important because this is where smaller businesses looking for generalist IT practitioners will tend to recruit from (i.e. a small employer might employ someone as a Network Engineer or in software development but the role would cover a much broader range of activities and breadth of competency than that covered by the level 4 standard).

Specialist roles such as those at level 4 were deemed not to require core and options. Even for pan-sector roles such as Digital Marketer where employers worked with other sectors that have a similar role. It was initially thought that there would need to be a common, pan-sector core plus sector-focused options but the working group decided that that core alone was sufficient– it will be how these core competencies are applied that will meet sector requirements.

Consultation

The programme of consultation with employers for the two initial standards was tackled in two ways:

1) Capturing qualitative feedback through half-day consultation workshops for SMEs.

The workshops took place in London and Sunderland. The latter is recognised as a hub for SME IT businesses. The aim of the workshops was to gather feedback from employers who:

- already employ apprentices;
- have employed apprentices but not had a positive experience;
- have never taken on an apprentice.

The workshops identified a number of areas where SMEs encounter challenges that were not prevalent amongst the steering group. For example, difficulties in procuring good quality provision when you are not an expert in either procurement or Apprenticeships, and inconsistencies in the quality of provision.

2) Using an online survey to provide wider employers with the means to provide feedback.

The steering group allocated the responsibility of facilitating the online consultation to e-skills UK who, under their direction, devised an online survey and shared this across the sector via their existing email distribution lists and website. Steering group employers also circulated the survey within their networks.

The feedback from the survey required the steering group to further consider:

- *the breadth of the occupational role in the context of a smaller business;*
- *the flexibility of entry requirements to avoid restricting the number of potential apprentices into the sector.*

Many of the Trailblazer employers had developed the existing Apprenticeship frameworks and they initially believed that these met employer needs and would need little amendment to create the new standards. Engaging with large numbers of employers through this wider consultation, opened the eyes of the Trailblazer employers to the difficulties faced by smaller employers and those who only have a small cohort of apprentices as they try to get what they need from the current frameworks. They now realise the enormous potential and impact that a suite of Apprenticeship standards that deliver the true competence could have on the sector as a whole.

Consulting other stakeholders

The steering group identified from the outset the importance of discussing the proposed standard with training providers and awarding bodies so that the practicalities of delivery were considered prior to any standard being agreed and they asked e-skills UK to facilitate this process of consultation on their behalf.

Awarding bodies were consulted on a one-to-one basis whereas training providers were invited to attend a half-day workshop to share the draft standards and gather feedback.

The future

The steering group members have a broader ambition than developing the Apprenticeship standards and ensuring that whatever they develop has clear entry level routes and progression. The group sees itself going forward as the guardians of the standards in line with any review processes and requirements outlined by BIS.

The 'big picture' has helped inform sector discussions with BIS about how many standards there might be and the likely demand for each standard. The steering group are using it to prioritise development, to quantify demand, and to ensure that whatever is developed has some chance of being sustainable. It may also be useful to help identify overlaps and gaps with other sectors.

There is a demand for standards at level 5 and above but the focus will stay on lower levels for now. There is also interest in developing the 'big picture' to the left and to engage with, for example, educationalists in terms of expectations about what is required in schools if students want to progress to a career in IT.

There is an increasing appetite to take this development work forward; employers see this as a major transformational activity for the sector.

The Energy and Utilities sector

This case study illustrates how the Energy and Utilities sector employers undertook the initial Trailblazer development work to draft Apprenticeship standards for the role of Power Network Craftsperson.

Employer leadership

"Harnessing employer interest from across the sector at the start of the process was important. This gave us the opportunity to develop shadow Trailblazer activity so that employers representing the whole of the sector were working on the changes at the same time an, throwing in ideas to the development process."

Employers from right across the Energy and Utilities sector wanted to be involved in this Trailblazer activity with the development of Apprenticeships also being a key part of their Industrial Partnership. The only way to ensure each employer was able to fully take part was to create a staged process where the sector area, Power, would take on the role of the official Trailblazer while the two other sector areas, Water & Waste Management, and Gas, would also start work on new Apprenticeship standards but running approximately one month behind on development.

"Employer engagement in each of the sectors allowed us to triangulate and to bounce off ideas from each other to check that we hadn't missed anything. All three employer groups were briefed based on BIS and FISSS information and this gave us a joined-up approach and kept all of our employers on board."

An existing standing committee group, *The Engineering Standards and Qualifications Group,* made up of 20 employers from the Power sector took on the role of overview group for the development of the first Apprenticeship standard for the occupational role of Power Network Craftsperson.

A 'Community of Practice' was established around Trailblazer development for each of the sector areas. Strong membership within the sector skills council, EU Skills, meant that employers had the latter's support to facilitate and coordinate the work of the different groups, with employers constantly feeding into the process. Overall, the three sector groups worked separately, as there were no common areas in terms of content development – apart from the process itself, which was the same for the standards all three sectors.

Developing the standard

The Power Group had recently completed the development of a common competency framework across the level 2 and level 3 workforce. Power engineering requires a distinct skill set as apprentices are working with high voltage.

This was a new challenge for employers and they subsequently signed up to the development of a Competency Accord (see box on right). The content of the new standard fell naturally out of this work.

A **competency accord** is an inter-employer agreement across the industry designed to ensure that those who are qualified in a particular occupation can transfer from one employer to another and that they will be capable of functioning effectively and efficiently with only minimal additional training to address their new working context or any new equipment to be used.

Employers recognised two distinct stages of apprentice development:

- Stage 1 – for new starts, leading to a **productive apprentice** after an induction period.
- Stage 2 – leading from Productive Apprentice through to a **competent worker** and sign-off of the Apprenticeship programme.

High-level assessment approach

> *"Assessment needs to fit with employers' needs and it must be meaningful to them and their expectations."*

Employers wanted a single assessment journey, stripping out qualification-based assessments and replacing them with industry and workplace based assessments.

The two-stage apprentice development model outlined above allows for employers to build in independent assessment that includes the following processes:

- Employer authorisation: assessments and judgements are made by supervisory staff and line managers to determine which roles the apprentice can undertake either alone or under supervision. Essentially, these are assessment processes (that may be graded) that determine competence and operate under authentic, exacting and stringent assessment requirements.
- Trade tests: employers need to be confident that employees are capable of completing work that is technically sound, safe and within accepted tolerances. As part of that process many employers have developed and established trade tests and trade test centres. These facilities and the associated assessment instruments will be used to confirm the capabilities and competence of newly qualified apprentices. Trade tests and employer authorisation processes already in place for the Power Engineering sector will now be extended to apprentices.

Apprenticeship grading was welcomed by employers as something that would encourage apprentices to strive for excellence in their working practices. To implement grading, it was decided to define the attitudes and behaviours that underpinned the competencies as these provide the added value that makes an apprentice more productive and valuable to the business. Examples such as conservation bias, decision making, risk taking, and customer contact are the types of additional attributes that employers would be looking for in their apprentices and that could inform the grading process.

Employers intend to develop a system that can be used across the sector so that the same tests and processes are used for all apprentices. Large employers will facilitate apprentices employed by SMEs to access opportunities through their supply chain. This model is already in place for the National Grid supply chain. Here SME network planning has facilitated a system whereby an SME releases their apprentice to be trained and assessed by one of the larger employers.

> *"It shouldn't matter where an apprentice is trained; they all need to be assessed to an approved quality standard – with no differentiation due to the type/size of employer an apprentice has been working for."*

The future

At the time of writing, two Apprenticeship standards for the Water & Waste Management sector and the Gas sector are in the final stages of their development. The Gas group are working towards a common competency agreement and Water & Waste Management are building their competency framework from scratch in line with Industrial Partnership plans.

The Accountancy sector

This case study illustrates how Trailblazer employers in the Accountancy sector worked with professional body partners to develop sustainable Apprenticeship standards that are more responsive to the needs of employers and that are a credible route into the accountancy profession.

Employer leadership

In March 2014, representatives of fourteen employers of various sizes came together to form the employer steering group that would develop the first two Apprenticeship standards in accountancy:

- Professional accounting technician (Level 4)
- Professional accountant (Level 7).

From the start, the group worked with the five professional bodies for the sector to ensure that the original policy intent of professional body recognition and registration was achieved. The professional bodies also helped to understand the market shape.

> *"To get progression through to professional body recognition right for our apprentices, it was important to include the professional body organisations in our working group from the start of the development of our new standards so that they could share their expertise when identifying the competencies that underpinned the occupations. We also recognised that professional bodies, through their employer membership, would be able to provide us with access to employers of all sizes up and down the country."*

Partnership working of this kind was familiar to the sector as employers and professional bodies had worked together in 2012/13 on the development of Higher Apprenticeships in Professional Services at levels 4 and 7.

Employers and strategic partners needed to put aside any issues around competition, and focus on collaboration to ensure that sector and employer needs would be met going forward. A governance structure was put in place which consisted of two of the largest employers in the sector taking a lead role in driving forward the work on the standards by chairing, hosting, project managing and providing the secretariat for the steering group. A BIS relationship manager provided policy advice and guidance.

A small employer, representing the voice of other small employers in the sector, provided a reality check for the proposals as they were developed and put forward.

> *"Every business needs to have accountancy support and, as a small employer employing six apprentices, I saw my role as the representative voice for all small employers, making sense of what any changes might mean for us in the 'real' world. In truth, many employers might say that developing Apprenticeship standards is somebody else's job – I think that's a shame. It's important that we know what a quality Apprenticeship looks like so that we can recruit the right local apprentices to our company".*

From March to July 2014, the steering group met every fortnight to work on the standards for the two occupations. Terms of reference for the group and project plans with milestones ensured that the group understood the task in hand and that the project stayed on track.

Two sub-groups, one for each of the standards, were set up to develop the content of each standard and report to the steering group. Each sub-group had a lead facilitator and consisted of five employer organisations and a professional body working together to develop the detail around the competencies for each occupation. Sub-group meetings took place every two weeks.

Development of the standards

Very early thinking proposed the development of a single standard for the sector. This would include stopping-off points and potentially a license to practice at two levels. However, it became clear that there were distinct technical differences between the roles and that two standards for two distinct occupations would be needed.

The focus for developing the standards was to look in detail at what competence looked like right across the sector without reference to qualifications. The importance of widening access and social mobility was a strong theme that drove some of the more critical thinking about entry to the profession and the role of qualifications. This was a new approach for the sector.

The thinking around the level 4 standard (for the role of professional accounting technician) began quickly as there were already established Apprenticeship frameworks in place covering levels 2, 3 and 4. However, for the new standard, it was necessary to rethink the content of the existing frameworks as it was criticised for being too generalist in content and insufficiently flexible. There was also a desire for a greater focus on workplace communication skills linked to important aspects of behaviour.

The level 7 standard (for the role of professional accountant) was built on the Professional Services Higher Apprenticeship frameworks and concentrates on what it means to be a professional accountant at that level – in particular, the competencies associated with the function of this role in terms of modern day accounting practice. This role opens up a new route for entrants into the profession and was therefore a much bigger challenge. The knowledge and the skills required had to reflect modern working such as the importance of relationship management skills. There was also debate about what the occupation should be called, as the remit for this profession is very broad. It was challenging to explain the role in terms of the areas the apprentice would be working in – whether it was an advisory, management or audit role. After working this through, employers were staggered by the breadth of the profession.

For both of the standards, employers took a very detailed look at the final wording of the competencies. For example, at level 4, in the competence statement *Provide commercial information that positively contributes to influencing business decisions,* the word 'commercial' was taken out to allow for the non-commercial aspect of the work of the public sector. There were also discussions around whether at this level, apprentices would 'verify' or 'review' financial information.

Employers were mindful of a commitment to widen access to the accountancy profession and the need to build stepping-stones both from and to other standards. In particular, there was much debate around the audience and entry level of apprentices for the level 7 (post-graduate level) role. Should this be progression from the level 4? Would it be school leavers or graduates going into the profession? Eventually, it was agreed that individual employers should identify their own entry requirements for both accountancy standards using previous qualifications, training, work experience, or other criteria as this would encourage applications from school leavers with a wide diversity of academic achievement.

Consultation with the wider sector

Once a draft outline for each of the standards had been created, it was important to find out whether what was being put forward was in line with the thinking, understanding, and requirements of employers in the wider sector particularly the SMEs. Feedback from a wide base of employers was needed to ensure that the described competencies at each level would cover all types of accountancy work within both the private and the public sectors.

Through their membership, professional bodies provided consultation conduits for the steering group and were able to reach out to employers of all sizes to collect feedback on the draft standards.

The consultation process was carried out via an online survey which covered all elements of the standards.

In total, 370 responses were received:

- 58% of the responses were from large employers and 40% were from SMEs (less than 250 employees) - 29% of which had fewer than 50 employees.

- Responses came from a breadth of sectors including those from employers in the tax, accountancy and finance sectors and from public-sector employers such as the NHS.

Overall, there was strong support for the proposed content of the standards and there were only a few small changes required to finalise them.

The consultation also provided an opportunity to generally raise employer awareness of Apprenticeships and to gauge the potential interest of those employers who perhaps had not previously thought about recruiting Apprenticeships within their organisation. Of the employer organisations surveyed, 45% of were more likely to consider an Apprenticeship based on the new standards than on the prior frameworks. Such feedback from the consultation process allowed the steering group to begin to shape market expectation and demand.

The Science Industry Partnership

This case study illustrates how the Life and Industrial Sciences sector employers organised themselves within the sector to undertake the development of Apprenticeship standards for the roles of Laboratory Technician and Science Manufacturing Technician, and how they approached higher level assessment.

Employer leadership

The Trailblazer steering group had already formed the *Science Industry Partnership (SIP)* and had previously submitted a bid to participate in the Employment Ownership of Skills pilot (EOP). The Trailblazer initiative was closely aligned to the *SMART Apprenticeships* programme outlined in the EOP that included Apprenticeship development.

For the Trailblazer work, the SIP employers formed two working groups, one for each standard, who worked to the same methodology, meeting at intervals to share information. The groups were facilitated by their sector skills council, Cogent, who acted as secretariat and project manager. Three professional bodies were also involved to ensure that professional recognition was clearly embedded in the outcomes.

The two working groups initially had a fairly small membership and were very action focused as the timetable for development of the standards was very tight. Membership of the working groups changed over the project to take into account the geography and the size of businesses within the sector. The groups reported to the SIP Board, which evolved in parallel with them. Accountability and communications relationships were made more formal.

Developing the standards

The *SMART Apprenticeships* proposals had, in many ways, anticipated the Trailblazer requirements by responding to the Richards Review particularly in respect to the end-loading of assessment and the freedom to choose different delivery models.

Some employers were happy with the existing SASE-compliant frameworks while others were keen to grasp the opportunity to create a different style of Apprenticeship. In the end, there was agreement that the standard would differ in two clear ways from the current SASE frameworks:

1. NVQ-type competency qualifications will be made optional, allowing employers to conduct skills training themselves and to not seek accreditation.
2. Knowledge-based qualifications already recognised by professional bodies are included to create links to professional registration.

High-level assessment approach

One of the key principles adopted by employers was for continuous assessment of the learner against the training plan, with two stages of training identified. A milestone assessment at the end of the first phase was seen as the way to mark the point where the learner can understand how to work safely and meet sufficient quality and regulatory standards to work under supervision.

The split between on-programme and end point assessment is approximately 25% and 75% and the latter comprises a range of assessment methods, including the attainment of mandatory knowledge qualifications, a portfolio of evidence, a presentation (e.g. project or case study) and a final synoptic assessment.

At the conclusion of the entire learning programme, the employer will recommend when the apprentice is ready for the final synoptic test. For each standard, there will be a Detailed Assessment Guide to inform the criteria and conditions for assessment.

Independence of assessment is key aspect of the government requirements for Apprenticeship assessment. The SIP has articulated this via a sector-specific assessment body, created through Cogent, to oversee all assessment arrangements and co-ordinate applications for certification.

Grading proved to be one area where the partnership challenged government guidance. This is a regulated industry where the competent authority requires the employer to demonstrate that staff are competent to carry out necessary tasks. It was considered that only a binary grading approach (Pass/Fail) would be appropriate for these competence skills – either the apprentice mastered the skill or they did not. Grading of the achievement of the standard is therefore based on assessment of the knowledge and behaviour elements.

Consultation

As well as conducting wider consultation with employers in the sector, it was considered important to consult with other stakeholders in the development of the new Apprenticeship. As training providers were not involved in the development of the standard, a Provider Reference Group was established through Cogent to consult on how the new assessment approach might be implemented and how providers might work with the proposed assessment body. Awarding organisations were not excluded, as they will also have a relationship with the proposed assessment body through the inclusion of recognised qualifications. Unlike the providers, discussions with awarding organisations were conducted on a one-to-one basis.

The future

The working groups, under the steer of the SIP Board, are continuing to work on the assessment details and the implementation requirements for their first two standards. Some arrangements, such as for quality assurance and inspection will necessarily involve external bodies such as Ofsted, but their role is as yet unclear if it is not tied to the current publically funded system of qualification delivery.

The *SMART Apprenticeships* group have proposals for two more Apprenticeship standards: Science Manufacturing Maintenance Technician and Laboratory Scientist:

- The working group for the Maintenance Technician standard will look closely at what has emerged in other sectors to ensure that whatever develops has transferability and progression. Trailblazers have considered a core and options approach around Maintenance Technician to rationalise emerging pan-sector overlaps but these have been predicated on the application of existing NOS/NVQ units and, for the science group, there is a desire to keep options open for innovation.
- The standard for Laboratory Scientist will be at a Higher Apprenticeship level and will provide progression for the new Laboratory Technicians.

A further sub-group in the *SMART Apprenticeships* programme is considering a standard for Polymers. And the sector skills council, Cogent, is continuing existing work on a suite of Healthcare Scientist Apprenticeships that has involved a significant number of employers and will have cross-sector implications.