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Public sector apprenticeship target reporting

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Contents

1.	Introduction and approach	3
2.	Overall progress against the target	5
3.	Actions taken by public sector bodies	6
	Internal development	7
	Changes in emphasis	7
	Focus on longer-term development	8
	External development	8
4.	Challenges faced by public sector bodies	11
	Systemic and procedural challenges relating to the apprenticeship system	12
	Financial and regulatory	12
	20% off-the-job	12
	Providers	13
	Standards	13
	Organisational challenges - perceptions, experience, and resource	14
5.	Future plans for meeting the public sector apprenticeship target	15
6.	Summary of key messages and experiences	18

1. Introduction and approach

The following briefing document provides a summary of the key findings from analysis of responses submitted by public sector bodies to understand how they have responded to the public sector apprenticeship target in 2018/19, the barriers they have faced, changes they have experienced since their 2017/18 activity, their plans for the future delivery of the target, and any wider or additional comments they wished to make.

The public sector apprenticeship target was introduced in 2017. Under this, public sector bodies with 250 or more staff in England have a target to employ an average of at least 2.3% of their staff as new apprentice starts over the period of 1st April 2017 to 31st March 2021.

Public sector bodies are required to submit data annually on the number of employees and apprenticeship starts they had before and following the target reporting period. They are also required to contextualise their approach to the target by providing responses of no more than 500 words to four questions via their Apprentice Service account, submitted annually to the Department for Education (DfE). Specifically, public sector bodies were asked:

1. Actions you have taken this year to meet the target, and how these compare to the actions taken in the previous year 17/18?
2. Challenges you faced this year in your efforts to meet the target, and how these compare to the challenges experienced in the previous year 17/18?
3. How you are planning to meet the target in future, and what will you continue to do or do differently to that end?
4. Have you got any other additional information you would like to add?

A total of 615 responses were received and analysed out of a possible 1,299 employers estimated to be in scope of the target (a 47.3% response rate compared with 82.4% response rate in 2017/18). The number of bodies in scope increased from 820 in 2017/18 to 1,299 in 2018/19 due to the inclusion of academies. In addition, detailed reporting against the target was 'cut-off' to allow for analysis, the total number of organisations who provided submissions to contribute to the development of the official statistics on the public sector target was 845 (63%).

A structured coding approach was used to identify both detailed and high-level themes emerging from responses, which could be applied across the high number of returns to understand the scale of particular experiences and activities as well as emerging best practice.

It should be noted that as analysis was conducted using qualitative open response data provided by public sector bodies. Public sector bodies in scope had the option to submit

a response or not. As such, responses cannot be considered representative of all public sector bodies and while figures are provided in this report to show scale of experience among respondents, they cannot be considered as exhaustive of all the actions, challenges, and future plans and should be treated as indicative.

It is also important to note that despite requests within the questions for comparisons to be made to actions and challenges from the 2017/18 period, most respondents focused on providing information on what they had experienced in 2018/19 with minimal clarification of where there were differences. However, many noted that actions taken and/or challenges were a 'continuation' or 'upscaling' of those from the previous reporting period. As such, the analysis makes overall comparisons of responses from 2017/18 and 2018/19 to identify key areas of continuation and change across the reporting years and sub-sectors, but draws out more specific emerging differences in a qualitative manner to explore nuances in response based on sector and context, for example geography.

The remainder of this briefing document is structured to show: overall progress against the target; actions taken by public sector bodies in 2018/19 and key differences to 2017/18; challenges faced and key differences to 2017/18; future plans; and, a concluding summary of key messages and experiences. Views from the additional information provided are reflected throughout the document as respondents primarily used this to expand on themes previously identified in their responses to preceding questions.

2. Overall progress against the target

It is important to note that findings in this report are based on a smaller sample of returns provided than were available for official statistics (615 compared with 845).

[Official published statistics](#) (based on 845 responses) show that an average of 1.7 per cent of employees¹ started an apprenticeship in 2018/19 compared with 1.4% in 2017/18 (1.6% cumulatively).

The official statistics also show that 21% of public sector bodies that provided a return in 2018/19 had 2.3% or more of employees starting a new apprenticeship within the reporting year (compared with 11% in 2017/18). This represents a significant increase since 2017/18. Also, 70.7% of public sector bodies who submitted a return across both reporting years increased the proportion of employees who started an apprenticeship in 2018/19 as compared to the previous reporting year.

As in 2017/18, based on the self-reported details available, there are no obvious differences in actions between those organisations that had reached and those that had not reached 2.3% of employees starting a new apprenticeship within the reporting year. We should also bear in mind that the actions may have been taken not just to grow their apprenticeship programmes, but also to maintain or improve the quality of their programmes.

Most organisations indicated that their approaches remained consistent with or built upon actions taken in the previous reporting period. These organisations discussed continuation, refinement, and upscaling the activities implemented in 2017/18. They also reported their progress had benefited from the development and capacity building activities undertaken in 2017/18, thus supporting them to be able to offer high quality programmes, while meeting or having regard for the target over the full reporting period (to 2021).

¹ The comparable figure for the smaller sample of 615 returns analysed for this research was very similar (1.8 per cent).

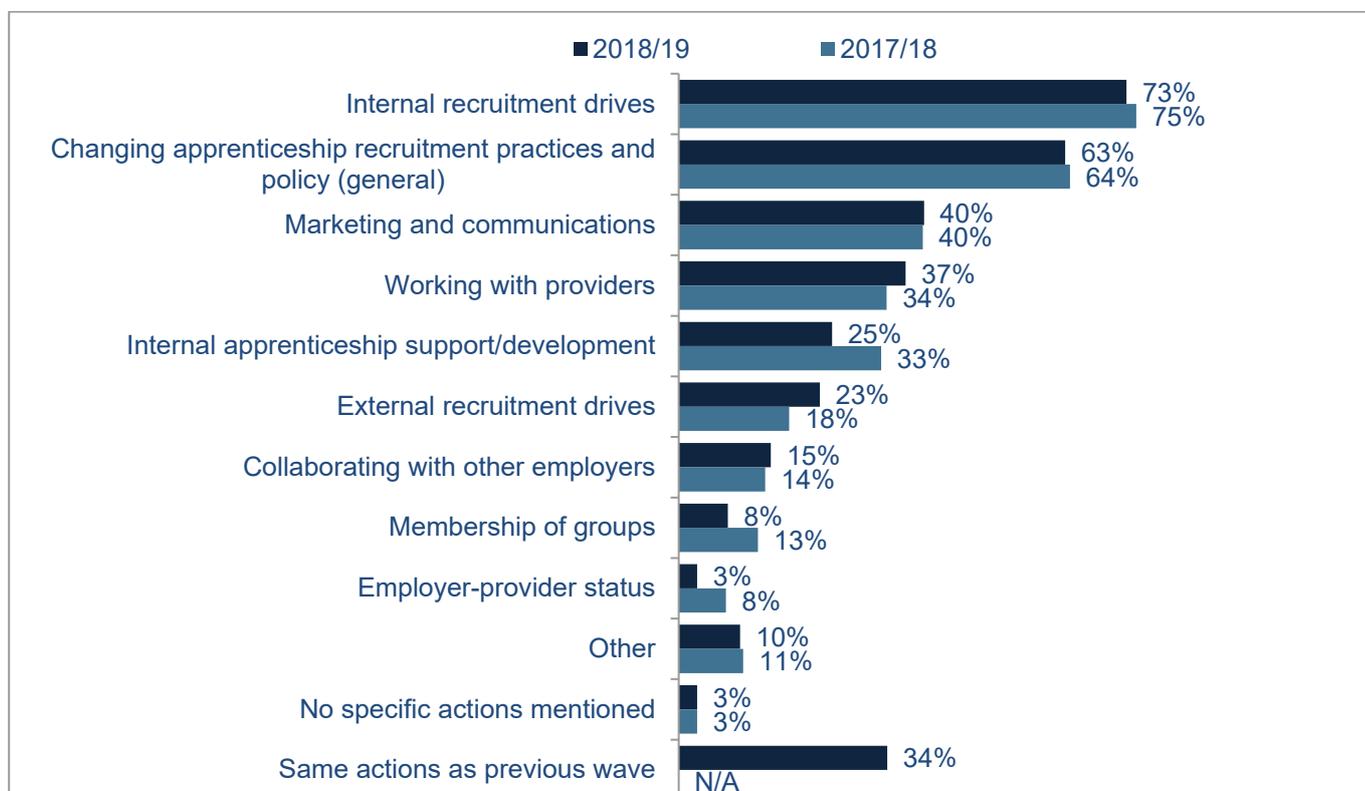
3. Actions taken by public sector bodies

As in 2017/18, the majority of public sector bodies have continued to undertake a range of actions to help meet the public sector target. A review of the responses provided found that the actions taken to move towards the 2.3% target (as well as challenges) were very similar to those employed in 2017/18. This may be explained by a number of factors:

- Many respondents in 2017/18 indicated that their activity established an approach they planned to continue.
- Some respondents in 2017/18 acknowledged they were further behind than they wanted to be, and had plans in place for 2018/19 to develop some of the structures and approaches used by others.
- Since 2017/18 best practice has been shared across a number of sub-sectors through collaborative working.

Over one-third of responses commented they were continuing actions in line with what they had developed in 2017/18, with many noting the overall expansion and improvement of their programmes. Figure 1, provides a breakdown of the actions undertaken by public sector bodies in 2018/19 compared with 2017/18, which are explored below under thematic headings: internal development, and external development.

Figure 1: High-level actions undertaken by public sector bodies in 2018/19 compared with 2017/18



Base: 2018/19=615, 2017/18=676, Source: Apprenticeship Activity Return

Internal development

As shown in Figure 1 (see p.6), the overall levels of activities undertaken for each action type remain mostly consistent with 2017/18. Internal focus forms the main emphasis of organisational strategy through:

- *internal recruitment drives* (e.g. exploring the use of apprenticeships for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and the skills development and career progression of existing staff);
- changing apprenticeship recruitment practices and policies in general (such as changes to recruitment and workforce development practices and policies); and,
- establishing and developing *internal apprenticeship support/development* systems and procedures for identifying and supporting apprenticeships.

Whilst overall the internal development picture remained similar to 2017/18, there were key differences in the more detailed actions being undertaken, showing the ongoing maturation and development of policies developed in 2017/18. These are explored further here.

Changes in emphasis

It is notable that in 2018/19 the volume undertaking *internal apprenticeship support/development activities* decreased (25% compared with 33% in 2017/18). In particular, using apprenticeships to meet CPD requests and training needs had decreased (15% in 2018/19 compared with 49% in 2017/18), potentially due to the previous high use of this approach meaning there were fewer opportunities available for these types of conversion in 2018/19.

An alternative – upskilling their staff to a minimum level – is notably higher (not captured in 2017/18 due to low levels of reporting, and recorded in 21% of responses in 2018/19), likely as a result of effectively making participation in apprenticeships more of a requirement than optional development. For example, bringing all staff to a minimum standard of digital training or reviewing staffs' skills gap at appraisals and meeting these needs through apprenticeships. Furthermore, many organisations commented that this upskilling included utilising degree level apprenticeships with senior or managerial staff.

In addition, where organisations were *changing apprenticeship recruitment practices and policies in general*, some of the more 'early stage' actions, such as turning vacancies into apprenticeships, were less frequently used in 2018/19 than in 2017/18 (30% compared with 40% respectively) – although these were still the most frequently used general changes reported. This might be because respondents were stating this action as a continuation of the policies put in place previously.

Focus on longer-term development

Use of longer-term or more complex approaches increased among those *changing apprenticeship recruitment practices and policies in general*. In particular, 5% more organisations had undertaken restructuring activities to accommodate additional apprenticeships (e.g. by requiring the use of apprentices in specific roles in the NHS), than in 2017/18. For many this is part of wider ongoing restructuring, but apprenticeships are actively reviewed and considered as part of this. This approach was significantly more common amongst those who had met or exceeded the target in 2018/19 as compared with 2017/18 (21% compared with 14%). Several local authorities reported linking these to their existing and longer-term targets to increase local employment among key groups such as young people not in employment and training (NEET), and care leavers – focusing apprenticeship recruitment on these groups in particular.

Notably, two-thirds of organisations who had not met the target were looking to change their apprenticeship policy, 10 percentage points more than those who had met or exceeded the target, again placing emphasis on improving longer term planning to meet the target.

As noted previously, work on *internal apprenticeship support/development activities* was reduced in 2018/19, with many of the respondents having improved these processes in 2017/18. For some, the focus was now more on establishing ongoing monitoring processes such as setting internal targets and using workforce planning groups.

External development

There was increased focus on external actions in 2018/19, which the evidence indicates is in response to two factors: firstly, the ability to roll out apprenticeships to external candidates now appropriate structures and policies had been developed and put in place in 2017/18; and secondly, the more limited options for internal apprenticeship recruitment now that any ‘quick wins’ had been achieved through meeting training and CPD requests through apprenticeships.

Figure 1 (see p.6) shows the increase in more externally focused activities mostly occurs in two areas:

- increased volume undertaking *external recruitment drives* (23% compared with 18% in 2017/18); and,
- *working with providers* on their apprenticeship offer, including identifying providers and working with them to develop their offer (37% compared with 34% in 2017/18).

There were also a consistently large proportion of public bodies (40% in both years) who focused on *marketing and communications* activities. While levels of development and delivery of marketing and communications remained the same in 2018/19 both internally and externally, emphasis moved away from basic information sharing to promoting best practice and good news stories, as well as further myth-busting² through case studies and information sharing.

Almost one-half of all Local Governments have used marketing and communications (49%), more than double the proportion of Police Forces (22%). NHS trusts are also far more likely to have utilised this approach (39%) than other sub-sectors, for example schools (27%).

Similarly, as the approaches to meeting the target continue to develop and mature, of high importance to public sector bodies was maintaining the relationships they have developed *working with providers* (37% in 2018/19 compared with 34% in 2017/18). Many used these relationships with providers to create additional new Standards to benefit their staff, although the most did not elaborate on how they did this. This was particularly the case among Fire Authorities (44%) and the Police (26%), due to their highly specific requirements which are not present in other sectors.

In addition, Figure 1 (see p.6) shows that 3% of respondents had either sought or achieved *employer-provider* status so they could best deliver against their organisation's requirements. Fire Authorities were the most likely to have taken this action (28%); however, some respondents reported challenge with regards to meeting the Ofsted requirements for apprenticeship employer-providers.

In terms of wider collaboration and partnerships, such as *collaborating with employers* and *membership of groups* there were fewer overall mentions of these in 2018/19 (23% compared with 27%); however, those public sector bodies who reported these actions, valued them highly. In particular, several local authorities discuss the benefits of the Local Government Association (LGA) Apprenticeship Accelerator Programme³, including providing information and networking opportunities. Also, Police and Fire Services value groups and opportunities to work together, for example some Police Forces have entered into regional collaboration to ensure consistency of delivery, innovation, and value for money of the Police Constable degree apprenticeship. Other groups referenced by

² Myth busting refers to challenging the preconception that apprenticeships are for school leavers aged 16-18, with few or no qualifications.

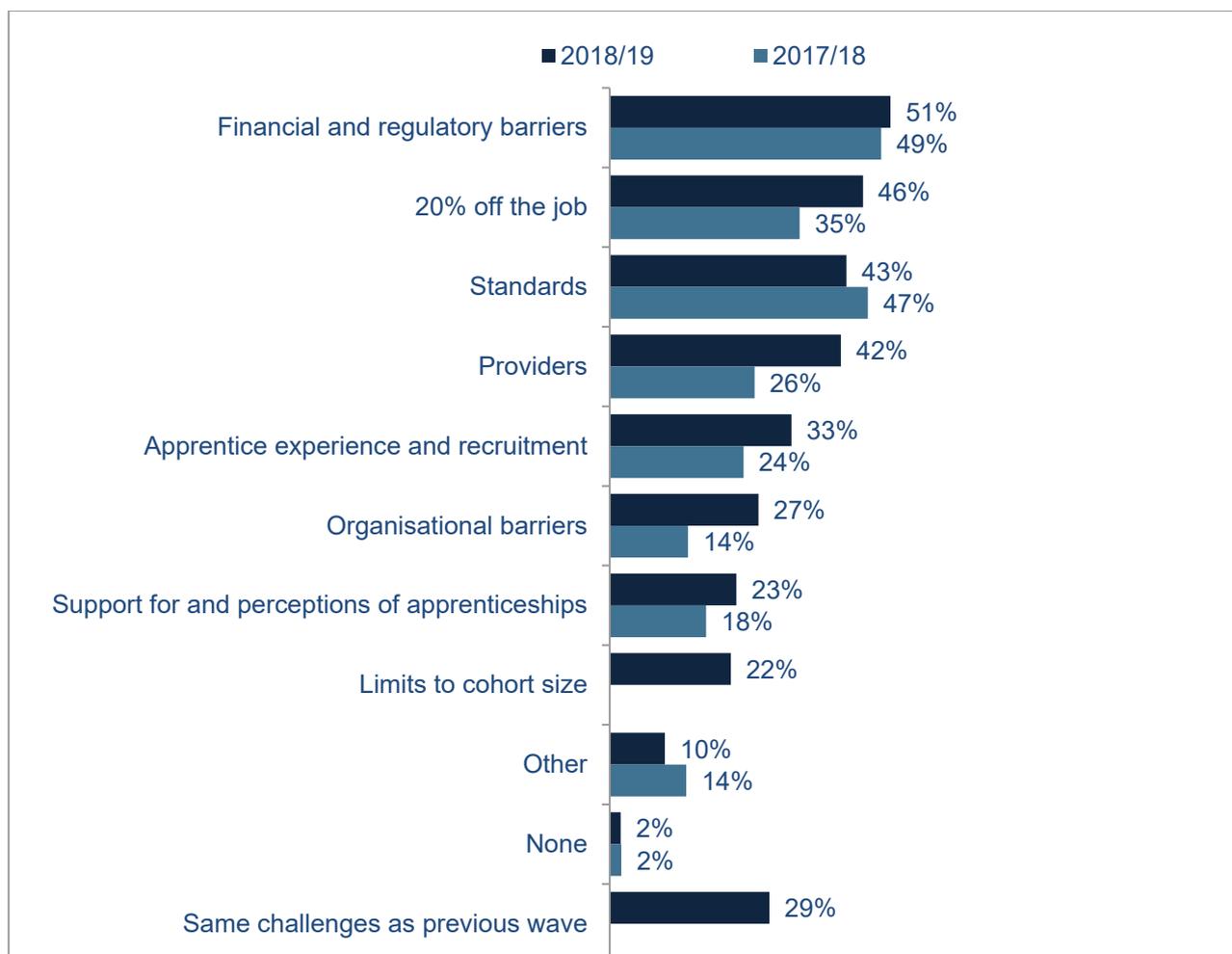
³ A programme of support for councils so they can maximise the Return on Investment (ROI) of their apprenticeship levy.

organisations include the Apprenticeship Diversity Champions Network, and the Apprenticeship Ambassador Network.

4. Challenges faced by public sector bodies

As with the actions taken, the challenges experienced by public sector bodies were mostly similar to those experienced in 2017/18, and 29% specifically reported they were facing the same challenges; however, the strategies used to address challenges were reported in many cases to be starting to take effect. Figure 2 provides a summary of the high-level challenges experienced by public sector bodies. Notably, while financial and regulatory barriers remain the top area of challenge (51%), issues around the 20% off-the-job training for apprentices were now seen more frequently as a challenge (46% compared with 35% in 2017/18), than issues relating to Standards (43% compared with 47% in 2017/18). Also of note, is the overall increase of reporting of concerns or challenges relating to providers (42% compared with 26% in 2017/18).

Figure 2: Challenges faced by public sector bodies in 2018/19 compared with 2017/18



Base: 2018/19=615, 2017/18=676, Source: Apprenticeship Activity Return

As in 2017/18 the challenges that were most frequently reported by public bodies were systemic (due to the structures and processes of the apprenticeship system e.g. procurement regulations) or procedural (due to their own internal policies and contexts,

for example working with various departmental leads to embed apprenticeships). With reference to Figure 2 (see p.11), key systemic and procedural challenges (specifically relating to the apprenticeship system) are addressed below - financial and regulatory, 20% off-the-job training, providers, and Standards, followed by a discussion of reported challenges at the organisational level relating to perceptions, experience, and resource.

Systemic and procedural challenges relating to the apprenticeship system

Financial and regulatory

Overall concerns about financial and regulatory barriers remained mostly consistent with 2017/18 (51% compared with 49% in 2017/18). Those who had not met the target were more likely to report they had experienced challenges due to *financial and regulatory barriers* (44% compared with 34% of those that met the target in 2018/19). Particular issues related to the procurement of providers and included the length of time taken to identify a suitable provider and using provider's online portals for purchasing apprenticeship training. For many who did not meet the target, much of their time in the past year was reportedly spent navigating these challenges. Of those who met or exceeded the target, some referenced establishing contractual relationships with those providers they knew they would be working with regularly, or using a variety of procurement hubs to be more efficient and reduce delays.

Budget limitations continued to be a particular concern for (39% in 2018/19 compared with 25% in 2017/18), this was particularly notable among Schools and Local Authorities who felt additional flexibilities should be available with the levy to support other costs, for example wages for new staff needed to help meet the public sector apprenticeship target (if they cannot meet the target through existing staff and vacancies). This was seen as particularly important where respondents felt their target was inflated by high numbers of part-time staff, or required off-the-job cover to ensure service levels are maintained during 20% off-the-job training, for example in Local Authorities and the NHS.

20% off-the-job

Nearly one-half (46% compared with 35% in 2017/18) of public sector bodies reported they had experienced challenges related to the 20% off-the-job training requirement. This was a particular concern for respondents from the NHS relating to apprenticeships in primary care roles. As in 2017/18 this included the requirement conflicting with safe staffing numbers and workloads (as replacement staff would need to be brought in and paid to provide cover), being perceived as off-putting for managers, and, resulting in high costs for salaries at degree level with no backfill.

This meant for many additional workforce planning and budget reviews were required to ensure appropriate levels of cover were available for those undertaking off-the-job training

Providers

Overall concerns about *providers* were higher in 2018/19 (42% compared with 26% in 2017/18). As in 2017/18, those who had not met the target were more likely than those who had met the target to report they had experienced challenges relating to providers (44% compared with 34% of those that met the target). This mostly related to identifying providers offering their required Standards. However, a small number also reported concerns around quality and cost of providers, and their ability to meet the needs for smaller cohort sizes.

Fire Authorities are the most likely to have found a lack of providers offering appropriate Standards, with some stating that this caused them to apply for employer-provider status. As such, Fire Authorities are one of the least likely sub-sectors to feel there are a lack of Standards, highlighting the issue of provision rather than a lack of Standards in and of themselves.

Local Authorities are the most likely to find that providers are unwilling to provide Standards due to small cohort sizes (12%). Police Forces and NHS Trusts also encounter this problem, but to a lesser extent (7% and 6% respectively). Many Local Authorities also comment that often only providers in major cities offer the Standards they require, and they are unable to afford the travel and accommodation costs involved. This is not necessarily a problem specific to rural or coastal regions, with many public sector bodies located in towns and smaller cities also experiencing this issue.

Standards

Despite the constraints around access to Standards noted previously, in 2018/19 concerns about access to specific *Standards* were slightly lower than in 2017/18. Although nearly one-half (43.4%) of public sector bodies reported they had experienced challenges related to the available Standards, this mostly included comments relating to the process for approval of Standards, provision of Standards by providers, and availability of end-point assessors rather than the existence of relevant Standards (although this was still a concern for some, for example in access to higher level teaching qualifications). Other concerns reported by some respondents included:

- Perception that there are a lack of viable Standards at Level 2. Several commented that the removal of the Level 2 Business Administration framework would give less options for enrolment, and this needed a replacement standard.

- Continued demand for more specialist Standards in some areas, for example higher level teaching qualifications, fire safety inspector (approved November 2019), and pest control.

Organisational challenges - perceptions, experience, and resource

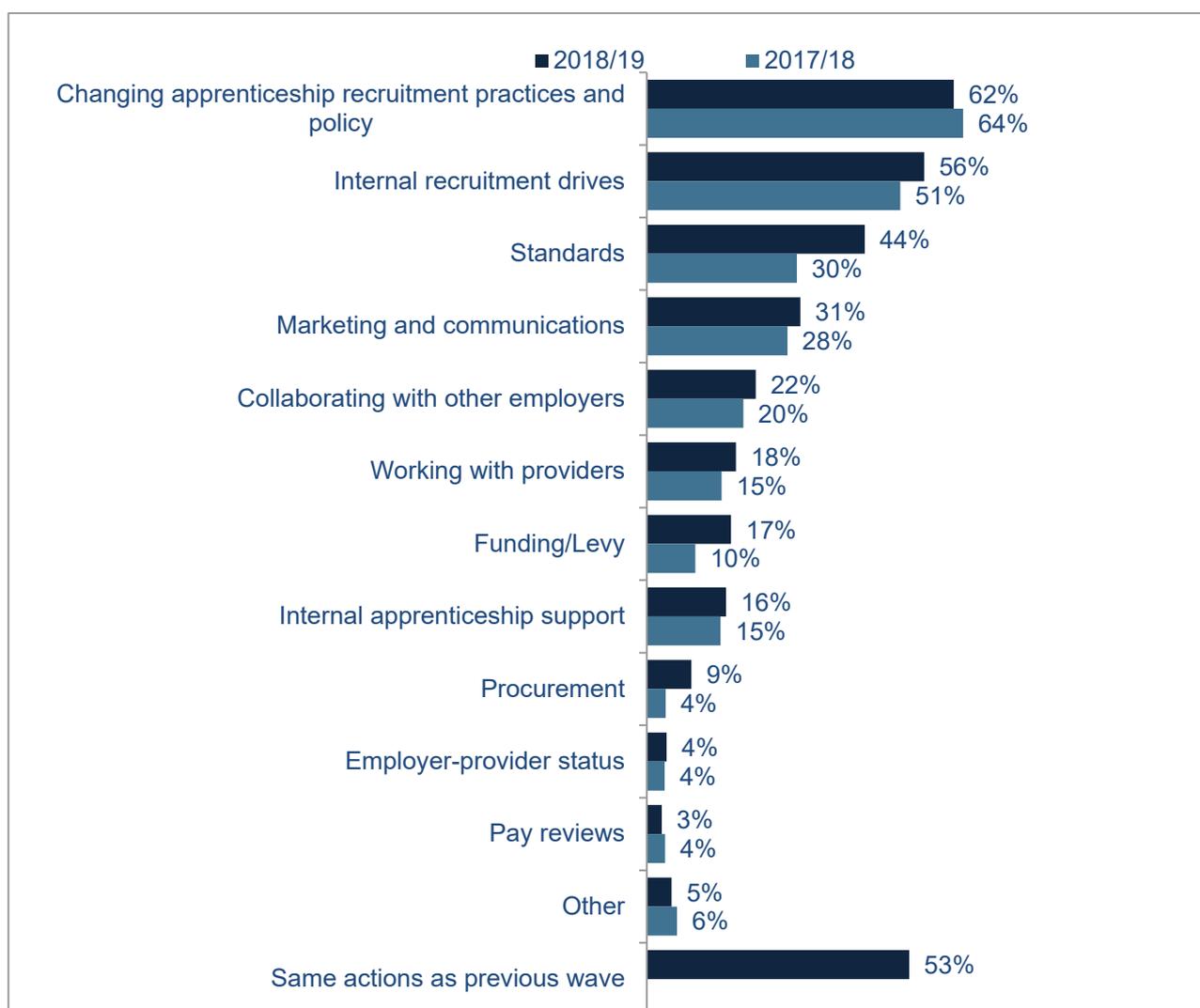
Ongoing barriers for many public sector bodies were related to *support for and perceptions of apprenticeships, organisational barriers, and apprentice experience and recruitment* issues. In combination the challenges meant managers and potential apprentices (both internal and external) were deterred from engaging with apprenticeships, for instance a lack of applications for a particular role may deter managers from using apprenticeships in the future, and more generally worsen their perceptions of apprenticeships. As in 2017/18, for many managers and potential apprentices, apprenticeships were considered to be for younger or early career individuals, and as such not something they wanted to be involved in. Some public bodies were attempting to address this through myth-busting activities and good practice sharing, for example case study development and information sharing.

Resource barriers were also frequently cited as a challenge to administering apprenticeships, in particular this was a challenge for one-quarter of Police Forces (26%) and one in five schools (19%).

5. Future plans for meeting the public sector apprenticeship target

For many respondents, the activities delivered in 2017/18, and continued and expanded on in 2018/19, have been reportedly crucial in establishing a strong position from which they can aim to meet the apprenticeship target overall by 2021. As such, many (53%) respondents explicitly commented they plan to continue with these approaches. Figure 3, provides an overview of the areas where public sector bodies plan to develop their apprenticeship programmes in the future, including ongoing changes to apprenticeship recruitment practices and policy (62%), and internal recruitment drives (56%) which were most frequently cited by respondents.

Figure 3: Future plans for 2019/20



Base: 2018/19=615, 2017/18=676, Source: Apprenticeship Activity Return

With reference to Figure 3 (see p.15) and taking into account the high level of consistency with and continuation of plans from 2017/18, examples of how public sector bodies plan to further develop and improve key processes and procedures relating to apprenticeships include:

- *changing recruitment practices and policy*, for example ongoing review of workforce planning to identify and embed opportunities for apprenticeships, and learn from experiences over the last year;
- ongoing promotion of apprenticeship opportunities both internally and externally through *internal recruitment drives* and *marketing and communication*, particularly relating to the benefits of apprenticeships and minimising negative perceptions and misconceptions;
- ongoing development of *internal apprenticeship support* and the potential use of pre-apprenticeship programmes and traineeships to support recruitment, as well as providing links to other employment and skills targets such as promoting apprenticeships among young carers;
- working to make the most of new *Standards* and continuing to contribute to the development of additional new Standards (including through trailblazer groups and working with providers);
- diversifying their use of *Standards* and ensuring clear progression pathways that can be taken following an apprenticeship; and,
- exploring options to achieve *employer-provider status* (or subcontractor status) where access to providers offering required Standards is limited/proving a barrier; and,
- expanding their approach to *collaboration with other employers*, including for some starting to work with other employers to support downstream apprenticeship funding – involving the transfer of up to 25% of the annual funding in their apprenticeship service account to support apprenticeships in other businesses.

There were relatively few sub-sector differences in likelihood to implement these future actions; however, Fire Authorities were the most likely to have plans relating to Standards development. More than half of Police Forces and NHS trusts were also looking to develop and diversify Standards. These plans may reflect their more specialised and technical industries and the need for them to have access to more appropriate Standards. However, it is notable Standard development did not come out as strongly as a challenge when compared with 2017/18. Concerns are more related to access and delivery, as such Fire Authorities and the Police also prioritised working with providers in the future.

Organisations from Local Government were the most likely to be planning to collaborate with other employers (31%), closely followed by Fire Authorities (28%), in order to provide support to sub-contractors they work with regularly, and to take advantage of capacity to assist other employers. These activities would allow them to both share best practice and consider utilising the availability of downstream apprenticeship funding.

As part of considering future plans for meeting the target, some respondents across all sub-sectors expressed ongoing concerns about the reporting measures for the target, stating headcount was not the appropriate measure for this because the inclusion of part-time staff inflates the target. This was particularly common amongst local authorities with schools under their control. Without changes to this approach to measuring progress, some respondents across all sectors report they may not achieve the target, and as such preferred to focus on apprenticeship quality rather than quantity. For example, through investing in a smaller number higher level apprenticeships if this is the skills need for their organisation.

Similarly, respondents across all sub-sectors reported preferences for more flexibility with the levy and how funds can be allocated to provide support with wider organisational costs of apprenticeships (such as management and pay). Most felt this additional flexibility would allow them to address some of the challenges experienced in terms of wider organisational resourcing and recruitment for apprenticeships.

6. Summary of key messages and experiences

Overall responses showed some common themes and experiences emerging amongst public sector bodies.

- In most cases the prevalence of the types of actions described and courses of action taken were overwhelmingly similar with 2017/18. This may be for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was the stated plan of many organisations in the 2017/18 return that they wanted to continue to build on the foundations created, and expand systems, process and activities based upon this. Secondly, best practice sharing and collaboration among public sector bodies of all types has increased following further validation of approaches that reportedly work (demonstrated through increased apprentice numbers in 2017/18). This indicates achieving the 2.3% target will be the culmination of a sequence of actions taken over time, rather than a singular event.
- It is notable that use of external recruitment drives was higher by 5 percentage points (23% of public sector bodies used these) in 2018/19 than 2017/18. In some cases it was stated that the public sector organisation was now better able to look externally for apprentices following the creation of internal apprenticeship processes and support (such as mentoring programmes). Several local authorities discussed focussing these external recruitment drives to their existing targets to increase local employment among key groups such as young people who are NEET, and care leavers.
- Similarly, challenges remained mostly the same as in 2017/18, with a focus on financial and regulatory barriers, as well as providers, the 20% off-the-job requirement, and organisational barriers. Whilst some had implemented approaches to overcome these barriers for example, workforce planning and budget reviews to ensure appropriate levels of cover for those undertaking off-the-job training, these mitigations were not always fully able to address concerns.
- Organisations reported fewer challenges with Standards. Many of the desired new Standards having now been approved allowing some sub-sectors, for example the NHS, to reportedly increase their number of apprentices. However, now that some priority areas of higher level apprenticeships have reportedly been addressed, concern among some public sector bodies moved to identifying providers who could offer these, and also to the provision of more Level 2 apprenticeships, with some concern about the impact of the removal of the Level 2 Business Administration framework, particularly among local authorities.
- Future plans also remained consistent with 2017/18, with a focus on continuing and extending good practice identified over the past 2 years, and allowing this work to come to fruition. However, particular areas of change some were considering was around delivery of Standards, with some most notably from the Fire Service exploring

employer-provider status. Others across all sectors were further reviewing the Standards available to them to see how they could make the best use of these to further integrate apprenticeships within their workforce(s).



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