

29 June 2020

Apprenticeship Approvals Group - Chair's End of Year Report 2020

From Ruth Jennings, Chair of the Apprenticeship Approvals Group (AAG):

The Apprenticeship Approvals Group first sat in November 2019. The aim was to expand and enhance the Modern Apprenticeship Group (MAG) - the existing governance structure for approving Modern Apprenticeships in Scotland, at that time. It was driven by a vision: to embed key principles across all elements of Scottish Apprenticeships governance: high quality, robust governance, transparency, consistency and coherence. In practice, this would mean several key shifts – a move from being government led, to industry-led; a widening of remit from modern apprenticeships only, to all apprenticeship approvals; and from disparate functions of governance to clearer responsibilities and better alignment with the design, development and leadership aspects of the system. By addressing these gaps, sharpening focus through the lens of industry need and ensuring consistency throughout the processes, the new Apprenticeship Approvals Group could ensure high quality and independent assurance of Scottish apprenticeships.

Industry-led with a strong employer voice

My role, representing a major UK employer and working in skills development and apprenticeships, means I have had the opportunity to be an active participant in the skills landscape across the four nations. As an active member of Scottish Apprenticeships Advisory Board (SAAB) Standards and Frameworks Group, I was delighted to be asked to Chair the new Apprenticeship Approvals Group, back in 2019. George Brown of Scottish Qualifications Authority Accreditation was invited to be Vice Chair.

Thereafter, membership of the group was expanded with a key focus placed upon ensuring that we had a strong employer voice, clearly reflected in its membership. I am pleased to have been able to welcome significant apprentice employers, BT, Scottish Water, Robertson Group and of course my own employer, Sainsbury's – all current members of the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board, to the list. Alongside these new members, which included ex-apprentices also, we have representation from education, training and accreditation bodies, trade unions and government.

The transitional period: from MAG to AAG

Both the Apprenticeship Approvals Group and the Modern Apprenticeship Group operated in parallel until AAG formally took over the reins as the sole approval body for all apprenticeships – foundation, modern and graduate - on 1 April 2020. On this day, MAG fully dissolved in line with Ministerial approval, finalising the change to a new governance structure for work-based learning in Scotland.

We held our inaugural meeting on 7 November in Glasgow, where we agreed a programme of work to lead us through the transition from MAG to AAG.

Developing our knowledge base

Since the first meeting, we set about preparing for this move with a series of training and information sessions to ensure that all AAG members were fully prepared. It was important that we all understood the legacy role we would play with existing apprenticeships, as well as and the new development process with the newly established Technical Expert Groups (TEGs).

Since the inaugural meeting, we now have confirmed our membership, have an agreed code of conduct and terms of reference all set out online on the publicly accessible Skills Development Scotland website.

The first few meetings focused on creating a common baseline of knowledge and understanding across all members. Our development programme was about ensuring we were equipped with the right information and knowledge to understand the developments within the work-based learning and skills landscape in Scotland. This has included learning about apprenticeship policy in Scotland, Fair Work and equality, as well as the different models of apprenticeships from Foundation through to Graduate Apprenticeships, and how these are developed. We also learned by looking at recent approvals by the previous MAG group, inviting AAG members to the MAG meetings to observe the discussions and decisions involved in approving an apprenticeship. This was a really useful exercise - the logic applied in reaching these decisions and what we could do to learn and improve on the previous process.

AAG in Action

AAG is beginning to demonstrate its value and started to fulfil its objective already, having approved its first frameworks at our May meeting this year. I was delighted that we were able to review and approve Scottish Apprenticeships frameworks in agriculture and in the water industry, both at SCQF level 5 & 6. Any frameworks that started their approval journey with MAG are now under AAG and we were really pleased to see the Foundation Apprenticeships - Business Skills and Financial Services - coming in for review in June this year.

As we go forward, we will continue to review all apprenticeships developed through the existing contracted approach (previously with Sector Skills Councils) but what the group are excited about is seeing and hopefully approving is the new employer-led developments through the Technical expert Group. The first of these is expected to be brought forward for review from August, and will contain meta-skills, with a view to these being delivered either late 2020 or early 2021.

Communicating change

We've been working to a thorough communications plan, to ensure that our stakeholders, including industry, education bodies, Scottish Government, learning providers and colleagues at Skills Development Scotland are aware of the transition to a new way of working. We've published various updates and information on the Skills Development Scotland websites, and other digital channels including social media and collaborative networks. We've also been working with members to provide guidance and a toolkit of information which can be shared. The role of SAAB has been key to this due the reach and influence of its members and its role is very much a two-way channel for communication.

Ensuring continuous improvement

We are working with the national standards body - British Standards Institute - as we continually review the approach to governance and quality assurance in Scottish apprenticeships. They are supporting us in strengthening the new system, by ensuring it is in line with best practice, and will provide us with key recommendations for any further improvements. This will allow Scottish apprenticeships to continue to deliver the highest quality work-based learning for employers and individuals alike.

The way forward for the Apprenticeship Approvals Group

The recent Covid-19 crisis has meant a move from the planned face-to-face meetings to virtual ones and with the support from all members, this has proved successful in allowing us to continue to operate and act as the approvals body. I'm proud to see a 'business as usual' approach by our group members and Skills Development Scotland in these difficult circumstances. This has meant that we can continue the momentum and the great work of AAG - a progressive, innovative approach which is leading the way across the UK.

Ongoing development of members

We have an ongoing commitment to ensure the continued growth of AAG's knowledge and expertise, ensuring that industry insight is at the heart of this through its employer-led membership. We will continue to support members with an ongoing programme of knowledge sharing and as a group, our knowledge continues to evolve and enrich to the apprenticeship approvals process.

Ruth Jennings

Chair of Apprenticeship Approval Group

Member of the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board Standards and Frameworks Group

