

Apprenticeship Approvals Group Chair's End of Year Report 2023



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

As Chair of the Apprenticeship Approvals Group (AAG), I am delighted to deliver my fourth annual report, reflect upon the progress we have made in the past year, and celebrate our achievements.

When I took up the post of Chair for the newly established Apprenticeship Approval's Group in 2018, I understood that this signalled an important political change. AAG was the evolution from a previously government-led body with a narrow focus on Modern Apprenticeships, to an employer-led approvals group, taking a holistic approach across the entire modern, foundation and graduate apprenticeship family.

Our remit was the same then as it is now: to ensure that only those apprenticeships which could demonstrate value to the learner while delivering the right skills for the employer and Scottish economy, would receive final approval. I am proud to say that four years in, we continue to achieve this. This is in no small part due to the dedication and expertise of our members, who volunteer their time individually, while providing a key function in the apprenticeship development lifecycle as collective of experts, operating as an independent body.

Operating within a climate of political uncertainty

Looking back over the past year, AAG has continued to do its job with laser-sharp focus and solid commitment to continuous improvement - but against a backdrop of political uncertainty.

It has been a testing year with some unique challenges. Various, whole-scale systemic reviews have been commissioned by Scottish Government to examine the wider skills and education ecosystem. They have all asked a similar question, 'does the current provision deliver for Scotland's learners, employers and economy?'

In the past year, we have seen the publication of: the Louise Hayward Review on Qualifications and Assessment; James Withers Review on the Skills Delivery Landscape; Skills Development Scotland's Careers Review; and Ken Muir's report on education reform. All of these have seismic potential to change the way we educate and skill-up people in Scotland to prepare them for the world of work. In turn, this will also have a significant impact on the work of AAG.

As we await an official response from Scottish Government, there are some things that we do know – mainly that the landscape we currently operate within is set to change significantly. The detail of this is yet to be known and until that point, while employers continue to cry out for more apprenticeships, and learners continue to seek training and jobs, then AAG must continue with a 'business-as-usual' approach.

Focus on quality assurance

We have achieved some huge successes over the past year. In the period 2022/23 alone, AAG has:

- Reviewed 19 apprenticeship frameworks:
 - ➔ 12 fully approved
 - ➔ 7 frameworks approved in principle
 - ➔ across a variety of subjects including barbering, aquaculture, engineering, youth work, automotive and digital technology

Overall, numbers are down slightly from last year's figures of 38 reviewed and 23 approved apprenticeships, which included 15 apprenticeship submissions pushed back for further feedback and review. This is a direct result of the process improvements we brought into place which have strengthened AAG's governance and quality assurance throughout all parts and stages of apprenticeship approvals. A key part of this has been the introduction of the Stage Gate process.

This year, for the first time, we are beginning to see the development of apprenticeships - such as the recently approved Engineering framework - which recognise the common, shared skills shared across occupations, yet within different contexts. Apprenticeships frameworks of this nature support transferability and labour mobility and help employers and individuals respond to a volatile, changing external environment. This approach will result in fewer apprenticeships but offer a greater reach and value to employers and individuals.

The Stage Gate approval process (and principles) introduces end-to-end governance of the apprenticeship development and approval process for the first time. It identifies four main stages within the life cycle: approach and scope, process for development, approval in principle and approval for delivery. Each stage involves its own set of checks and balances - linking with developers, testing iterations, continual improvement and allowing members a more proactive role to challenge and add value at the different stages. This approach coupled with monthly development and risk updates ensures AAG members have visibility throughout developments. Previously, AAG (and before this, the Modern Apprenticeship Group) members would only see something in its almost-complete state. Now we form part of the end-to-end process and have the opportunity to challenge and support in line with governance good practice, all in seamless way. It's a thing of real beauty. There's been a huge reduction on repeated submissions and error correction, making AAG's role far more efficient and streamlined.

Continually developing the skills of AAG's membership

Being a member of AAG is no small ask and so we remain committed to providing our members with the right skills and information to do the job. Learning and development is a must to keep up with the ever-changing world we operate within, and we have recently undertaken some skilling-up exercises to keep AAG members abreast of wider developments. We've had the pleasure of learning from the Fair Work Convention, delving into the detail of what Fair Work is, its implications for employers and how AAG can best consider Fair Work when approving apprenticeships.

Continuous improvement features as an ongoing piece of work within standards and frameworks with AAG working closely alongside policy and operational experts at Skills Development Scotland. We've completed the first stage - consultation with key stakeholders on how they can better engage in the apprenticeship development process. Members of AAG (specifically representatives from training providers and awarding bodies) were involved in this consultation and were able to contribute to the outputs and actions we can now see taking shape. This activity will lead to engagement and collaboration with all actors/stakeholders of the apprenticeship system at a much earlier stage resulting in quicker development time and better use of resources.

In addition, colleagues from SQA, as the qualifications awarding body in Scotland, attended one of our meetings to explain how qualifications within apprenticeships are developed and approved. This has helped members understand the gap between approving the framework and approving the full apprenticeship – and served us well to better align new and refreshed apprenticeships with qualifications' requirements, earlier in the process.

We've also worked closely with colleagues from SDS to better understand the Apprenticeship Transition Plan and the implications this can have for the credentials that make up an apprenticeship and how this translates into a record of prior learning and its overall portability. This transferability remains a vital selling point to any learner considering an apprenticeship.

This year we have witnessed the collaborative work between SDS, SQA Accreditation and Scottish Government officials to ensure that there is alignment of priorities and resources to support the development of a joint plan of activity. This is hugely encouraging, and in a rapidly evolving landscape, necessary to get the right skills to employers when they need them.

A key piece of work has involved some examination of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) credit rating process i.e. how units are allocated SCQF credit and level, and how this forms part of the overall qualification.

Maintaining the essential employer voice

I am very proud of the work we have achieved, and we will continue to work closely with our governing board, the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board (SAAB) to explore how employers in particular (as the organisations engaging apprentices in that essential contract of work) can get better involved in designing future frameworks through more widespread involvement in Technical Expert Groups.

With a wealth of knowledge behind us, and the support of a vast network of industry leaders and employers through SAAB, qualifications experts, training providers, policy officials and trade unions, we hope that our expertise and the value in our work is recognised and will continue for years to come. Having employers at the heart of the design, development and approval of apprenticeships is, I believe, the only way to ensure that apprenticeships remain relevant and able to serve their purpose - in providing high value jobs. I hope that this will be reflected in whatever future form the new skills landscape takes.



Ruth Jennings, Sainsburys

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