



Regional Skills Pilot - Apprenticeship Support Programme 2026

Version number	Purpose/Changes	Author	Date
2.0	Version 2	Rebecca Anderson-Moss	05/01/2026

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Enterprise Cheshire & Warrington is leading the Regional Skills Pilot, a Department of Energy Security & Net Zero initiative designed to test new approaches in upskilling the local workforce ahead of the transition to clean energy. Phase 1 of the pilot mapped the skills base across Cheshire West & Chester's energy- and carbon-intensive sectors against the requirements of Clean Power 2030. This analysis identified priority skills gaps and recommended several interventions for Phase 2, including:

- commissioning short, targeted training courses;
- establishing an Apprenticeship Support Programme;
- delivering a knowledge-transfer initiative to strengthen the training workforce; and
- coordinating a regional, strategic approach to clean energy skills.

This strategy document outlines the delivery plan for the Apprenticeship Support Programme - an intervention aimed at enabling businesses, particularly SMEs, to engage more effectively with apprenticeships that support clean energy transition. The programme will reduce barriers by offering financial, recruitment, and networking support, while also aligning new and existing apprenticeship provision to industry needs. Its design and priorities reflect extensive stakeholder engagement across both phases of the pilot.

2. VISION & PURPOSE

The Regional Skills Pilot seeks to support Cheshire West & Chester's carbon- and energy-intensive industries in commencing their transition to clean energy by addressing five key priorities:

1. Aligning industry and education to create a cohesive, responsive, and accessible skills system
2. Strengthening employer engagement with relevant training opportunities
3. Expanding provider capacity to respond effectively to employer needs
4. Developing the skills required within the current workforce to enable decarbonisation
5. Increasing recruitment into clean-energy-related apprenticeships

The vision for the Apprenticeship Support Programme is to significantly increase business engagement in the development, delivery and uptake of apprenticeships that contribute to the clean energy workforce, resulting in an expanded pool of skilled local talent.

The purpose of the programme is to test a range of support mechanisms that reduce apprenticeship-related barriers for businesses, with a particular focus on SMEs. By building workforce capacity ahead of increased sectoral demand - in construction, engineering, energy production and related industries - the programme will help position the local economy for a successful transition to clean energy.

3. CONTEXT

Cheshire West & Chester has been identified by the Office for Clean Energy Jobs (OCEJ) as a location with strong potential for clean energy employment growth. Together with neighbouring authorities, it forms a cross-border economic corridor at the centre of the North West Industrial Cluster - characterised by high industrial energy consumption, significant carbon-emitting sites, and key industrial 'hotspots' in Ellesmere Port, Winsford, Elton, Northwich, and Middlewich.

The region faces transition risks associated with industrial decarbonisation, including the displacement of certain roles, emerging technical skill requirements, and the need for a more agile workforce. This is also compounded by an aging workforce in many of the related sectors.

Employment projections highlight two major periods of clean-energy-related growth:

- **2026–2029**, driven by offshore wind, CCUS and hydrogen infrastructure;
- **Early 2030s**, associated with nuclear new-build activity.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE 1: WORKFORCE AND EMPLOYER INSIGHT

Mapping of the local skills base and stakeholder feedback highlighted the following:

- SMEs remain poorly connected to the skills system and face cost, administrative and delivery barriers to engaging with apprenticeships.
- Employers often lack confidence articulating skills needs and are unaware of the potential for apprenticeships and young people to support workforce planning.
- Significant construction growth expected in 2028 will intensify pressure on local supply of trades, with retrofit representing a major skills gap.
- Demand for clean energy skills has increased sharply since 2019, particularly in engineering occupations.
- Shortages exist in welding, pipefitting, electrical power engineering, construction rigging, civil engineering technicians, scaffolders and SHE technician roles.
- Many employers anticipate that up to half of their workforce will require upskilling to meet transition demands.
- Persistent recruitment difficulties exist across engineering, technical and specialist roles.
- SMEs frequently require external support for apprenticeship administration.
- Interest in levy sharing is emerging, though knowledge of processes is limited.
- Employers report the need for new apprenticeship content and emerging standards, particularly in data science, utilities, and green technical skills.

FINDINGS FROM PHASE 2: APPRENTICESHIP PROVISION MAPPING

A detailed mapping exercise of local apprenticeship provision identified:

- Only six local providers offer a substantial range of clean energy-related apprenticeships.
- Warrington & Vale Royal College and The Engineering College deliver the broadest offer, followed by TTE Training, Cheshire College South & West and Cogent Skills.
- Provision is concentrated at Levels 2 and 3, with significant gaps at Level 4 and above.
- Apprenticeships are mainly focused on engineering and construction trades, with no local nuclear-specific offer despite strong regional demand.
- Most common standards include Engineering Fitter, Maintenance and Operations Engineering Technician, Installation and Maintenance Electrician, and Plumbing & Domestic Heating Technician.
- Delivery hubs are centred in Ellesmere Port & the Wirral, Warrington, Crewe and Winsford.
- Only one training provider offers pipe welding, pipefitting and groundwork.
- Major gaps exist in electrical/electronic engineering, mechatronics, automation, AI, robotics and ‘green’ apprenticeship standards relating to retrofit, renewables, smart technologies, recycling, environmental and nuclear roles.

4. CHALLENGES

Businesses face increasing financial pressures due to wider economic conditions and national policy changes and this is having a significant impact on uptake of apprenticeships. These pressures are compounded by administrative complexity, limited internal capacity, and challenges with recruitment and retention. They include:

FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS -

- High costs of apprentice wages, equipment and associated expenses, particularly for SMEs
- Difficulty offering competitive wages in comparison with other sectors
- Complexity surrounding incentives and funding mechanisms, including the Apprenticeship Levy
- Reduced productivity during the initial training period

ADMINISTRATIVE AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS -

- Complexity in navigating training provider options and regulatory requirements
- Administrative tasks that exceed SMEs' HR capacity
- Significant time investment required for mentoring and supervision
- Uncertainty created by ongoing changes to education and economic policy

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION CHALLENGES -

- Difficulty sourcing candidates with appropriate skills and behaviours
- Concerns around apprentice retention after qualification
- Persistent perception barriers among employers, young people, parents and educators
- Limited experience within some businesses in providing structured training and mentoring environments

The Apprenticeship Support Programme directly responds to a number of these constraints & barriers, however, challenges remain that need to be addressed at a national level if employers are to be fully supported to engage with apprenticeships.

5. OBJECTIVES & PRIORITIES

The Apprenticeship Support Programme is designed to address the challenges outlined above and to strengthen the region's apprenticeship ecosystem in support of clean energy transition. Programme objectives and resulting activity will continue to take into account any national changes in policy or funding and will align accordingly.

PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES:

- Launch a financial support scheme enabling businesses to build the infrastructure required to take on apprentices
- Improve access to apprenticeship networks and business-to-business coaching and mentoring
- Broker connections between employers, training providers and key stakeholders to support recruitment and training delivery

- Provide access to advice and guidance, wider employment services and support for the effective use of the Digital Apprenticeship Service (DAS)
- Facilitate the co-development of new apprenticeship provision aligned to employer needs

PROGRAMME FOCUS AREAS:

- Supporting businesses within the Cheshire West & Chester local authority area
- Targeting businesses in energy production and carbon-intensive industries such as: construction; engineering; advanced manufacturing; and agriculture
- Prioritising support for SMEs
- Engaging businesses that are new to apprenticeships or have previously disengaged
- Supporting both new-entrant and upskilling apprenticeship pathways
- Enhancing access to funding to mitigate financial barriers
- Providing guidance, coaching and mentoring to build employer confidence
- Strengthening access to existing support networks & employment services
- Enabling businesses to collaborate with training providers to co-develop and deliver relevant provision

6. TIMELINE & ACTIONS:

Actions	Date to be completed	Person(s) Responsible
Apprenticeship standards & providers mapping exercise	End of October 2025	Assistant Programme Lead
Compile master stakeholder spreadsheet with target employers	End of October 2025	Assistant Programme Lead & Lead Technical & Business Advisor
Identify & invite key stakeholders to a stakeholder working group	End of October 2025	RSP Programme Lead & Assistant Programme Lead
Host an Employer Business Breakfast event	Early November 2025	RSP Programme Lead & Assistant Programme Lead
Stakeholder engagement & feedback gathering to inform strategy and policy	Early December 2025	Assistant Programme Lead
Apprenticeship Support Programme Strategy	Mid-December 2025	RSP Programme Lead
Employer Incentive Scheme documentation	Mid-December 2025	Assistant Programme Lead
Strategy & policy approval	Mid-December 2025	Steering Group
Apprenticeship Support Programme launch (to include marketing campaign)	Early January 2026	Assistant Programme Lead
Employer engagement event	End of January 2026	Assistant Programme Lead
Continued stakeholder engagement and apprenticeship recruitment activities (inc distribution of grants)	January to March 2026	Assistant Programme Lead
Impact evidence gathering	March/ April 2026	RSP Programme Lead & Assistant Programme Lead
Evaluation period	March/ April 2026	Fortia

7. DELIVERY RESOURCE:

The Regional Skills Pilot delivery team is comprised of:

- Programme Lead (0.8FTE)
- Assistant Programme Lead (0.4FTE)
- Lead Technical & Business Advisor (0.2FTE)
- Programme Administrator (0.4FTE)

The Regional Skills Pilot delivery team sit within the wider Skills team at Enterprise Cheshire & Warrington and under the leadership of the Director of Skills & Employability.

The phase 2 development of the Apprenticeship Support Programme has been directed by employer feedback, and supported by a range of wider stakeholders, who have offered insight and direct resource. This includes:

- *North West Apprenticeship Ambassadors Network* – providing access to an apprenticeship network and coaching & mentoring ‘buddy’ system
- *Cheshire & Warrington Local Skills Improvement Plan* – providing a wider & complementary support mechanism for employers focused on levy-transfer
- *West Cheshire & North Wales Chamber of Commerce* – employer engagement and insight from employer feedback
- *Warrington & Vale Royal College* - employer engagement and insight from employer feedback
- *Cogent Skills* - providing a complementary employment service for employers via their Flexi Job Apprenticeship Agency
- *Cheshire College South & West* - insight from employer feedback
- *Reaseheath College* - insight from employer feedback
- *Cheshire & Warrington Careers Hub* - employer engagement

Overview of Funding (as of 05.01.2026):

Intervention Funding Allocation: £60,000 (**£120,000***)

The breakdown of anticipated spend is as follows:

Activity	Anticipated Spend
Employer Incentive Scheme	£60,000 (£110,000*)
Coaching & Mentoring	£0 – will be facilitated via the North West Apprenticeship Ambassador Network at no cost
Referral service, advice & guidance	£0 – covered through the overarching RSP programme management costs
Co-development of provision	£10,000*
TOTAL	£60,000 (£120,000*)

**Following early lessons learnt throughout the pilot, a request for funding to be moved from the short course intervention to the apprenticeship support intervention has been made to the Department of Energy Security & Net Zero (DESNZ) to enable more impactful use of funding. A decision is pending.*

8. ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

The Regional Skills Pilot Programme Lead is responsible for the delivery of the Apprenticeship Support Programme, supported by the Assistant Programme Lead.

Specific roles and responsibilities for the delivery of the programme are:

Role:	Regional Skills Pilot Programme Lead	Assistant Programme Lead	Lead Technical & Business Advisor	Programme Administrator	Net Zero Programme Manager	Director of Skills & Employability
DESNZ communications & contract management	Y				Y	Y
Programme Management	Y	Y				
Process development & implementation	Y	Y				
Programme documentation	Y	Y		Y		
Employer Engagement	Y	Y	Y			
Wider stakeholder engagement	Y				Y	Y
Marketing & promotion inc events		Y		Y		
Provider & employer communications		Y		Y		
Technical Advice			Y		Y	
Tracking systems production				Y		
Application processing				Y		
Application scoring	Y	Y				
Grant allocation & payment processing		Y		Y		
Monitoring & tracking		Y		Y		
Impact evidence	Y	Y				
Reporting	Y	Y			Y	
Analysis & evaluation	Y	Y				

Governance and approval of proposed initiatives resides with the Regional Skills Pilot steering group that is composed of representatives from:

- the Cheshire & Warrington local authorities
- Enterprise Cheshire & Warrington
- North West Net Zero
- ECITB
- Cogent Skills
- DWP
- Key employers

The steering group is chaired by the CEO of Enterprise Cheshire & Warrington and meets on a monthly basis.

9. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The programme will be measured against the following set of targets:

- A minimum of 10* apprentices recruited onto clean-energy related standards
- A minimum of 8 small to medium-sized businesses accessing financial support to engage with apprenticeships
- A minimum of 8 small to medium-sized businesses accessing coaching & mentoring to support with apprenticeship engagement, recruitment & delivery
- At least 2 new apprenticeships to commence co-development between employers & training providers in order to meet local training gaps

**Following positive approval by DESNZ to increase the funding allocated to the Apprenticeship Support Programme, this KPI will increase to a minimum of 20 apprentices recruited onto clean-energy related standards*

10. IMPACT & EVALUATION

External evaluation of the programme and the impact of the delivered initiatives will be conducted by Fortia as part of the Regional Skills Pilot overarching evaluation. Impact evidence that will be scrutinised and shared as part of the evaluation includes:

- Apprenticeship recruitment data
- Employer data
- Apprenticeship Support Programme uptake data (including employer applications, numbers of referrals...)
- Employer testimonials and case studies
- Curriculum planning documentation
- Marketing materials
- Employer survey data

Evaluation is scheduled to take place throughout the lifespan of the programme and will conclude in March/April 2026.