



Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority

Meeting and date: Fire Authority, 15 February 2023

Report title: Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority (BMKFA)
Apprenticeship Programme Update

Lead Member: Simon Rouse - Chairman

Report sponsor: Calum Bell – Head of Protection, Assurance & Development

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Action: Noting

Recommendations: It is recommended that the information contained within this update is noted.

Executive summary:

Year on year the Authority has continued to exceed the public sector target, introduced as part of the Government's apprenticeships Reform agenda, whereby organisations in England must meet a minimum of 2.3% apprenticeship new starts each year, based on employee headcount.

In July 2015 the Authority approved its apprenticeship programme with its first cohort of Firefighter Apprentices starting in 2016.

With current and previous apprentices now embedded across the Service, the Authority is proud of its progress in employing new apprentices and upskilling existing employees.

The Authority has fully utilised the funds available through the levy and has started to enter into co-investment funding arrangements with the Government. This means that the Authority pays 5% towards the cost of apprenticeship training and the Government pays the remaining 95%.

The Authority continues to look for ways to effectively utilise and improve its apprenticeship programme. Whether that be through different delivery models, collaboration with other emergency services or local businesses, or options to increase the funding available to invest in apprenticeships for staff.

Financial implications:

Details of the Authority's contribution and use of the apprenticeship levy is contained within Appendix 1.

Risk management:

Staff Availability is an identified corporate risk which is reviewed regularly by the Workforce Planning Group, Performance Monitoring and Strategic Management Boards.

Apprentice recruitment forms part of the Authority's succession planning process and contributes to the delivery of the Authority's People Strategy, by building capacity and capabilities agenda, supporting ongoing professionalisation of the Service and continuing to raise standards.

The Authority continues to utilise the apprenticeship programme as one of the ways to improve the diversity of the operational workforce.

Legal implications:

The Public Sector Apprenticeship Targets Regulations 2017 (SI 2017/513) (2017 Regulations) came into force on 31 March 2017 and required prescribed public bodies (such as the Authority) with 250 or more employees in England to have at least 2.3% apprenticeship starts each year, which could be aggregated over the four year period from 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2021.

The Public Sector Apprenticeship Targets (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (SI 2021/278) came into force on 1 April 2021. These Regulations amended the 2017 Regulations to provide that the same public sector apprenticeship target for specified public sector bodies (2.3% of their headcount, as new apprentice starts) would apply for a further year, beginning with 1 April 2021 and ending with 31 March 2022.

For the reporting periods ending on 31 March 2021, the Overview and Audit Committee received annual reports on how the Authority was performing against the public sector target; and received a draft annual return for approval before being published on the Authority's website.

The annual reporting met and exceeded the requirements of the statutory guidance. The Authority is no longer required to provide an annual return on these figures. The figures for the last 5 years are provided within Appendix 1.

Privacy and security implications:

The Authority is committed to protecting and respecting the privacy of individuals and the responsible handling of personal information. The Authority and any partners it works with, is under a legal duty both to process personal information in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and to respect the confidentiality of details held.

Duty to collaborate:

The Authority continues to work with its Thames Valley Fire Service partners to determine options for a collaborative approach to apprenticeship delivery. The Authority will continue to progress this and continues to learn from each Service's experience, share best practice, guidance and offer support.

Careers fairs have been attended with a collaborative approach being taken between The Authority and Thames Valley Police, at present these have included the National Apprenticeship show at the Milton Keynes arena.

The Organisational Development department are currently exploring potential funding options, including utilising local businesses unused levy funds – as detailed above. The team have reached out to local colleges within Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, who we deliver our apprenticeship programmes through, as well as other Fire Services, to determine if this would be a viable option for the Authority.

Health and safety implications:

Considered, none identified pertaining to this report.

Environmental implications:

Considered, none identified pertaining to this report.

Equality, diversity, and inclusion implications:

The recommendations contained within this report supports the delivery of the People Strategy and four of the pillars contained within it; Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, Organisational Development & Resourcing, Training, Learning & Development and Employee Engagement.

An Equalities Impact Assessment is reviewed/completed when there is any change to process or procedure related to the Authority's Apprenticeship Programme.

The Authority's Apprenticeship Programme has had a positive impact on, reducing the average age of our workforce, the investment in the local community via the postcode criteria in place during recruitment and increasing the diversity of employees.

In addition, increased support is in place from the Employee Development Officer for those employees who may have a learning disability and require reasonable adjustments to be made. Referrals to specialist organisations are also being made where needed.

The Authority endorsed the submission of a pledge and were the first Fire and Rescue Service to be accepted by the Apprenticeship Diversity Champions Network (ADCN) in February 2018. The Authority were given the opportunity to be quoted within the 2019 ADCN report, being asked to showcase as exemplars within this group and continue to be active members of this group.

During National Apprenticeship Week 2022, one of our Firefighter Apprentice's represented the Authority, on a telephone discussion with the Fire Minister. Following introductions, Lord Greenhalgh asked what they enjoyed about their apprenticeship, why they had joined and if they wanted to stay once competent. Our Firefighter presented himself professionally throughout, giving a great introduction and sharing his positive experience, the support he had received and his enjoyment of the job alongside his plans to progress his career.

Apprenticeships are available to all ages, not just school leavers or "younger" people. The Authority has utilised apprenticeships to support the development of existing staff.

Consultation and communication:

Regular communication is undertaken across Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service, delivered via:

- Intranet articles
- Regular engagement with staff / face to face briefings
- Regular 1:1's and learner reviews conducted by the Employee Development Officer

Background papers:

Apprenticeship Programme – Annual Statutory Reporting 2018-2021:

- [DfE Apprenticeship Return 30 September 2021 \(bucksfire.gov.uk\)](https://bucksfire.gov.uk)
- [Appendix B - Data Publication and Apprenticeship Activity Return 30 September 2020.docx \(bucksfire.gov.uk\)](https://bucksfire.gov.uk)
- <https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2020/03/apprenticeship-activity-return-30-september-2019.pdf/>
- [https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2020/03/das annual apprenticeship return 2018.pdf/](https://bucksfire.gov.uk/documents/2020/03/das%20annual%20apprenticeship%20return%202018.pdf/)

Appendix	Title	Protective Marking
1	BMKFA Apprenticeship Programme Update	Official Sensitive

The Background and Current Position

In July 2015 the Authority approved its apprenticeship programme with its first cohort of Firefighter Apprentices starting in 2016. Apprentice recruitment is now fully embedded as part of the Authority's workforce and succession planning process and contributes to the delivery of the Authority's People Strategy, by building capacity and capabilities agenda, supporting ongoing professionalisation of the Service and continuing to raise standards.

The Authority has been working hard to evolve and transform its apprenticeship proposition. As an organisation the Authority has moved away from the previous Apprenticeship Training Agency (ATA) delivery option and now directly employs all apprentices and appoints a training provider to deliver the skills and knowledge element, alongside workplace assessing and coaching.

In addition to this, the Authority has demonstrated its commitment to apprenticeships by investing in and appointing a dedicated Employee Development Officer to provide the necessary learning support to all its apprentices. The Employee Development Officer supports all staff within the Authority who are developing themselves whether this be through an apprenticeship, or an internal development programme linked to promotion.

With current and previous apprentices now embedded across support staff and operational roles, the Authority is proud of its progress in employing new apprentices and upskilling existing employees.

Over the last 5 years, our staff have been enrolled on a wide range of apprenticeships:

- Firefighter – level 3
- Business Administration – level 3 & 4
- ICT Helpdesk – level 3
- Digital Marketing – level 3
- Vehicle Technician – level 3
- Cyber Security Technologist – level 4
- Assistant Accountant – level 3
- Human Resources level 3 & 5
- Information Communication Technology – level 3
- Coaching Professional – level 5
- Marketing Manager – level 6
- Operations / Department Manager – level 5
- Senior Leaders Masters Degree – Level 7
- Fire Safety – Level 6

In January 2022, a paper was presented to the Strategic Management Board, analysing the delivery options available for the Authority's Firefighter apprenticeship programme.

Appendix 1

The recommended option was the continuation of the acquisition training (Firefighter Delivery Programme – FFDP) to be delivered externally by a training provider (Capita) at the Fire Service College (FSC). This allows the Authority to work in partnership with a registered Training Provider to deliver the Firefighter apprenticeship programme. The Training Provider conducts learner reviews and monitors the progress of the apprentice to provide feedback and training to support the apprentice with off-the-job learning and the knowledge elements of the programme. The Training Provider holds the apprenticeship delivery contract, which is managed by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).

The acquisition training is funded through the apprenticeship levy utilising the full funding band of £14,000 and there is a top up fee of £3,900 per learner, which the Authority pays directly to the Training Provider (costed based on current provision by FSC).

The recommended option is now fully embedded for delivery of the Authority's Firefighter apprenticeship programme.

Department for Education Apprenticeship Reform Programme

In 2015 the Government set a national target of generating 3 million high quality apprenticeship starts in England and the Authority has been a leading force in promoting apprenticeships across the sector nationally and within the workplace.

The Apprenticeships Reform Programme was established in May 2015 and was scheduled to be delivered by the end of the financial year 2020/21 and was extended for a further year, beginning with 1 April 2021 and ending with 31 March 2022.

As part of the Government's apprenticeships Reform agenda, a public sector target was introduced whereby organisations in England must meet a minimum of 2.3% apprenticeship new starts each year, based on employee headcount.

To help ensure the public sector led the way in apprenticeship delivery, large public sector organisations were required to report against the public sector apprenticeship target.

For the reporting periods ending on 31 March 2021, the Overview and Audit Committee received annual reports on how the Authority was performing against the public sector target; and received a draft annual return for approval before being published on the Authority's website.

The annual reporting met and exceeded the requirements of the statutory guidance. The Authority is no longer required to provide an annual return on these figures.

The figures for the last 5 years are provided below.

Financial Year	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023*
New Apprentice Starts	14	42	4	21	16	19
% New Apprentice Starts of Establishment	3.1%	9.5%	0.9%**	4.4%	3.4%	3.8%

* 2022-2023 numbers are subject to change with further planned recruitment campaigns for Firefighter apprentices and a Learning & Development Administrator apprentice in 2023. Although it is no longer a requirement, this showcases that the Authority has already exceeded the target of 2.3% apprentice starts for this period.

** During 2019-2020 reporting period, we recruited Firefighter apprentices in March 2019 and April 2021 and therefore fell outside of the reporting cut off dates.

The Apprenticeship Levy

The Apprenticeship Levy was introduced in April 2017 for all employers that have an annual PAYE bill of £3 million per annum and employ over 250 staff. The employer's payment is set at 0.5% of their annual payroll and includes a £14,000 annual allowance. The Government tops up The Authority's contributions by 10% making a total current allowance of approximately £78,241 (December 2022).

Summary of Levy payments made by the Authority:

Levy Payments	£ (Includes 10% Top Up)
2022/23	-44,613*
2021/22	-77,107
2020/21	-74,259
2019/20	-64,419
2018/19	-64,725
2017/18	-58,756
Total	-383,879

* Payments made up to November 2022

The Authority draws down on this levy for those employees who are currently undertaking apprenticeships to assist with their own development and to also enhance the skills within the organisation.

Breakdown of Levy investment by apprentice type:

Apprenticeship	£
Firefighter	275,826
Other Apprentices	131,481
Total	407,307

The Authority has fully invested the funds available through the levy - £383,879 - and has now entered into co-investment funding arrangements with the Government. This means that the Authority pays 5% towards the cost of apprenticeship training and the Government pays the remaining 95%.

The tables below, detail the amount the Levy has been topped up by, by both the Authority and the Government through the co-investment funding arrangement:

Authority Contributions	£
2022/23	-1,171
Total	-1,171

Government Contributions	£
2022/23	-22,254
Total	-22,254

Alternative Funding Options

Levy paying employers can transfer a percentage of their levy funds, which were declared for the previous tax year, to other employers. Employers receiving transferred funds will only be able to use them to pay for training and assessment for new apprenticeship starts.

The Organisational Development department are currently exploring other potential funding options, including utilising local businesses unused levy funds – as detailed above. The team have reached out to local colleges within Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, who we deliver our apprenticeship programmes through, as well as other Fire Services, to determine if this would be a viable option for the Authority.

Next Steps

The Authority continues to look for ways to effectively utilise and improve its apprenticeship programme. Whether that be through different delivery models, collaboration with other emergency services or local businesses, or options to increase the funding available to invest in apprenticeships for all staff.

The apprenticeship programme is fully embedded within the Authority's culture and ways of working. It enables new starters and enhances the Authority's strategy for the retention and upskilling of existing staff.