

Go ahead for Level 3

Four years after the first employer ‘trailblazer’ group was formed, the new Level 3 apprenticeship standard has finally been approved.

Charlotte Goddard reports

Recruitment remains the number-one challenge for nurseries in the UK as qualified staff continue to leave the sector in droves. The NDNA’s most recent workforce survey found that 86 per cent of nurseries lost staff last year, with the number of Level 3-qualified staff in the sector down by almost a fifth since 2016. Two-thirds of nursery managers say they are unable to recruit suitable replacements due to a lack of candidates.

Against this worrying background, ongoing work on bringing early years qualifications in line with what employers need has become more urgent. Five years after the Government first mooted the idea of empowering ‘trailblazer’ groups of employers to develop sector-led apprenticeship standards, and four years after the first such trailblazer

group was established in the early years sector, the first apprenticeship standard for early years practitioners was finally approved at the beginning of March.

The Early Years Educator (EYE) Level 3 apprenticeship standard has been put through a second Trailblazer group, headed by nursery chain Busy Bees. The group was established in February 2017 after the first group was sacked for resisting pressure from the Department for Education over its – now reneged upon – requirement for maths and English GCSEs at grade C (their Level 3 standard was first submitted back in 2014).

Chaired by Fay Gibbin, training manager of Busy Bees, the current trailblazer group has encountered its own obstacle on the path to approval: it does not have the power to change the criteria of the EYE

The Early Years Educator (EYE) standards were worked on by the Trailblazer group headed by Busy Bees



qualification, on which the Level 3 apprenticeship standards are based, but the Institute for Apprenticeships could not accept the standards unless the criteria were changed, as they did not fit with its own template and guidelines. The standards were first submitted in June, so have taken at least nine months of to-ing and fro-ing to be approved.

‘Delays were primarily down to the fact that the Department for Education defined the criteria for the

WHO ARE THE TRAILBLAZERS?

The trailblazer group mostly features a number of small nurseries, with the National Day Nurseries Association playing an advisory role. Bright Horizons is not a member but is ‘working closely’ with the group.

Members are: Darcie Bunny in Derby, Little Cupcakes and Blossom Day Nursery in Leicester, Cheeky Monkeys in Staffordshire, Nottinghamshire-based Hollies Day Nurseries (four settings), The Learning Tree (three nurseries) and Shapes Day Nursery in Birmingham. Also: Holmes Park Day Nursery in Reading, which was part of the Treetops group bought by Busy Bees last year, and First Quest Day Nursery in Worcestershire.

‘We are a mixture of people: owners, managers, practitioners – all different levels with different experiences of apprenticeships programmes themselves,’ says Busy Bees training manager Fay Gibbin. ‘When we were putting the group together we approached people ourselves, and also were approached by settings after we went out on social media. We were looking for a mix of employers, different sizes and types, some private and some voluntary sector. They all have different ideas and different views – the sector is so wide and covers so many different roles that it is important to get a range of perspectives.’

A larger advisory group feeds into

the trailblazer group, including larger employers and voluntary-run settings that want to be involved but don’t necessarily want to put their heads above the parapet.

Outside experts such as awarding bodies have also attended meetings. ‘When and how often we meet depends on what we are working on at the time,’ Ms Gibbin says. ‘We were meeting quite regularly in the early days, but now we are working on feedback from the Institute as it comes in, and we can do that by conference call. We also email back and forwards to ask questions before the meeting. We tend to meet in the Midlands because it’s easier for everyone to get to.’



EYE qualification,' says Ms Gibbin. 'You would believe that would make things easier, but the Institute for Apprenticeships [IfA] and the Education and Childcare Route Panel were pushing the standards back and saying the statements weren't worded correctly – but they were part of the DfE defined criteria, which we did not have the power to change.'

To solve this problem, the group requested support from the Department for Education and were assigned an intermediary from its Early Years and Childcare: Providers and Regulation team. The intermediary had the power to change the EYE criteria, and this got things moving again.

Ms Gibbin also feels the process has been hampered by a lack of early years representation on the Institute's Route Panel, headed by Sir Nick Weller, executive principal at Dixons City Academy in Bradford. The panel oversees both the Trailblazer group's work on apprenticeships and the work of another panel developing the new T Level qualifications for the childcare and education sector.

'If you look at the Route Panel, we don't think it is fully representative of the sector,' she says. 'It is not made up of early years representatives, it is more about schools and education,

and that can sometimes be a barrier.'

Now the standards have been approved, the group can submit its assessment plan, which it has worked on with awarding bodies Skills First, CACHE and City and Guilds. This includes how the apprentice will be assessed at the end of their apprenticeship and what they will be assessed on, who will carry out the assessment and who will make the final judgement of competency and grading. Once approved, it will be published alongside details of the maximum amount of funding that will be available from the Government for the apprenticeship. The Trailblazer group is recommending a funding band of £5,000 to £6,000, based on a full costing analysis of three training providers, compared with the current rate providers receive, of £2,500.

Ms Gibbin thinks the assessment plan will be approved more quickly than the standard was because much of the work is already completed. 'Our focus at the moment is on Level 3 because that is a licence to practice,' she says. 'We have already worked with awarding bodies to develop a draft assessment plan, but until the standard was approved we couldn't submit it formally. However, we have submitted it to the account manager

T LEVELS AND WORK PLACEMENTS

T levels are an alternative to apprenticeships. They have come about as part of the major skills reforms taking place in the UK. T levels will be a classroom-based vocational programme (as opposed to the work-based apprenticeships with some classroom time) with 45 to 60 days of work placement time. Without successful completion of this work placement, the student doesn't get the T level.

The idea is that these work placements are high-quality and structured, following concerns that too many under the previous system were not.

Now the Department for Education has commissioned a charity, The Challenge, to pilot the delivery of new-work placements in the current academic year, in preparation for the launch of childcare and education T Levels in 2020, among others.

The pilot work placement programme is running mainly across London, the West Midlands and the North-West, and involves around 2,500 students currently on vocational courses at 21 further education providers, including childcare courses. Thirty-eight childcare students at South Thames College and 15 at Manchester College are taking part in the pilot. 'The new model for work placements is being designed as a significantly different approach to traditional "work experience" placements,' says a spokesperson for The Challenge.

The DfE is incentivising the creation of substantive work placements by providing training providers with £250 for each qualifying student. Providers must ensure work placements are an average of 50 days long, cover at least 315 hours and are focused on developing practical and technical skills. They must also take place with an external employer away from the student's learning environment, and be delivered to a structured work plan, supervised and monitored by site visits.

The University of Derby is researching the provision of work placements in four technical route areas, including Childcare and Education. The research aims to identify how learning currently takes place on work placements in England, and what lessons can be learned for implementation of extended work placements, and will be published in July.

'If you look at the Route Panel, we don't think it is fully representative of the sector'

at the IfA and are waiting for informal feedback.'

While the priority remains Level 3 for the time being, the group has started to look at apprenticeship standards for Levels 4, 5 and 6. 'We have written role profiles as to what roles at those levels would look like,' says Ms Gibbin. 'We will start looking at those levels more closely over the rest of the year. We will be able to consult more broadly than with Level 3 because there isn't that rigidly defined criteria.'

Eventually the group will look at standards for Level 2, but as a DfE working group is developing defined criteria for that level, as it did with the Level 3 EYE, the Trailblazer group's hands are currently tied. ■