

# A safe bet?

Apprentices are cheap to employ, often enthusiastic and can be trained to fit an organisation's needs, but there are risks involved too. So are they really a good investment? By *Nicole Weinstein*

**A**pprenticeships have never been so popular. Against the high levels of youth unemployment of recent years, apprenticeships have been a political trump card, with all the political parties vying to create more of them in May's election. The coalition doubled the number of apprenticeships in the last parliament and David Cameron has now pledged to create three million new apprenticeships by 2020. For providers, apprentices mean the opportunity to create home-grown talent and their relative cheapness allows a nursery to grow.

But while the political will has been met with a desire by early years providers to take apprentices on, the requirement from September 2014 for applicants to hold a minimum grade C in English and maths has caused a huge drop in the number of eligible candidates.

John Warren, director of childcare services at Fennies, an eight-nursery chain which won an award for Apprenticeship Employer of the Year 2015, says, 'We've had a lot of successes over the years, with some moving on to become room leaders and deputy managers. But we are now struggling to fill our vacancies from January. A year ago, we would have been turning people away. This qualification requirement is blocking us from employing excellent candidates and it's having a knock-on effect on our Level 3 workforce.' The company currently employs more than 40 apprentices, many of whom were recruited before the change came in.

## ON THE DECLINE

There is no data showing how many people are in childcare apprenticeships specifically, but the National Apprenticeship Service says the number successfully finishing the Children and Young People's Workforce Apprenticeship Framework, which includes courses covering both



the Early Years Educator (EYE) and social care, dropped by 1,190 between 2011/12 and 2013/14. It says there were 15,650 completions in 2011/2, compared to 14,460 in 2013/14, which is the most recent data available.

The GCSE requirement associated with the new EYE standard, which applies to both apprenticeships and work- and college-based EYE diplomas, has resulted in trainers seeing apprenticeship numbers decimated by up to 96 per cent.

Stella Ziolkowski, National Day Nurseries Association director of quality and workforce development, says she has raised this with the Department of Education. 'The issue is that training providers are not taking students on if they don't believe they can achieve the maths and English grade C by the end of the apprenticeship,' she explains. 'Employers won't take on an apprentice if they haven't gained their maths and English qualification or aren't likely to as they won't be counted towards their ratios of Level 3 qualified staff.'

**At Fennies, 90 per cent of apprentices go on to secure a full-time job with the company**

'To illustrate this massive reduction in early years apprentices, one of our members went to five training providers to try to source apprentices and they have not been successful.'

## GOOD LEVELS OF EDUCATION

There are many reasons why it is important for apprentices to have a good all-round level of education. Mr Warren does not dispute that English at level C or above in GCSE is a necessity because of the 'amount of report-writing that they have to do', but says that maths is the bigger problem, 'stopping them from getting a foot in the door'.

Margaret Baran, joint director of Whitton Day Nursery and Twickenham Day Nursery, will only take on apprentices with A to C in English and maths. She says, 'Having employed many NVQ Level 2 and 3 apprentices who don't have the A to C GCSEs in English and maths, I can testify that most of these are not up to the job, with a very few exceptions. Many of these leave childcare once they ►

## APPRENTICESHIPS



realise they are unable to make relevant observations or write effective plans for children's development.

'In addition, their spelling, grammar and diction have to be constantly corrected by the senior staff and their maths skills are unacceptable, not to mention certain other skills. In light of what is now expected by the Government and Ofsted, childcare workers and Early Years Educators are expected to be able to do a similar job as qualified teachers, without having undertaken a degree.'

### WORK ETHIC

Many young apprentices are eager to learn, enthusiastic and reliable. However, for others the move from education to a working environment may be a shock and they might lack the experience and commercial awareness.

At Fennies, where 90 per cent of apprentices go on to secure a full-time job with the company, apprentices' hourly rates are topped up to the equivalent of the minimum wage. Mr Warren says, 'In addition to their salary, we pay towards travel and provide a packed lunch. We find that in treating them well, we have loyal staff team. From a financial point of view, hiring an apprentice helps you expand your business because your budget for staffing is less if you have a team of apprentices supporting you.'

'However, if you employ a young person who doesn't have a good work ethic, it can be a disadvantage. For example, if they regularly call in sick, instead of paying £4 or £5 an hour for an apprentice, plus their travel and packed lunch, you end up paying

£15 an hour for an agency member of staff. So, if they are off sick, you end up paying triple.'

Apprentices are also difficult to sack because they are protected by employment law. Mr Warren says that his apprentices have a long vetting and induction period of about six weeks, where they learn what is expected of them in their role. 'In the first six to eight weeks, they shadow our team and move from room to room and it's a couple of months before they become a solid member of the team,' he explains.

'The room leaders are given training in how to mentor the apprentices by Hawk Training. The jobs that we don't allow apprentices to do are give medication, feed children with dietary requirements and have key children straight away. This can sometimes put pressure on other qualified staff in the room,' he adds.

Having enough time to mentor, train and support apprentices is another key factor, according to Gemma Street, area manager at Brambley Hedge, a chain of three nurseries based in Cheshire.

'It is vital that you have enough staff in place to be able to support the room supervisors while they train up the apprentices. We employ four apprentices and the first round are now coming up to being fully qualified members of the team. It's great to see them at this stage because of all the hard work the room supervisors have put in,' she says.

'Time constraints is by far the biggest challenge for us. The room

### Room leaders at Fennies receive training from Hawk Training in how to mentor apprentices



### MORE INFORMATION

Apprenticeship Grant for Employers of 16- to 24-Year-Olds, to the value of £1,500 per apprentice, is available for employers if they meet the criteria set out by the Skills Funding Agency. See [www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-grant-employer-fact-sheet](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-grant-employer-fact-sheet)

supervisors need time to mentor the apprentices, to go through the structure and routines of the day, to go through the children's learning journeys, and to teach them about what is expected of them in the role of a nursery practitioner. We ensure that our managers are on hand to go into the rooms to support the supervisors while they are mentoring the apprentices. We've put a lot of hard work and commitment into training our apprentices because we were becoming increasingly disappointed with the qualified staff that came through the door at interview stage.

'Some of those with Level 3 qualifications were nowhere near up to scratch with child development so we decided to put apprentices in each of our nurseries and to train our internal staff using Learndirect courses.'

For large chains such as Busy Bees, which has had an in-house training programme since 2003, on-the-job apprenticeship training is now big business, with more than 600 apprentices on its programmes currently, and 1,500 projected for the end of 2015. This marks a huge expansion, as it has trained 1,800 people as apprentices so far inside and outside the company.

In terms of its own staff, 830 Busy Bees employees are going through the programme. Training manager Fay Gibbin says, 'We reap the benefits of growing our own skilled workforce. We believe that by empowering our dedicated staff teams with exceptional skills and knowledge they will inherit the company's values.'

### ONWARDS AND UPWARDS

With the qualifications barrier limiting the pool of eligible candidates, and the possible financial implications of employing an apprentice who might not be suited to the job, employing apprentices who will ultimately become the future of your childcare workforce is not an easy task.

It is clear that providers who have had success with their apprenticeship programmes have been committed to employing and training the right candidates. And for those who have put time, energy and patience into training their next generation of childcare staff, the results speak for themselves: they have a dependable, reliable, loyal workforce that has been trained according to the company's individual needs. This is job satisfaction for the employer and the employee. ■