

Northern Skills Network Apprenticeship Assessment Roundtable and update Webinar, in partnership with the Federation of Awarding Bodies and Gateway Qualifications

This roundtable was convened to facilitate a solution-focused discussion on proposed changes to apprenticeship assessment, the implications for providers, apprentices, and assessment organisations (AOs), and how the sector can shape these reforms to ensure quality and sustainability.

The session was part of NSN's engagement to ensure the apprenticeship sector's voice is represented with key stakeholders, and the current consultation open: [Regulatory framework for apprenticeship assessment - GOV.UK](#)

The roundtable was attended by 19 individuals, representatives were welcomed from Independent Training Providers, FE Colleges, End Point Assessment Organisations/Assessment Organisations and local provider networks. The update webinar was attended by over 100 individuals the above organisations.

Wider Context of Change in the Skills Landscape

The discussion took place amidst a period of significant change and reform across the skills and apprenticeship system, including:

- Changes to the End Point Assessment model and increasing responsibility for Assessment Organisations (AOs) to design and implement new strategies per standard.
- The development of Foundation Apprenticeships and proposals for shorter, modular apprenticeships, particularly to engage more young people and support transition into work.
- Introduction of the Skills and Growth Offer, aimed at aligning post-16 provision with local labour market needs and driving economic productivity.
- Reforms to Off-the-Job Training Hours, now defined by standard rather than a blanket 20% requirement, giving more flexibility to tailor delivery models.
- A revised Ofsted Education Inspection Framework (EIF) due.
- Emerging policy aligned to Skills England's "8+2 priority sectors", including Construction, Engineering, Health & Social Care, and Digital, which are expected to shape future funding, standards review, and system reform.

These changes present opportunities and challenges, and underscore the need for clear communication, robust implementation plans, and support for providers, employers, and apprentices.

Federation of Awarding Bodies

Charlotte opened the session by setting the context around the ongoing consultation on apprenticeship assessment reforms, which remains open until 27th August 2025. She highlighted the significant shift proposed in the assessment model, placing greater responsibility on Assessment Organisations (AOs) to design and deliver assessments. Under the new model, 40% of the assessment will continue to be externally marked, but AOs will take a more central role in shaping the approach per standard.

Charlotte raised the proposed timeframe for implementation, which aims to review all standards by August 2026. However, clarity is needed on whether changes will apply to new apprenticeship starts only, or also to those already on-programme, risking the creation of a dual system or dual model, with implications for consistency, funding, and delivery.

FAB, in partnership with DfE John Myers, Department for Education, is producing a companion document to support understanding of the new model.

When discussing the challenges faced with EPA, there has been an agreed 5 C's as the core areas of focus for reform:

- Cost
- Complexity
- Capacity
- Consistency
- Completions

Charlotte talked about the need for Providers and Apprenticeship Assessment Organisations to work closely together and to ensure that clarity and consideration is given to ensure a smooth transition to the new model.

Gateway Qualifications

Current Structure vs. Proposed Reform

Gateway Qualifications outlined the significant shift in the role of Assessment Organisations (EPAOs) under the proposed reforms:

- Currently, responsibility for standard development and assessment design sits with IfATE and Trailblazer groups, while delivery is overseen by Ofqual and EPAOs.
- Under the proposed model, EPAOs will be responsible for designing, delivering, and owning their own assessment strategies.
- This represents a major change, with the potential for variation in assessment models between EPAOs, which has not been the case previously.

Implications for Assessment Organisations

- EPAOs will need to create their own assessment strategies per standard, which may differ significantly from other EPAOs.
- This diverges from the current model, where there is very limited variation between EPAOs assessing the same standard.

Implications for Providers

- Providers will need to make strategic choices about which EPAO or AAO (Approved Assessment Organisation) to work with, based on how each has designed their assessment.
- In some cases, providers will need to become a recognised centre for the AAO in order to deliver assessments – this adds operational and quality requirements.
- An example was given using the Level 5 Coaching Professional Standard, where three different models may be available, depending on the EPAO:
 - Providers do up to 60% of the assessment
 - Provider will do a % of the assessment
 - Status Quo – with tweaks

Operational Considerations

Gateway (the process into EPA) will still exist and will continue to be linked to funding/payment milestones. However, there are outstanding questions about how this will work in practice, particularly in relation to retention and completion funding if assessment models diverge significantly.

Gateway Qualifications highlighted the complexity and risk these changes may introduce for both providers and apprentices, while also acknowledging the potential for greater flexibility and innovation in assessment. However, they emphasised the need for clarity, consistency, and adequate support as the sector navigates this transition.

Discussion Summary

Key Risks:

- There is growing concern that the scale of proposed change, especially without clear implementation plans or transitional support, could damage the apprenticeship brand, which has been built on trust, quality, and stability.
- Confusion and fragmentation for providers, especially where dual systems may exist during transition.
- Significant concerns about changing assessment expectations mid-programme, which would breach agreements with employers and learners.
- Additional burdens on providers, including:
 - Staffing and training needs – in the transition from frameworks to standards, many providers have lost the “assessor” skills and IQA roles within the business
 - Quality assurance requirements
 - Cost implications
- Navigating diverse assessment models from multiple AOs

Assessment Principles:

- The importance of maintaining a common core framework for assessment, with room for innovation, was strongly emphasised.
- Many stakeholders value current methods such as portfolio-based assessments, professional discussions, and knowledge tests, particularly when delivered flexibly and creatively.

Sector Collaboration:

- The sector is committed to working together to influence positive change.
- There is a strong appetite for organisations like NSN, FAB, and AELP to lead collective engagement with DfE and other stakeholders.
- The principle of independent assessment remains welcomed, but it must be manageable, consistent, and clearly communicated.

Initial Challenges surrounding the proposed changes to assessments:

Consistency of the whole approach to assessment

Specialisms for Teaching and Assessing (Plumbing)

Staff development - time resource

Capacity - there is none!

Lack of capability

Will degrade with quality of the apprenticeship system

Unclear

Complexity

Complex

Capacity

Unworkable

Confusion

Concern this just falling back in to the framework approach

Consistency

Capability

Complexity

Cost

Competency

[illegible]

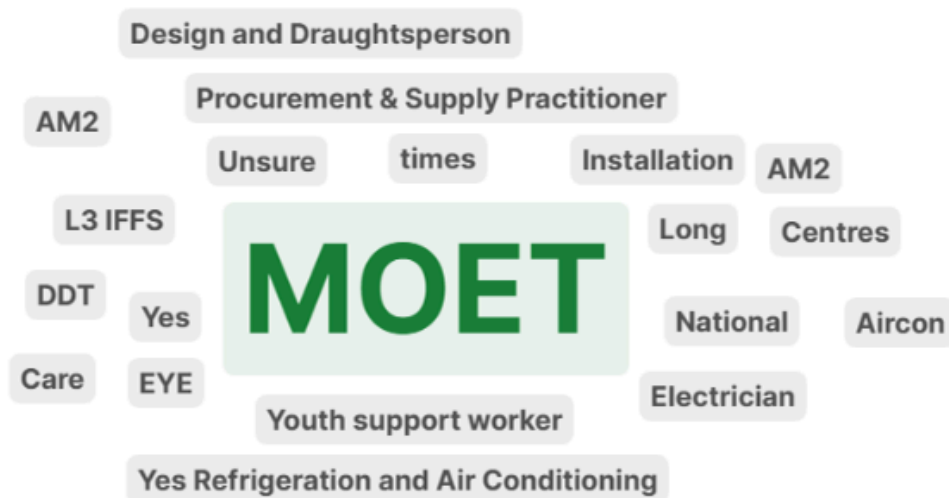
Polling Questions

Are there any apprenticeship standards you think are overly complex, cost is disproportionate, there is a lack of assessment capacity or completions are blocked by assessment?

Roundtable feedback:



Webinar feedback:



Polling Questions

Do you feel End Point Assessment currently provides a quality service?

Roundtable feedback:

Mixed picture



Yes



No



Webinar feedback:

Yes



Mixed picture



No



Questions Raised

- How will the role of an independent IQA be defined - can they be employed by a provider as long as they are not directly involved in teaching/learning delivery? This may be difficult for niche provision
- How will the new framework address concerns around the financial sustainability of Apprenticeship Assessment, particularly if providers and AOs face increased resource and compliance demands?
- How can consistency and standardisation of assessment be maintained across different delivery models while still allowing for flexibility in assessment approaches?
- How will the new framework treat additional, non-mandated qualifications that employers or apprentices request as 'value added'?
- Will training providers be able to design and submit assessment versions for approval by an AO, or will all providers be required to deliver a standardised assessment for each element?
- Could a more flexible or staggered approach to assessment be implemented to reduce pressure on apprentices compared with the current system of clustered EPAs?
- How will costs be managed if providers become e.g. approval fees, annual charges, and additional quality assurance requirements?

Opportunities for Constructive Reform – key asks:

- Support a phased approach to reform, with minimum six-month lead time, applying only to new starts.
- Retain elements of the current system that are working well, while introducing flexibility and innovation in standards where it is genuinely needed.
- Ensure reforms are apprentice-focused, evidence-based, and aligned with industry and employer needs.
- Continue to develop CPD, guidance and support for providers, particularly for internal quality assurance (IQA), assessment planning, and onboarding new staff.
 - Is there scope for the Apprenticeship Workforce Development Fund to support providers?
- Operations/Departmental Manager is a standard was identified from those in the group as one that is overly complex, cost is disproportionate, there is a lack of assessment capacity, or completions are regularly blocked by assessment – is there scope for this one to be reviewed in the next batch?

Next Steps

NSN and local provider networks will continue to facilitate regional discussions, gather evidence, and feed into consultation responses and stakeholder discussions.

For more information, please contact: chair@northernskillsnetwork.co.uk