



APPG for London and APPG on Apprenticeships Joint Meeting on Apprenticeships and Social Mobility

Meeting date: Monday 13 November 2023

Location: Palace of Westminster

Chairs: Sir Bob Neill MP and Charlotte Nichols MP

Speakers:

- Doniya Soni-Clark – Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Multiverse
- Mayor Rokhsana Fiaz – Executive Member for Economy and Skills, London Councils
- Tanisha Zaman – Peer Researcher, Partnership for Young London
- Nikkita Gordon – Apprentice Trainee Driver at Go Ahead London
- Tyrique Miller – Sales Executive Apprentice, LSBU
- Alex O’Shea – Estimator Apprentice, Sir Robert McAlpine Ltd
- Zawad Ibrahim – Advanced Business Administrator Apprenticeship, London Borough of Camden

Also in attendance:

- Munira Wilson MP
- Catherine West MP
- Earl Russell
- Lord Best.

Summary of the meeting

Sir Bob Neill MP opened the meeting outlining how apprenticeships are an important means of social mobility and have advantages in accessibility compared to other forms of education or employment. Sir Bob talked about the situation in London, which has seen a decline in the number of young people starting apprenticeships since the introduction of apprenticeship levy. He expressed his concern for this, given the higher than average youth unemployment levels in the city and the cost of living crisis, where earning whilst learning becomes increasingly important for Londoners on low incomes.

Doniya Soni-Clark, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at Multiverse, emphasised the need to address the disparity between talent distribution and opportunity, especially in the tech sector. Multiverse aims to offer diverse and inclusive opportunities, recognising the business benefits of greater diversity.

Soni-Clark emphasised the importance of apprenticeships as a tool for social mobility, enabling individuals to learn on the job while earning a living. She underscored the role of apprenticeships in building diverse and inclusive teams and creating opportunities for those who may not have access through traditional career paths. Multiverse's mission revolves around diversity, with a focus on providing opportunities to high-potential talent.

Doniya shared statistics, such as the low representation of ethnic minorities and women in senior tech roles, and highlighted Multiverse's efforts to hire from deprived neighbourhoods and support individuals from various backgrounds, including those on free school meals. Soni-Clark concluded by expressing a strong belief in apprenticeships as a source of social mobility, emphasising their effectiveness at multiple points in an individual's career for upskilling and earning opportunities.

Tanisha Zaman, a peer researcher at the Partnership for Young London, provided insights into the challenges faced by young people in apprenticeships and the impact on social mobility. Zaman, drawing from personal experience, highlighted the stigma associated with apprenticeships, particularly in a city like London where university education is highly encouraged. Zaman pointed out that this stigma is not only present in social settings but is deeply rooted in the education system, with teachers often only talking about students going to university over apprenticeships.

Tanisha stressed the lack of awareness and education about apprenticeships, noting that many young people are not adequately informed about the potential and value of apprenticeship programmes.

Zaman also addressed the issue of financial support, stating that there is a lack of understanding among young people regarding how to stabilise themselves financially during an apprenticeship. The misconception that apprenticeships only offer minimum wage was discussed, and Zaman highlighted the need for better education to differentiate between apprenticeships and internships.

An important point raised by Tanisha was the absence of financial support, such as the educational maintenance allowance, for apprenticeships, contrasting it with the financial stability provided to those following traditional educational routes, such as university. Zaman said apprenticeships are seen as a barrier to a social lifestyle, as apprentices miss out on opportunities like Freshers Week and student unions that are commonly associated with university life. Zaman argued that apprenticeships should be more than just work and certification; they should offer a lifestyle that is currently overlooked and neglected.

In conclusion, Zaman called for a more comprehensive approach to tackle the stigma, misinformation, and lack of support associated with apprenticeships, emphasising the need to ensure that young people undergoing apprenticeships have access to financial stability, student unions, and a sense of belonging.

Mayor Rokhsana Fiaz, Executive Member for Employment and Skills at London Councils, provided an overview of the work undertaken by London Councils in relation to apprenticeships.

Mayor Fiaz highlighted the critical role of apprenticeships in offering an accessible avenue for social mobility, enabling individuals to upskill and significantly boost their earnings. However, Fiaz expressed concern about the declining trend in apprenticeship starts, particularly since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy and the transition to apprenticeship standards.

Mayor Fiaz emphasised the financial challenges faced by apprentices, particularly in high-cost living areas like London, where low apprenticeship wages act as a significant barrier. Mayor Fiaz commended London boroughs, with nearly 80% paying apprentices at least the London living wage,

surpassing the minimum wage for apprenticeships. Despite these efforts, the decline in apprenticeship starts and completions has persisted.

In response to these challenges, Mayor Fiaz outlined proposals for reforming the apprenticeship levy to better support social mobility. She suggested reforms which included allowing levy-paying employers to use some of their levy for the wage costs of new apprentices from priority groups, supporting intermediate level apprenticeships, making equivalent funding available to non-levy payers, and enabling the use of levy funding for pre-employment training.

Additional proposals included a review of apprenticeship funding bands, particularly in high-cost places like London, and the expedited introduction of new apprenticeship standards to reduce bureaucracy.

Mayor Fiaz concluded by advocating for further devolution, and highlighted that London Councils, working with the Greater London Authority, is proposing greater devolution of employment and skills provision, including the apprenticeship levy.

Charlotte Nichols MP agreed with Tanisha's comments around the social side, and the financial side of apprenticeships, and how that's something that we haven't yet been able to crack yet. She recognised it as important and something that doesn't often get mentioned.

Nichols highlighted that there are a number of sectors that very used to doing apprenticeships, such as engineering and infrastructure for example, where there has always been a very well established path into the sector. But noted it has been very interesting to see the work of apprentices in sectors like the creative sector, which have been less common.

Nichols then handed over to apprentices to share their experiences. Nikkita Gordon, an Apprentice Trainee Driver at Go Ahead London, said her apprenticeship has been very helpful in learning how to become a bus driver. She said her apprenticeship paid a lot more than her last job, and that she really enjoys it.

Alex O'Shea, an Estimator Apprentice at Sir Robert McAlpine Ltd, said apprenticeships often have negative connotations as opposed to degrees, and that it is really important we find away to move away from this. He said apprentices offer incredibly opportunities, including learning, working, getting paid, and networking. He apprenticeships can be hard work, but what you get out of them is incredible. He said apprenticeships can fill the skills gap in certain industries which currently aren't popular among young people.

Tyrique Miller, a Sales Executive Apprentice with London South Bank University, said he believes apprenticeships are the best pathway into work in modern society. He said his apprenticeship has given him amazing professional development opportunities. He said he believes apprenticeships solves the problem that a lot of young people face with finding a job, as they build up your experience, rather than insisting you have experience before you start. He said that given his age, and the fact that he has two young children, his story shows that it is never too late to start an apprenticeship.

Zawad Ibrahim, an Advanced Business Administrator Apprenticeship at the London Borough of Camden, shared his story of being a refugee from Afghanistan and feeling lost and distressed about his future in the UK. He said his apprenticeship has been the best thing which has happened to him since arriving in the UK. Ibrahim said the apprenticeship programme helped him to boost his confidence, development skills and grow both personally and professionally. Zawad said it has also

given him the opportunity to work alongside experienced professionals across council and learn from them.

Munira Wilson MP asked the speakers how we start to tackle the stigma around apprenticeships. Tanisha Zaman answered by saying if you change the way apprenticeships are talked about in the education system, everything will follow, including in social circles and in wider society. Mayor Fiaz said that we need to have a look at how apprenticeships are marketed.