

National Apprenticeships Week: Experts reveal what more needs to be done to fill ‘huge number of vacancies’

The apprenticeships sector in Greater Manchester is in a “really strong position” but there is still more work to be done to fill the “huge number of vacancies” in the region and encourage employers to take part, according to a pair of experts.

The annual National Apprenticeships Week is due to be marked from Monday, February 7, and is aimed at shining a light on the work being done by employers and apprentices across the UK.

To mark the occasion, BusinessLive has spoken in depth to apprenticeships and employment experts working in Greater Manchester to get their take on how the last two years has impacted the sector and what budding apprentices are faced with today.

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Naomi Ilagoswa, head of strategic partnerships and external projects at The Growth Company, said there are a “huge number of vacancies to be filled” and that it is just as important to support employers to consider hiring apprentices as it is to encourage people to become one.

She added: “There are key sectors which are crucial to society, such as care and hospitality, where there have been real pressure points because of the pandemic but also Brexit and the loss of workforce.

“We are focusing on how we reshape what talent looks like and making sure we are creating opportunities for young people, which is important as we approach National Apprenticeships Week, but also how we make employers aware of the talent that they are missing in disabled people for example.

“It’s about how we support employers to fill the vacancies they have but encourage them to look at it through a different lens.”

Naomi Ilagoswa, head of strategic partnerships and external projects at The Growth Company in Manchester

Unsurprisingly, the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on the number of jobs being available over the last two years as well as the number of people wanting to take up an apprenticeship.

However Naomi Ilagoswa said the situation has not turned out exactly as was predicted.

“As the pandemic has progressed the picture has really changed”, she said.

“When it first hit there was a real crisis and lots of people were made redundant, benefit claims rocketed.

“We are quite lucky in Greater Manchester that we have been devolved as a region so through the commission powers and the way the combined authority is set up, we were able to flex provision.

“I manage a website called Employ GM which was something that we launched to support people during the pandemic.

“Also through the skills devolution, the adult education budget funding was able to be flexed to support the economic crisis and employers.

“Now I think it’s a very different picture as the way we thought furlough was going to end, with lots of people losing their jobs, did not happen as expected.

“It has flipped and it is now about the huge amount of vacancies and we are trying to support employers to fill those.”

National Apprenticeships Week aims to “bring businesses and apprentices across the country to shine a light on the positive impact that apprenticeships make to individuals, businesses and the wider economy”, according to the official website.

The theme this year is 'build the future'; reflecting on how apprenticeships can help individuals to develop the skills and knowledge required for a rewarding career, and businesses to develop a talented workforce that is equipped with future-ready skills.

Naomi Ilagoswa added: "When you look at the number of 18 years olds going into apprenticeships, the number is still quite low.

"Particularly with the end to the Kickstart scheme it is now time for employers to look at how they could use apprenticeships to rebuild their workforce of the future.

"We are seeing lots of people leaving the workforce earlier and retiring so employers might have an aging workforce and lack of skills and I think that as part of your recruitment strategy to look at how you can skill people on the job through apprenticeships is really positive.

"Apprenticeships are for all ages and you may have somebody who has had 20 or 30 years of experience in a different field but that sector no longer has the same opportunities and they could be brought into your workforce as an apprentice and they would bring loads of quality experience with them."



Jon-Paul Rimmington, managing director for education and skills at The Growth Company in Manchester

Fellow expert Jon-Paul Rimmington, the managing director for education and skills at The Growth Company, has said the apprenticeship picture in Greater Manchester is “encouraging and improving”.

Mr Rimmington has worked in the sector for more than 20 years and hailed the importance of the Apprenticeship Levy which was introduced in the 2017/18 tax year which helps fund apprenticeship training.

He added: “Obviously we have seen significant disruption within the apprenticeship market across all sectors to varying degrees over the last two years.

“The opportunities now are starting to recover and apprenticeship starts are now beginning to get back to where they were pre-pandemic.

“There is an awful lot of choice for employees looking for apprenticeships and also for employers looking for apprenticeships.

“There are a lot out there and there are a lot of opportunities for pathways through to apprenticeships which means that people can learn the skills they need if they were looking to move sectors.”

On the importance of National Apprenticeships Week, he said: “The week has always been aimed at raising the reputation and aspirations of young people through the apprenticeship route.

“It is also about looking at how employers can help young people onto their first stepping stone to employment.

“This week gives us a platform to really shout about the amazing things that our apprentices do and that employers do to support them as well.

“This is really a defined time to shout from the rooftops about what great opportunities they are.”

To mark National Apprenticeships Week, employers across Greater Manchester have been invited to attend two free events that will focus on upskilling the workforce.

The events will take place on Wednesday, February 9, and Thursday, February 10, with the first ‘Build the Future with Apprenticeships’ to be staged at the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce building, Elliot House, at 151 Deansgate, Manchester.

The second event will see the Growth Company host a webinar for employers, ‘Apprenticeships: Supporting your Recruitment and Retention’.

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