

# AAG Chair's End of Year Report 2022

From Ruth Jennings, Chair of the Apprenticeship Approvals Group (AAG).



## Apprenticeship Approvals Group (AAG) Chair's Annual Report

### Evolving a quality approach

The Apprenticeship Approvals Group works as part of the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board (SAAB) Standards and Frameworks group to support the overall governance structure for apprenticeships in Scotland. AAG's purpose is to ensure that developed apprenticeships meet the needs of employers and provide high quality learning for individuals.

When the Apprenticeship Approvals Group (AAG) was established in November 2019, taking accountability for the final checks and 'sign off' on apprenticeships from the previous Modern Apprenticeships Group, its remit covered Foundation and Graduate, as well as Modern Apprenticeships. This move heralded the beginning of a shift which placed employers firmly at the centre of the creation, development, and approval of apprenticeships in Scotland. My first Chair's report, published in 2020, reflected upon this transition. The subsequent 2021 annual review considered the 'bedding in' period of becoming operational, focusing on the development of the Group's membership to enable it to function as smoothly and effectively as possible.

I am now delighted to deliver the third annual report as Chair of the Apprenticeship Approvals Group, and recap on another significant year. This year's activity has been characterised by its pace and progress made within operational mode – with our key focus placed on quality assurance and embedding this as part of the overall process.

### Driving quality

We've been making leaps and bounds, striding into 'business as usual' mode, notwithstanding the additional complexities that a recovery from the pandemic has brought. Our 'quality-drive' approach, with the apprentice being at the heart of all discussions and decision making, is - and will remain, a priority for AAG.

The 14 principles which form the Definition of Apprenticeships, help to steer our thinking. A significant piece of work was undertaken by AAG to deep dive into the colour and depth of these principles and explore where greater clarity could be provided, to enhance consistency and quality. Principle 13 aims to ensure that apprenticeships are underpinned by robust quality assurance processes, from design stage, right through to delivery. Across the AAG membership, we recognise quality assurance as the reason for our existence, our 'North Star' – and it will continue to guide all our decision making.

A range of organisations are involved in the quality assurance of apprenticeships: from the development of underpinning standards to Technical Expert Groups which validate 'real work life' application, to the approval of apprenticeship framework, and the delivery of training. Each stakeholder has a distinct role, with each stage being a significant moving part of a system which ensures a high-quality end product - an apprenticeship which delivers for the learner and employer.

In a period where Skills Development Scotland (SDS) is implementing its five-year plan to review and refresh all existing Scottish Apprenticeships, this has meant that we have seen an exponential rise in the number of applications submitted to AAG. We've worked at an incredible pace – considering more apprenticeships than ever, in order to allow a continuous flow of frameworks as they come through the new development process. We've also had to balance and reconcile this with the challenges (and opportunities) posed by a changing world of work, as businesses and the economy attempt to recover from the pandemic.

## Activity over the past year

With an upsurge in activity in the past year, there has been lots to reflect upon and learn, but also lots to celebrate. We have:

- reviewed 38 apprenticeships
- approved 23 new and updated apprenticeships
- referred 15 apprenticeships for further feedback and review

With submissions from across different sectors, we have seen some excellent proposals and also a number of common reasons for deferrals and rejections. Feedback across the board has the same message: that consultation across a wide breadth of groups - employers, trade and sector bodies, unions, qualifications and education organisations - will always be significant and shouldn't be undersold.

We also know that diversity and inclusion (D&I) is significant and that there's a greater need now, more than ever, to make sure that submissions illustrate clearly how D&I and fair work is considered in apprenticeship development, to allow open access to a diverse range of learners. We have also noted some variances between those apprenticeships developed by the traditional contracted approach and those developed through the Technical Expert Group (TEG) process. This learning has shaped our approach in how we can support applicants – and as a direct result of this, we have started to strengthen governance around when full proposals should be submitted to AAG so that we can provide clearer guidance to Skills Sector Councils and others who are developing apprenticeships utilising the traditional approach.

But we've also seen a variety of apprenticeships from across different industries 'go to market', including: Providing Financial Services (SCQF Level 6); Project Management (SCQF 8 and 10) and Construction Technical (SCQF Level 9 and Level 10), including entirely new apprenticeships designed to meet employer demand such as Engineering and Digital Manufacturing (SCQF Level 8). Seeing these as 'live' apprenticeships, published online, recruiting learners, attracting new talent, with learning providers set up to deliver - is the end result we, as AAG members, work to fulfil.

## Continuous improvement

With AAG's remit having such a strong focus on ensuring quality, we always seek to continually improve.

We have clarified and implemented a consistent approach to the treatment of Core Skills and how they play through into submissions, so it is clear what the expectations are for both the apprentice and employer. I'm hopeful that the recent work we did to clarify the application of the 14 principles which define a Scottish Apprenticeship will also help map out a much clearer view of future pathways coming down the line.

Utilising and refining the role of supporting technical resources within SDS and SQA accreditation (the AAG subgroup) has helped to ensure AAG members are able to focus on quality assurance and better streamline the workflow.

We are currently in the process of refreshing the group's Terms of Reference, for approval by SAAB Standards and Frameworks Group and the Minister for Higher Education, Further Education, Youth Employment and Training, so that we are always in the best place possible. With a new strategy for SAAB which aims to strengthen the employer voice across the skills system, it makes sense that AAG's remit supports and aligns with this.

## Range of membership is key – and ever evolving

By nature, membership of the Approvals Group must constantly evolve to reflect progressions in technology, key sectors and the ever-changing world of work. Last year we made some adjustments to ensure we had the right representation from government, and now we are also looking to onboard representation from higher education to develop our range of membership. The members' induction pack has been developed further, to include clarity on the roles of members, the brilliant outcomes we support, and the commitment and knowledge we bring to the process.

## Looking Ahead

Looking forward into next year and beyond, it's clear that we will continue to focus on a quality-focused approach. We know that work is needed to better understand the changing landscape, while we consider and look to approve new apprenticeships which support specific, sectoral requirements and emerging technologies.

As we gather greater clarity around the network and connections between agencies and stakeholders, we strive to create more streamlined processes. The work of the Approvals Group has delivered - and learned - so much over the past year. We will take our knowledge forward, while ensuring that quality assurance remains our cornerstone.



### **Ruth Jennings**

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