

# WMADASS Social Care Apprenticeships

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# Executive Summary

This report is the 4<sup>th</sup> update of the original report published in 2024.

The West Midlands adult social care (ASC) sector is experiencing acute workforce pressures driven by rising demand, persistent vacancies, and a rapidly ageing workforce. Apprenticeships remain a critical route to developing a sustainable talent pipeline, but uptake, achievement and employer engagement continue to fall below regional need.

National data confirms growth in apprenticeship starts, 24,650 in 2024/25, a 5% increase — yet still 18% below 2019/20 levels. Achievement rates remain low at 46.1%, well below the national average of 60.5%. The workforce profile continues to skew older, with 83% of starters aged 25+, reflecting a continued focus on upskilling existing staff rather than creating new entry routes for younger people.

Themes identified

- Significant system barriers (SME capacity, training provider quality variation, levy complexity, financial insecurity for learners).
- A pressing need to reshape apprenticeships through foundation routes, modularisation, and simplified funding models.
- Strategic opportunities created by the Growth & Skills Levy, Youth Guarantee, technical qualifications, and national reforms to programme duration and assessment.
- The requirement for regional coordination, further employer engagement, and dedicated support infrastructure for SMEs.

Together, these insights present a need for WMADASS to drive a clearer, more inclusive regional apprenticeship system, aligned to workforce need, young people's routes into employment, and long-term progression into regulated professions.

## 1. Current Context and Workforce Pressures

The West Midlands ASC sector faces:

- High vacancy and turnover rates, with limited local infrastructure to convert interest into sustained workforce participation.
- Growing complexity of care requiring increased upskilling of existing staff.
- Skills shortages in dementia, complex care, therapies, and leadership roles.
- A workforce ageing rapidly, with 29% aged 55+ regionally.

National reform is reshaping opportunities for access, progression, and support — but uptake in social care continues to lag behind equivalent sectors.

## 2. Apprenticeship Participation, Achievement and Retention

### 2.1 Participation Trends

- Adult social care apprenticeships represent only 7% of all national starts, with participation overwhelmingly from those aged 25+.
- Limited youth participation persists due to poor awareness, inconsistent support, and financial barriers including Universal Credit instability.

### 2.2 Achievement and Retention

- Achievement rates remain 46.1%, with 47.3% retention, the lowest of all sectors studied.

Drop-off occurs primarily before end-point assessment, reflecting systemic issues with support, supervision, and programme continuity

## 3. System Barriers

### 3.1 SME Barriers

Identified consistently:

- Limited supervisory and mentoring capacity
- Inability to release staff for off-the-job training
- Administrative burden and levy complexity
- Fragmented local support infrastructure

These issues disproportionately impact a sector where 80–90% of providers are SMEs or micro-providers.

### 3.2 Barriers for Young People

- Universal Credit instability
- Perceived low pay
- Reduced social capital and post-Covid wellbeing issues
- Patchy wrap-around support (transport, digital access, childcare, mentoring)

### 3.3 Provider Quality Variation

Significant variability persists, with some training providers and Education Institutions prioritising volume over suitability.

## 4. Opportunities from recent National Reform

### 4.1 Foundation Apprenticeships & Modular Units

- Create flexible “first-step” pathways, especially for NEET young people.
- Aligns with WMADASS ambitions for Level 2–4 pipelines and progression into regulated professions.

### 4.2 Growth & Skills Levy

- Opens opportunities to increase funding for core ASC roles.
- Supports investment in Level 3 adult care worker pathways and therapy-support roles.

### 4.3 Youth Guarantee and 200,000 Paid Jobs

- Establishes social care as a key sector for early careers.
- Strong alignment with WMADASS partnerships with our Councils, DWP, WeJobBox, and Proud to Care.

### 4.4 Technical Qualifications (V Levels, Higher Technical)

- Provide alternative routes with parity of esteem, as yet to be understood.

### 4.5 Digitalisation & Assessment Reform

- Simplified information, more flexible assessment models, reduced administrative load, as yet to be understood.

## 5. Regional Opportunities

### 5.1 West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and future Strategic Mayoral Authorities

MSAs can:

- Shape a regional model of inclusive apprenticeships
- Leverage convening power on UC reform, levy flexibility, and funding rules
- Strengthen SME infrastructure through simplified applications, pastoral support, employer hubs, and shared schemes

## 5.2 Investment Zone Opportunities

- Backfill funding
- Job-rotation pilots
- Digital and care-tech workforce development

## 5.3 Ethical AI and Technology Integration

- New care-tech roles require governance and planning
- Opportunities to integrate AI-driven workforce forecasting

# 6. Strategic Actions

## A. Strengthen Entry Routes

- Implement foundation apprenticeships and modular units to widen access.

## B. Prioritise Youth Recruitment

- Align with Youth Guarantee and Future Hubs.

## C. Expand Progression Pathways

- Strengthen pipelines into OT, therapies, nursing associate, and social work roles. The DHSC Care Workforce Pathway will be published shortly.

## D. Strengthen Regional SME Support

- Create a WMADASS-led apprenticeship recruitment support infrastructure modelled on Sandwell's Academy approach.

## E. Influence National Policy

- Ensure ASC voices shape levy reform, assessment changes, youth policy, and funding models.

## F. Improve Provider Quality

- Commission, endorse or quality-assure providers offering youth-centred, pastoral, and employer-responsive delivery models.

## 7. Conclusions

- Apprenticeships remain central to building a sustainable ASC workforce.
- System barriers persist — particularly for SMEs and young entrants.
- National reform provides an opportunity to reshape pathways, simplify processes, and embed local coordination.
- WMADASS and West Midlands Combined Authority have complementary and powerful roles in driving a coherent, inclusive and future-facing regional apprenticeship strategy.

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