

# APPRENTICESHIPS AND EQUALITY: A GUIDE FOR APPRENTICESHIP PROVIDERS

## WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guide is for apprenticeship training providers and employers who want to improve gender equality and diversity within their apprenticeship programmes. It explains why apprenticeships are an important part of workplace development, how gender inequality affects apprenticeships, and the steps providers and employers can take to make them fair, inclusive, and accessible. You can use this guide alongside our other **Think Business, Think Equality** resources to support apprentices and create safer, more equitable workplaces.

There are four types of organisations involved in delivering apprenticeships, and Think Business, Think Equality is relevant to each:

- 1. Employers who deliver all apprenticeship training in-house** (they are both the employer and the training provider).
- 2. Employers who deliver apprenticeship training in partnership with, or fully outsourced to, a training provider** (they are the employer, but not always the training provider).
- 3. Training providers who deliver training on behalf of an employer** (they are not the apprentice's employer, but are responsible for providing high-quality training).
- 4. Training providers as employers themselves** (all training providers also employ their own staff, even if they are not the employer of the apprentices they train).

Think Business, Think Equality can support all of these organisations in both their **role as employers** and their **role in delivering training**, ensuring equality is embedded across apprenticeship delivery.



## WHY GENDER EQUALITY MATTERS IN APPRENTICESHIPS

Apprenticeships are a valuable pathway into the labour market. They combine paid work with training and qualifications, enabling businesses to build skills and apprentices to gain valuable experience and career opportunities.

However, apprenticeship frameworks are highly gender segregated. Men dominate in construction, engineering and technical frameworks, while women are concentrated in care, hairdressing and service roles. The result is that:

- Women are less likely to access higher-paid apprenticeship pathways that have positive career outcomes.
- Employers miss out on talented people who are channelled away from their sector.
- Gender segregation is reinforced rather than challenged.

These barriers don't affect all women equally. Racially minoritised women, disabled women, and young mothers can face additional obstacles in accessing, sustaining, and progressing through apprenticeships.

While occupational segregation exists in the education pipeline that precedes the apprenticeship framework, that doesn't mean that it is outwith the influence of apprenticeship providers. By taking action at the pre-recruitment stage, providers can open up opportunities to under-represented groups and shift the balance of applicants. This creates a virtuous cycle where greater representation of women in male-dominated frameworks means that future women are more likely to see those careers as 'for them', and more likely to apply, reducing occupational segregation further. When providers see occupational segregation as an external issue, and don't take action, they help to sustain this inequality.

Tackling this inequality matters for both equality and business reasons. More diverse apprenticeships give employers access to a wider talent pool, improve retention and progression, and support fairer workplace cultures.

## HOW THINK BUSINESS, THINK EQUALITY CAN HELP YOU

Think Business, Think Equality can help you make your apprenticeship programmes fair and inclusive. The tests most relevant to apprenticeship providers are **Recruitment & Retention, Development & Progression, Workplace Culture, Sexual Harassment, and Flexible Working** - each offering practical guidance on tackling the specific equality challenges apprentices face.



## 1. OPENING UP OPPORTUNITIES — RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Occupational segregation begins at the recruitment stage. Women already face a range of barriers in securing good quality training and employment. Adverts reflect stereotypes, opportunities often aren't flexible, and bias still influences decisions. Without action, women and men will continue to be channelled into traditional roles – the same goes for apprenticeships.

To challenge this, you can:

- Review recruitment materials and imagery to ensure they are inclusive.
- Promote apprenticeships widely, including within schools, community groups, and equalities networks to reach underrepresented candidates – thinking particularly about racially minoritised women, disabled women, and young mothers who may be even more excluded by traditional recruitment channels.
- Monitor applications and starts by gender and other characteristics, such as ethnicity and disability, to identify inequalities.

## 2. SUPPORTING FAIR PROGRESSION — DEVELOPMENT & PROGRESSION

Apprenticeships are a form of structured development, but when they end, it shouldn't be the end of the story. Apprentices need clear progression routes so they can continue to grow and develop beyond the apprenticeship itself. Without this, women in particular are at risk of being left in low-paid roles with little opportunity to move on in their career.

To help create change, you can:

- If you employ apprentices, integrate apprenticeships into wider progression routes within your business.
- Provide targeted mentoring and networking opportunities for female apprentices, particularly in male-dominated areas where they might find it harder to build networks.
- Develop targeted programmes to support women in lower-paid, female-dominated sectors, helping them build skills to move sideways into different roles or upwards into more senior positions.



### 3. CREATING SAFE AND INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS — WORKPLACE CULTURE AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Apprentices are often young and new to the workplace, which can make them particularly vulnerable to harassment or exclusion. This risk can be heightened for racially minoritised women, disabled women, and young mothers, who may experience multiple forms of discrimination or stigma. Providers and employers both have responsibilities to ensure apprentices are protected. Building flexibility into apprenticeships makes them more accessible for these groups, enabling them to access more and better-quality opportunities.

Apprenticeship providers have a responsibility to:

- Have a clear, standalone sexual harassment policy and process, and make sure apprentices know how to report concerns.
- Train staff and supervisors on how to identify and respond to sexual harassment.
- Foster a workplace culture where apprentices are respected and included, and where gender inequality and discriminatory behaviour is challenged.

### 4. MAKING APPRENTICESHIPS ACCESSIBLE — FLEXIBLE WORKING

Traditional apprenticeship models often assume full-time, rigid participation, but this can exclude people with caring responsibilities, disabled women, and women with long-term health conditions. Building flexibility into apprenticeships makes them more accessible for these groups, enabling them to access more and better-quality opportunities.

Simple changes providers can make are:

- Offer flexible or part-time apprenticeship options where possible.
- Consider adjustments to start times, study arrangements, or work patterns to widen access.
- Recognise that flexibility helps retain talented apprentices and widens your recruitment pool.



## USING THINK BUSINESS, THINK EQUALITY IN PRACTICE

- **Apprentice employers who also deliver training:** use Think Business, Think Equality to review both your internal employment practices and the training environment you provide for apprentices.
- **Apprentice employers who work with training providers:** use Think Business, Think Equality to ensure equality is built into the apprenticeships you offer, and to set expectations of your providers.
- **Apprenticeship training providers:** use Think Business, Think Equality to improve your own organisational practices as employers, and to embed equality within the training you deliver on behalf of others.

By using the **Think Business, Think Equality** tool to strengthen your approach, you can help ensure apprenticeships don't reinforce inequality but instead open up fair, safe, and inclusive opportunities that benefit apprentices, businesses, and the wider economy.



Close the Gap works in Scotland on women's labour market participation. We work with policymakers, employers and unions to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's inequality at work.

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Close the Gap (SCIO) (known as Close the Gap) is a Scottish charity, no SC046842.

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