

SME APPRENTICESHIP ESSENTIALS.

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Apprenticeship Workforce Development (AWD) Programme: SME Apprenticeship Pilot

What Good SME Practice Looks Like: Learning from the University of Warwick's SME Apprenticeship Partners

Why this matters for the SME Apprenticeship Pilot

The SME Apprenticeship Pilot is due to launch during National Apprenticeship Week 2026 – 9th-15th February. It is newly designed to strengthen apprenticeship success in England by equipping SME managers with the confidence, capability and practical approaches needed to support apprentices effectively in work and to recognise the importance of these work-based roles when considering the competence of the apprenticeship workforce.

Evidence in this case study shows that, when managers are closely engaged, apprentices benefit from **high-quality support, stronger leadership development and more meaningful progress review** — leading to confident practitioners who progress into wider, more impactful roles within their organisations.

This summary highlights the kinds of practices the pilot aims to **normalise and scale across SMEs**, even where time, experience or confidence may currently be limited.

Individualised, person-centred support

(Aligned to SME Pilot Themes 2 & 3: Managing Apprentices; Coaching and Communication)

SMEs often excel in providing personalised support, reflecting the close-knit nature of smaller organisations. Warwick's SME partners demonstrate how this can translate into strong apprentice outcomes.

Good practice includes:

- **Tailored development planning**, with managers adapting responsibilities and stretch opportunities to reflect apprentices' strengths, interests and aspirations
- **Flexible workplace adjustments** that help apprentices balance academic, professional and personal commitments

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- **Regular informal check-ins**, enabling early conversations about confidence, workload or wellbeing — not just formal review points
- **Close mentoring relationships**, often involving senior staff, giving apprentices direct access to experience, insight and guidance

This high-touch approach helps apprentices feel valued, supported and embedded within their teams, contributing to confidence and sustained engagement.

“Apprentices benefit from highly personalised support that enables them to make strong progress in both their academic and workplace learning.”

(University of Warwick Ofsted Report, 2024)

Pilot link: The SME Pilot focuses on helping managers develop the confidence and practical skills to provide this kind of ongoing, human-centred support — even where apprenticeships are new or unfamiliar.

Developing leadership capability through real work

(Aligned to SME Pilot Theme 3: Developing a Learning Culture)

Many of Warwick’s SME partners actively support apprentices to develop leadership skills by involving them in meaningful organisational activity early in their apprenticeship.

Examples include:

- **Early exposure to decision-making**, such as participation in project planning, service improvement or operational meetings
- **Opportunities to lead small projects or workstreams**, building communication, delegation and problem-solving skills
- **Shadowing senior leaders**, offering insight into strategic thinking and organisational culture
- **Structured reflection on leadership behaviours**, often linked to apprenticeship Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours (KSBs) and Warwick’s academic frameworks

These approaches help apprentices develop professional identity, confidence and readiness for progression — often earlier than expected.

“Apprentices develop confidence and leadership behaviours through well planned opportunities in the workplace and through the curriculum.”

(Ofsted, 2024)

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Pilot link: The SME Pilot supports managers to recognise everyday opportunities for coaching, stretch and leadership development — without requiring complex systems or additional resource.

High-quality progress reviewing through shared responsibility

(Aligned to SME Pilot Themes 2 & 4: Supporting Progress; Securing Completion)

Strong engagement in progress review is another hallmark of effective SME practice within Warwick's partnerships. Employers play an active role in a robust tripartite relationship between apprentice, provider and workplace.

Good practice includes:

- **Consistent employer attendance at progress reviews**, ensuring academic and workplace learning remain aligned
- **Detailed, constructive feedback** on performance, behaviours and professional development
- **Proactive identification of development opportunities**, such as new responsibilities, placements or training
- **Clear follow-through on agreed actions**, demonstrating shared accountability for apprentice success

This collaborative approach strengthens the quality of evidence, supports compliance, and helps apprentices stay focused, motivated and on track.

“Regular, high quality progress reviews help apprentices reflect on their development, understand their targets and stay on track to achieve.”

(Ofsted, 2024)

Pilot link: A core aim of the SME Pilot is to demystify progress reviews for managers — helping them feel confident contributing meaningfully and using reviews as a tool for motivation and retention, not just compliance.

Overall learning for the SME Apprenticeship Pilot

The experience of Warwick's SME partners reinforces a central message of the SME Apprenticeship Pilot:

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Strong apprenticeship outcomes are driven less by size or sector, and more by confident, engaged line management and clear communication.

Through personalised support, leadership development and high-quality progress review, these SMEs create environments where apprentices:

- Grow in confidence and capability
- Take on broader, more impactful roles
- Progress successfully through and beyond their apprenticeship

The SME Apprenticeship Pilot is designed to help more employers adopt these practices — providing practical, accessible support that fits the realities of SME working life and strengthens outcomes for apprentices and businesses alike.