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**Evaluation of the Apprenticeship
Trailblazers: Interim report**

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RESEARCH

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The Institute for Employment Studies

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in public employment policy and organisational human resource issues. It works closely with employers in the manufacturing, service and public sectors, government departments, agencies, and professional and employee bodies. For over 40 years the Institute has been a focus of knowledge and practical experience in employment and training policy, the operation of labour markets, and human resource planning and development. IES is a not-for-profit organisation which has over 30 multidisciplinary staff and a network of international associates. IES expertise is available to all organisations through research, consultancy, publications and the Internet. For further details please visit: www.employment-studies.co.uk

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Executive Summary

The Apprenticeship Trailblazers are the means through which the government is implementing the Richard Review recommendations for greater employer ownership of Apprenticeship training. The Trailblazers are being phased in over time using an early adopter model to test the processes required of employers to develop the occupational standards and detailed assessment models that conform to the national principles for the new apprenticeships. In addition, the Trailblazers are being used to identify the structures required nationally to oversee and quality assure the new process for apprenticeship development.

The Institute for Employment Studies was commissioned to lead a process evaluation of Trailblazer developments. The research involves 16 of the Trailblazers and is tasked with exploring:

- how Trailblazer networks are established and structured;
- the processes involved in developing standards and detailed assessments; employer responses to the national principles such as grading, endpoint and synoptic assessment as well as to the funding reforms; and
- the overall satisfaction of employers with the development process.

This report is an interim output from the evaluation and draws on interviews with a range of stakeholders and messages emerging from national workshops and Trailblazers' meetings. A final evaluation report will be submitted for publication in Spring 2015

Trailblazers' structures and processes

The predominant picture is one of **established employer networks** proposing to develop Apprenticeship standards; however, these networks originate from a number of sources including the industrial partnerships formed for the 'Employer Ownership of Skills' programme, and those of sectoral bodies of various types (professional bodies, training councils, regulatory bodies as well as sector skills councils). It is primarily through working with established networks that the Trailblazers have been able to deliver the standards and assessment outlines to the tight timetable that the Department has required.

However, while the intensity of the work required the use of those existing networks, a downside is the potential to exclude those employers who are not already network members. To manage this risk, all Trailblazers have been at pains to ensure wider consultation. In addition, the Department has also kept a register of employers enquiring about Trailblazers, and where appropriate has passed on their contact details to the existing networks. It is crucial that consultations on the new standards are not rushed and are sufficiently wide-reaching to enable the spread beyond existing network members and into the wider sector. Encouraging large and medium employers to consult within their supply chains can assist in widening the reach of consultations, where such supply chains exist.

In leading developments, Trailblazers have typically formed an **oversight group and operational, task-focused groups**. These groups are, in some cases, linked to the industrial partnerships or to established structures within sectors. For some Trailblazers, there is a vision that these structures will become the coordinating or governing body for current and future standards. In some instances, there is a move towards combining the interests of several Trailblazer networks into one overall governance body. Thought must now be given to how these governance structures will relate to (any) national-level governance body or structure.

Being part of these developments is **resource-intensive** for all types of organisation but particularly challenging for smaller employers to withstand. As work has continued, the goodwill of some employing organisations has waned and the size of some networks has dwindled. Trailblazers have sought to adopt approaches that, to a degree, can mitigate the resource requirement; these have included use of a facilitator (to arrange meetings, lead the drafting process for standards and detailed assessments etc) and drawing on experts (awarding bodies, training providers etc) to provide specialist input. In order for employers to truly have ownership of developments however, it is crucial that they have final 'sign off'; consequently, while there are strategies that can reduce the burdens placed upon them being part of a Trailblazer entails a certain level of involvement and, hence, resource input from employers. In light of the perceived high level of resource required, this may raise questions about maintaining employer buy-in in the longer term. However, it is undoubtedly the case that employers have broadly welcomed the reformed system, which is demonstrated by the numbers involved in Trailblazer developments.

The new standards

For many Trailblazers, the **opportunity to develop a new standard** represents a chance to continue their previous work refining the Apprenticeship model in their sector. For some the existing training is seen as high quality and in such circumstances it is unsurprising that an evolutionary development model has been adopted. For others, the chance to work from a clean sheet has been welcomed. This spectrum means that the standards can be responsive to differing contexts such as occupation regulation.

There continues to be **some variation** in how the Trailblazers describe occupations and the typical entry criteria and the skills, knowledge and behaviours that each role requires. Among the earliest Trailblazers there were differing stances taken to the incorporation of qualifications into standards however greater uniformity has emerged since the developers' guidance was updated by the Department. The conditions under which qualifications can be included are now clearly stated. The number of roles covered by the Trailblazers appears to govern how far a core and options approach is pursued. Combining a number of occupations within one standard has the potential to limit the overall number of standards required which may provide greater simplicity and efficiency as developments expand.

While there is no fixed **review cycle for the new standards** the guidance does require standard setters to set a review date¹. However, a small number of early Trailblazers did

¹ The guidance recommends that at minimum, standards should be reviewed three years after their creation. This period can be shorter in particular circumstances e.g. where there are rapid technological changes in an occupation.

not specify a review date nor a clear position on who should be involved in their review. This aspect of the process forms the next stage of work being taken forward nationally. However, some Trailblazers are questioning who would lead the review process for their standards since individuals currently engaged in the detailed work may move posts or their company may decide to end their support for the work. Continuity may therefore become an issue.

The detailed assessment

Once they began the process of developing the detailed assessment specifications, **Trailblazers relied more heavily upon experts** to assist them. In some cases, this drew on the support of training providers, awarding organisations and nationally appointed assessment experts, as well as individuals drawn from sectoral bodies who in some cases had not, until that point at least, been involved in developments. As with the process of developing the standards there was criticism of the tight timescale which was said by some to have had the effect of constraining innovation. There was little flexibility regarding timescales for these early Trailblazers; however, it is anticipated that once there is a national cycle of meetings for approval of assessments and standards¹ then the time-scale for development of each future Trailblazer can be determined by those involved in the detailed work.

Significant variation exists in the **grading systems** of the different Trailblazers and in solutions to the concept of independence in assessment. Grade categories vary between standards as well as what is graded. The equivalence of grading between standards is not guaranteed which raises questions about what the grade in practice means. Feedback from the early Trailblazers indicated that it may not be possible or desirable to grade all apprenticeships (or all aspects of them) hence policy has been changed to allow greater flexibility on this point. The new apprenticeships are seen as 'for the sector' and little emphasis has been placed on transferability between sectors. The perceived lack of independence in the final assessment was the cause for some detailed assessments to be rejected by the panel. Greater clarity on expectations in this regard is needed.

Estimating costs and the funding reforms

A key challenge for the earliest Trailblazers was the requirement for them to **estimate the costs of delivery before detailed assessments had been developed**. For some this proved to be a difficult process. In some instances, the estimate relied upon the current costs of training because there was little else that could be used as the basis for this calculation. Where employers were themselves the training provider, the process was often more straightforward; however a great deal depended upon whether training budgets were coordinated across departments in large organisations. In the future, these challenges should not exist as Trailblazers will be required to submit their funding evidence alongside their high level assessment model.

¹ Details of the planned cycle of national meetings to support the process for developing standards was published in October 2014 after the primary research for this report

Most **standards were assigned to the funding cap that employers determined** but some were not. In these cases, there were calls for greater transparency about the funding formula and the information used to arrive at a cap¹. For those Trailblazers that were adversely affected by the decision on the funding cap, an appeals process overturned the original decision. A standardised template for estimating costs has now been supplied by the Department.

Generally, the principles of the funding reforms and **the expectation for employer co-investment were viewed as simple and straightforward**. However, some employers were concerned about the lack of clarity about what would count towards co-investment and some were confused about this being ‘in kind’ rather than ‘in cash’². There were concerns too about the potential reaction of small employers to the new model and fears that the requirement for a cash investment in training would be off-putting to them. Moreover, the point was made that small employers would lack the buying power of larger employers which could make it difficult to negotiate and source customised training for a small number of apprentices.

Delivering the new standards

Most but not all Trailblazers have initially committed to **small scale delivery** of the new standards, which some view as a pilot. In these latter instances, employers wish to test the quality of the learner experience and the provision, as well as assess the calibre of apprentices attracted through the new offer and their contribution to business outcomes. Rolling out at a small scale was seen as less risky if unforeseen issues were encountered; there would be less involved in making the necessary adjustments.

However there are some standards that will not be delivered for the time being for various reasons, including that some networks have decided that they need more time to move from development to delivery than others. Until delivery commences, it will not be possible to understand whether they are a good fit for industry needs. In addition, some employers who have been involved in developments do not intend to be involved in delivery while issues such as the alignment of the training model between UK nations remain unresolved. This forms an area of on-going work for policymakers.

Success measures and outcomes

In terms of determining the **success of the standards**, employers highlight aspects such as skills need being met, improved quality within the apprenticeship programme, parity of esteem between training and educational routes, and better options for labour market entry.

Other outcomes from the development process are noted to be the **close collaboration between employers** on the skills agenda; the Trailblazers have provided a tangible

¹ This has been included in latest guidance which was issued subsequent to the research for this report.

² The position has been clarified with the publication of Funding Rules for Trailblazers in November 2014, subsequent to the primary research for this report

project for joint working and have managed to avoid the risks of competition and confidentiality between businesses.

By building standards around industry-identified skills shortages and skill needs, employers report that they anticipate high quality programmes that will deliver the skills they need because the standards will be the best possible fit to the identified job role. Many hope that the standard will guarantee the transferability of skills between companies, creating a strong secondary market for apprentices as they develop their careers. Employers believe that by helping to develop the standards, they will be assured of the quality of training, understand the skills and competencies that apprentices will gain, and be assured that these skills and competencies are relevant to their organisation.

Concluding points

An overall assessment of the process to date has to be, **for the large part, very positive** since it has engendered a great deal of employer engagement and resulted, in a relatively short time, in a set of new standards and assessment models that are believed to meet employers' needs and can act as a template to future developments. Employers have welcomed being at the heart of developments, despite the resource investment this has entailed.

However, as was expected, learning points have emerged from the work to date that speak to the structures and support necessary to continue the roll out of the new model. There are some potential risks emerging, some of which have been identified in this summary that will require national attention in coming months. The ability to manage these risks and set up **a structure and process that allows Trailblazers to truly take ownership** of their development is the key challenge for the national policy team although as the latest guidance for Trailblazer Developers demonstrates the structure for a steady state has begun to emerge.

1 Introduction

The Apprenticeship Trailblazers are being introduced as a means to address recommendations from the Richard Review (2012), which noted that employers are ‘*best placed to judge the quality and relevance of training and demand the highest possible standards from training organisations*’. Employer ownership has become a central theme of Apprenticeship policy in England, and is a response to growing recognition of the importance of engaging employers in the content of Apprenticeship training and assessment. Through expanding the role of employers, policy makers hope to create more robust linkages between Apprenticeships and the skills required by the labour market. The European Commission (2013) has suggested that this should result in greater value for money, through sharing costs, resources and technologies with employers. The reforms to the funding programme in England will test this hypothesis.

Policymakers recognise that these are significant reforms to the Apprenticeships programme and believe that having examples in place of the new system working effectively in practice will support future developments. This will help to create models of effective practice, identify areas where further work is needed and provide a strong basis for full implementation of the reforms. It has also required rapid development work amongst the Apprenticeship Trailblazers, the means through which these objectives are being achieved.

The Trailblazers are being phased in over time. They were first operationalised in October 2013 through eight employer networks. The Apprenticeship standards created by these eight networks were launched as part of National Apprenticeship Week 2014. In March 2014, a further 29 employer networks took on the task of developing new Apprenticeship standards for occupations in their sectors with their standards being launched in August 2014. In addition, many of the original eight networks have now started work on additional Apprenticeship Standards¹.

1.1 The current position

Records held by the Department indicate that at the current time, over 1,000 employers are involved in Trailblazers, and are drawn from over 75 sectors. Seventy-three standards have been approved and published and more than 75 further new standards are in development. The new apprenticeships are in a broad range of sectors from nuclear to fashion, law, banking and the armed forces.

- The first apprenticeship starts on the new standards began in September 2014
- Trailblazer activity will take place throughout 2014/15 and 2015/16
- The aim is that from 2017/18 all apprenticeship starts will be on the new standards.

¹ A complete list of the currently approved Apprenticeship Standards may be found here: <http://www.apprenticeships.org.uk/standards>

Standards and assessment plans produced by employers and agreed by Government are published at: www.gov.uk/government/collections/apprenticeship-standards

Standards being developed by employer groups across the Trailblazers can be viewed here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/apprenticeship-standards-in-development

1.2 The evaluation

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) was commissioned by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to evaluate the implementation process adopted by the Trailblazer networks and identify lessons to assist with future developments. The evaluation commenced in January 2014 and will conclude in March 2015. The current report is the first interim output from the evaluation to be published. The final report from the evaluation will be submitted to BIS in Spring 2015.

The evaluation has been tasked with reporting on the following:

- How Trailblazer networks are established, organised and structured – including employers’ motivations to get involved, and the implications of being involved.
- The processes involved in Trailblazer developments – covering the creation of the new Standards and outline assessments, as well as detailed assessment plans.
- Responses to key national principles including end-point and synoptic assessment as well as grading.
- Views of the funding mechanisms and reforms – including the allocation of the government funding cap made in respect of each standard, as well as the general principles of the new funding model. ¹
- Perceived impact of the Trailblazers – in respect of employer satisfaction with the process and outcomes including the views of large employers and small-to-medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

To do this, the evaluation team has sought to involve 16 employer networks selected by BIS as the focus for the research activities. These included the original eight Trailblazers plus a further eight drawn from the second tranche of employer networks. These covered, by sector and occupation(s):

- Accountancy (Professional Accounting Technician; and Professional Accountant)
- Adult Social Care (Adult Social Care Worker)

¹ Details of the reformed funding programme for those involved in training apprentices to the new standards in 2014/15 may be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/324526/Apprenticeship-Funding-Reform-Briefing.pdf

- Aerospace (Aerospace Manufacturing Fitter)
- Automotive (Mechatronics Maintenance Technician)
- Butchery (Butchery)
- Conveyancing (Conveyancing Technician; and Licenced Conveyancer)
- Craft (Craftperson)
- Digital Industries (Software developer; and Network engineer)
- Electrotechnology (Installation Electrician; and Maintenance Electrician)
- Energy and Utilities (Power Network Craftsperson)
- Financial Services (Relationship Manager; and Financial Services Administrator)
- Food and Drink manufacturing (Food and Drink Mechanical Maintenance Engineer; and Food and Drink Multi-skilled Maintenance Engineer)
- Golf Greenkeeping - horticulture (Golf Greenkeeper)
- Hospitality (Senior Chef: Culinary Arts; and Senior Chef: Production Cooking)
- Life and Industrial Sciences (Laboratory Technician; and Science Manufacturing Technician).
- Nursing (Nursing)

Methodology

The evaluation is being conducted over three rounds of research. In the first two rounds of the evaluation the research activity involved:

- A review of documents, including the draft and finalised standards and outline assessments, along with workshop packs and other documents shared with the team by BIS
- Telephone discussions with all of the Apprenticeship Unit (BIS and DfE) and Skills Funding Agency relationship managers involved in supporting developments
- A limited number of discussions with other national stakeholders (c.5) (such as Gatsby Foundation, unionlearn, assessment experts, and provider bodies)
- Attendance at the two relationship manager review meetings held to date

- Attendance at national workshops for Trailblazer networks related to supporting the early and more recent Trailblazer networks
- Discussions with employers, Trailblazer facilitators and other stakeholders relevant to the selected networks
- Attendance at meetings associated with the Trailblazers – some of these were working groups whereas others were steering groups.

In addition to these activities, research was completed with each Trailblazer network selected for the evaluation. The nature and extent of this research is shown in Table 1 below.

In addition, a survey of employers was implemented to broaden the reach of the evaluation. This was launched in Autumn 2014 and remained open to responses until the end of December 2014.

Table 1: Fieldwork completed related to each Trailblazer network

Round 1 Research (involving 8 Trailblazer networks)	Round 2 Research (involving 16 Trailblazer networks including longitudinal research with 8 networks)
58 interviews with employers, Trailblazer facilitators and other stakeholders	95 interviews with employers, Trailblazer facilitators and other stakeholders
Attendance at 4 meetings associated with Trailblazer developments	Attendance at 11 meetings associated with Trailblazer developments
6 interviews with relationship managers	12 interviews with relationship managers

Source: IES 2014

2 Trailblazers' structures and processes

Each of the first two rounds of the evaluation commenced at the point at which most Trailblazers had already drafted their Apprenticeship standards. Some had already developed their high level assessment models by that point, too. This chapter reports on the structures and processes that enabled them to reach this position and provides an overview of the nature and extent of their involvement. Later chapters examine the new Standards and the process adopted by Trailblazers in developing their detailed assessment strategies.

2.1 Trailblazer infrastructure and networks

The greatest influence on the development of the early Trailblazer networks was the Employer Ownership of Skills Programme (EOP). This established Industrial Partnerships (IPs) which provided at least part of the infrastructure for the early Trailblazers, for example the strategic or oversight group. To ensure that these Trailblazers would move ahead without the potential delays that network forming might entail BIS approached existing employer networks (ie many of those that had formed for EOP). For the early Trailblazers creating this link was therefore both a strategic and a pragmatic policy decision. A few of the newer Trailblazers examined by the research also have IP links; however, most do not.

As part of the more recent developments, employers and sector stakeholders have been able to express interest to BIS in developing the new Apprenticeship Standards and this has reportedly led to the establishment of new networks to take forward Trailblazer developments. However, none of the networks established for the Trailblazers involved in the evaluation were new. Rather, the Trailblazer networks continue to develop from those of sectoral bodies, which include training councils, professional or regulatory bodies as well as Sector Skills Councils. In some cases there has been some additional network formation in the form of a subgroup created specifically to take forward Trailblazer developments, but for the large part, the more recent Trailblazers are mostly working with and through those employers that were already engaged with the sectoral bodies.

For the early and more recent Trailblazers, working through established employer networks has been a practical necessity in light of the tight timetable being operated and the most recent research shows that need for speed has not abated over time. The time constraints (and the resources required to develop the standard within a very short period) were highlighted as extremely challenging by many employers. If networks were not already fairly well established, it is unlikely that this pace of development could have been achieved. However, there have been downsides to the rapid pace of developments. The time and resource constraints imposed by the September delivery date for the assessment plan for those Trailblazers taking part in the earliest round of developments had, in the view of some of the employers involved, inhibited innovation in developing the detailed assessments and led to an over-reliance on old and established models. The use of existing networks may also serve to exclude employers who are not already part of networks. This in turn may mean that the new standards lack traction in their sectors,

although as noted previously, employers can express interest in developing new standards directly to BIS, and BIS can link them to the existing networks if the standard they suggest overlaps with the work of an existing network.

In addition, some of the EOP/IP groupings have, in parallel to the Trailblazer, re-developed or tightened up the 'old style' apprenticeship model, which may, on the one hand, suggest caution and a desire to pilot new, innovative developments ahead of large-scale delivery or on the other, less support than envisaged for the new model. Also, where structures such as IPs do not exist this may lead to other issues arising which BIS will need to resolve. For example, there may be a particular challenge in terms of agreeing arrangements for the future monitoring and review of standards in the absence of accepted networks.

Over time, and as their work moves from specifying the standard to considering the composition of detailed assessment, the evidence points to a likely contraction in the size of Trailblazer networks. While the emphasis on industry consultation in the development process should in principle act to increase the numbers of employers included the success of this will depend on whether the consultation can reach beyond the existing networks of sectoral and other bodies. Encouraging employers to forward consultations within their supply chains may provide one way of ensuring wider reach – at least in sectors involving large and smaller employing organisations – but does imply that employers will need to dedicate further resource to the process.

2.2 Trailblazer structures and governance

As noted, many of the early Trailblazers had drawn on the networks, and specifically the IPs, formed for the EOP. In many instances these have operated as an oversight or governance group. Boards are typically large, with 20 or more employers involved. This brings some benefits in that there are employers 'around the table' that can be easily consulted on developments. However, given such large numbers, not all can have detailed involvement in development work; rather, the detailed work towards the development of standards and assessment has often been undertaken by operational groups which are variously called working, action, sub- or task groups.

These operational groups can be temporary and formed to tackle particular objectives as they arise in the development process, or alternatively they can be more permanent, leading activity on an on-going basis for developing an occupational standard or the outline assessment. Where more than one standard has been developed in parallel this latter approach has been more common, with working groups leading the development of each standard. This has some pros and cons: it enables a close focus and attention on the content of one occupational standard; however it also means that there is less opportunity for an individual employer to be involved to a significant degree in multiple standards that have relevance to them.

Where links with EOP are not present or as strong (as is the case with many of more recent Trailblazer networks), the same types of structures may nonetheless operate. Typically in such cases the Trailblazers draw on the network(s) of a sectoral body, usually that of the relevant Sector Skills Council (SSC), a professional body, a training council or regulatory body. The connectedness of the SSC to the sector and particularly to the occupation under consideration (at least in the view of employers involved in the

Trailblazer groupings), appears to be a key determinant of their role within Trailblazers. In some cases, SSCs sit within the group and another body acts as facilitator. Irrespective of whether it is an SSC or other sectoral body that is involved, and to what degree, the structures through which Trailblazer networks operate vary little from those which originated from the EOPs.

In both rounds of the research some respondents believed that BIS did not intend for the SSCs to be involved. However, for many of these the strong connection of the SSC to the sector means that SSCs are a valued and trusted partner, *'[SSC] listen to what we want, they are really employer-led'*. However, it is apparent that the development model has allowed a structure appropriate to each Trailblazer network to emerge (at least in the view of employers involved), with or without SSC involvement as preferred by each sector, which perhaps is the key message resulting from this analysis. It is valuable that different levels of SSC involvement have emerged, since lessons are likely to arise for how to manage developments as the number of standards within sectors increases.

Many of the networks now involved in Trailblazers have previously been involved in redeveloping Apprenticeship training to bring it closer to the needs of employers. The Trailblazers have presented a natural extension to this work and allowed employers increased freedom to design training to meet their needs, and for this reason, have been welcomed. However, the EOP has also provided an opportunity to take forward the redevelopment of apprenticeships and in some cases, two training models have been developed in parallel – one which will be fully funded and another that will require employer investment. The effects of this are as yet unclear.

2.3 Who is involved, when and why?

Membership of the Trailblazer networks has been driven by some of the same factors that determined their structures, although some new factors have also come into play. Consequently, their membership varies somewhat more than their structures.

A common feature of membership is that there is **someone assigned to the role of facilitator**, who manages the administrative demands of the developments. This role can include 'back office' administration and meeting arrangements. This can extend to responsibility for developing draft documents (standards and detailed assessments) based on discussions at meetings, for approval by the groupings established by Trailblazers. Employers in one network described this process as *'marking their homework'*.

Who takes on this facilitator role varies, although three key models emerged in the early Trailblazers, which have been mirrored in the more recent networks: either an employer (this is the least common model), a key contact in a sectoral body, or a consultant who has been funded (sometimes through monies provided by the Gatsby Foundation) typically fulfils this role. Where a consultant facilitates, typically they are commissioned either by the sectoral body (in cases where these are facilitating the Trailblazer), or by the employer working group responsible for development of standard.

Each model has benefits and drawbacks. For example, employers acting in the facilitator role have required significant support and goodwill from their companies because of the high level of resource involved; however it is clear that only certain organisations – mainly larger employers – can resource this.

The benefits of an SSC contact or consultant taking on the role include the dedicated resource this may be able to provide, which can lessen the burden on and investment required of employers. However, some SSC contacts in the more recent Trailblazers made the point that, unless SSCs are a membership organisation or in receipt of EOP funds, they do not have additional financial resources to support these developments; for some this raised questions about sustainability as developments scale up.

The use of Gatsby Foundation funding by some (mainly early, STEM) Trailblazers to finance the facilitator role had helped reduce the resource burdens on employers but may also present some risks in terms of sustainability. A particular concern is who will hold the knowledge about what the development process has entailed over the longer term, and any considerations that might need to feed into review processes.

What is clear – from across the piece – is that it is crucial that individuals providing the facilitator role act as ‘honest brokers’, enabling employers to come together, and then supporting them to determine the agenda, rather than setting it for them. Despite the presence of facilitators, it is apparent that Trailblazers still require a high degree of employer engagement since employers must monitor the actions of facilitators to ensure that honest brokerage emerges. However, employers identify benefits to the facilitator role, noting that it *‘can help reduce the competitive edge that can develop between companies’* to ensure a standard is developed that is appropriate and accepted by industry employers as a whole.

In terms of **employer membership**, the operational groups typically comprise company managers with responsibility for training and development and managers with oversight of apprenticeship training. In some cases, these managers have experience of assessment and in many groups, the participating managers have themselves been through the apprenticeship route. In all cases, there is considerable expertise in the delivery of training. Less frequently, although dominating an operational group in one sector, human resource managers and those with oversight of ‘people development’ comprised the operational groups. Finally, the membership of one Trailblazer operational group included line managers of the relevant occupations from some companies as well as training managers from others.

There were some drawbacks to the involvement of line managers without direct responsibility for training or development. These were less likely to be able to take time off the job to dedicate to Trailblazer work and, as a consequence, were less likely to engage with the evaluation or the national support teams. However, all employers struggled to fit in the development tasks alongside their work and there were myriad examples of employers using their personal time to support development and to *‘keep the day job going’* throughout the development process.

A **spread of company sizes** has been involved in the development process which broadly reflects the typical firm size composition of the different sectors. In all cases, the Trailblazer networks have the support of large and well known employers in their sectors. Across the Trailblazers, evidence suggested significant engagement of large and medium-sized companies. The engagement with small enterprises was also apparent, although sometimes this was indirect, through a mediating or representative organisation, rather than direct involvement per se. Consequently, the active engagement of small businesses is far harder to assess except in sectors where they are predominant. In some Trailblazer

networks, particular group members take responsibility for consulting small businesses in order to appreciate the differential resource burden that fuller engagement implies.

The size of companies participating has implications for available capacity and resources for employer involvement, with larger organisations being better able to weather the secondment of senior personnel for a significant proportion of their working week. For example, in the more recent research an employer chair of the Trailblazer network which was also supported by an SSC in a facilitator role provided an illustration of the time needed to get the new Standard to the point of approval:

'In the thick of the processes... I'd give it up to two days a week, bearing in mind [my work commitments]. It was a real challenge to balance, because you don't have the resources behind you to disappear for days on end. So it's been very stretched.'

Employer chair of a Trailblazer

This speaks to the benefits of having a trusted facilitator able to take on much of the administrative burden of developments as well as to cascade developments amongst wider industry for consultation. It also serves to emphasise the high resource level required of those employers that are deeply engaged with the Trailblazers.

Beyond employers and facilitators, composition of the Trailblazer networks varies considerably. Some Trailblazers separate the administrative task from the development and drafting process – these bring in **experts** to devise the solutions, which employers can then assess for relevance and appropriateness. These experts can include providers, assessment bodies and others. The timing of their involvement varies, with some Trailblazers taking the stance (said to have been encouraged by Relationship Managers) that early developments must involve only employers if Trailblazers are to be considered truly employer led. Others have been content to have some of these experts at the table from the outset. Consequently, some Trailblazer networks have been attended by key providers in the sector (and some employer-providers), professional bodies, and awarding organisations along with sectoral bodies and employers throughout the process whereas others have drafted in additional expertise only at key points in the process. To date, there is little to indicate which provides the most robust way forward and there is no indication that where membership extends beyond simply employers and facilitators that employers feel any less ownership of the Standard and the detailed assessment plan.

2.4 What is involved?

As noted, the development of the standards, outline and detailed assessment, has involved a considerable resource and this is not without its challenges. The process of **consensual development** has required repeated iterations of these documents followed by discussion, review and revision. Motivating this detailed involvement amongst employers is the apparent dissatisfaction with the outgoing framework along with the desire to influence any new training model to ensure it meets requirements. Employers had the attitude that they *[have] to be in it, to win it*. Beyond these factors, close sympathy with the aims of the sectoral body drove involvement, as did skills shortages and the lack of pathways to enable access to occupations.

The more recent research suggests that Trailblazer developments have continued to demand **significant time and resource** from those involved and this may raise challenges for sustainability. It is far from clear how long this extent of support can be maintained. In the most recent round of research, despite goodwill on the part of individuals involved it was apparent that many companies were questioning the resource that Trailblazer development required. It also indicates that despite the provision of templates for the more recent standards, and more of a 'road map' being available to them to guide developments, these 'tools' have not necessarily reduced the resource requirement involved which is a challenging message.

As with the first round of research, the **frequency and duration of meetings** has varied considerably and depends greatly upon the model of who leads the drafting process and how employer engagement is ensured. Where employers have sat around the table and debated the precise wording of, for example, the module descriptions that underpin the detailed assessment plan, they have dedicated significant tranches of time – for example, some meetings operating in this mode lasted five-and-a-half hours. Where employers are, in effect, delegating developments of detailed assessment to providers or awarding bodies, their meetings to approve or otherwise the materials drafted by these external bodies can be brief, less than one hour in duration.

It is not clear that fewer or more, longer or shorter, meetings impoverishes or improves the results. Rather, the frequency and duration of meetings reflects the development model and process instigated by each Trailblazer network which in turn reflects the interests and resources available among those involved. Future Trailblazers should canvass employers (and others) about the optimal frequency and duration of meetings based on the time resource available among employers and facilitators. It is apparent that the Trailblazers are generating a great deal of interest among providers and awarding bodies and this may mean they are willing to bear at least some of the resource burden in order to ensure their own role in Apprenticeships as the new standards roll out.

As noted, Trailblazers have established some approaches to ensure they have the necessary resource to take forward their work. It is clear that the **resourcing model** cannot be one-size-fits-all; rather, it must be shaped to fit with the resources employers want and are able to make available. Moreover, some employers are questioning how long they can maintain the level of involvement and resource entailed to date. This view emerged from employers across a range of Trailblazers although was least prevalent in those networks where development tasks were outsourced to external parties and then reviewed and agreed by employers. There were hopes among those who were part of the earliest Trailblazers that the resource required would '*level out*' but this had not been the case in the lead up to the detailed assessment plan. There was also evidence of the resource demanded being questioned by senior managers in employers' organisations.

2.5 Making decisions and developing consensus

The operational groups have been crucial to driving decision-making on the requirements of sectors in terms of role descriptions, skills, competencies and behaviours. The Trailblazers demonstrate two main approaches to developing **consensus on the Standards**; in one, a clean sheet is the starting point and the Standard has been drafted through an iterative process starting with the identification of what is needed to perform a particular job. The alternative approach has been to use the existing framework (or indeed

other qualification route into an occupation) as the starting point and to debate how well this fits the job role under examination. There is a nuance to this model introduced by the more recent Trailblazers, some of whom have used the early Standards to inform their development (ie, while the Department was able to provide a document template for the Standard, it was the content and approach taken within the pre-existing Standards that informed content).

In illustration of the development process to get to the Standard, one employer described being set '*homework*' to describe the job role and competencies, skills and behaviours required in their own company and sending this in advance of the meeting to the facilitator. The facilitator collated all employer responses and then, as part of an all-day meeting, two operational groups (related to different standards) mapped and scoped the differing definitions in order to reach a consensus that could work across the industry.

Observations of Trailblazer meetings confirm that consensual approaches have emerged. It is clear though that Trailblazers work through differing processes so the means to develop consensus is quite varied. Not all, for instance, involve employers in all day meetings; in contrast, some meetings can be comparatively short but achieve a similar level of engagement and consensus. There is an indication that employers are (and need to be) passionate about the need for high quality apprenticeships and, as part of the process, are quick to question the developments to ensure that the right outcomes are reached.

In terms of gathering the views of employers who are not part of operational or strategic groups, and particularly SMEs, a range of approaches have been used. These include:

- online consultations (the scale of the sample and response rate varies considerably between Trailblazers)
- a process of successive online panels
- consultations led by operational group employers with SMEs in their supply chains and division leads and other staff in the own (large) organisations
- consultations led by a selected member of the operational group assigned with the responsibility for SME engagement
- consultations of databases of SMEs held by SSCs and other sector bodies
- locating working groups in different regions in order to attract a different group of employers to meetings to understand their views.

Some Trailblazers have taken great care to ensure the diversity of employers in their sector had been included in the consultations, although given the size of some of these sectors some doubts were expressed regarding whether they could claim to have achieved a 'representative' sample. There had also been debates about who to approach within the consultations (eg HR or training managers, trade bodies), which suggests that considerable attention had been paid to this aspect of the process. An example of an extensive consultation is one in which the networks of the SSC were used as well as

advertising the consultation document in the trade press and promoting it through personal networks.

While there is reasonable confidence across the Trailblazer networks that the standards and outline assessments have the backing of sector employers, there were necessarily limitations on the consultation process. While in some cases the consultation was sent out to large databases, there was limited time available to encourage responses. In these situations employers noted that if there had been a longer time to conduct the consultations they could have done more to encourage responses which would have meant they could be more assured of industry support. Moreover, the consultation typically could only be sent directly to employers who were already *'in the loop'* in some way ie those in the supply chain of a larger employer or those in touch with a sectoral body of some sort. The validity of the responses to consultations therefore depends on the reliability and reach of the data sources drawn on.

In both rounds of the research the consultations led to some 'tweaks' of the Standards and outline assessments. Consequently they were seen to have made a difference and to have been of value.

Moving into the development of the **detailed assessment**, consultation has been more limited and typically has involved members of the strategic and operational groups associated with the Trailblazers. To be fair, the Trailblazer networks are not required to consult beyond the development of the Standard. Moreover the work on the detailed assessment, at least in some cases, has been more onerous and resource intensive than that to arrive at the standard. Whether the development process had been outsourced to experts, or had mainly been the work of employers, there has been consultation within all Trailblazers, at minimum extending from working groups to strategic groups, to arrive at the detailed assessment.

The membership of Trailblazer networks has dwindled as they have moved into their second stage of work. Since this stage of work is more detailed, a contraction in the number of employers involved might have been expected. While in terms of determining an assessment model this may not constitute a problem, getting a critical mass involved in delivery and having enough of an insight to ensure the standard and training is fit for purpose on an ongoing basis may be a challenge. Until delivery commences at a larger scale, however, any implications remain unclear.

2.6 Developing the national infrastructure and support

Where Trailblazers differ from prior initiatives lies in their implementation through what is described as an early adopter model, rather than a set of pilots to test delivery. The desire is for successive rounds of Trailblazers to prove the reform concepts and deliver intelligence on the issues that arise from establishing standards and assessment models that can help build toward a steady state, leading to a template process that can be implemented to enable the reforms to flourish across sectors and occupations.

The early adopter model however is not one-sided: while employer networks deliver the intelligence about the support they require to reach steady-state, BIS is also trialling various aspects of the infrastructure needed to support this approach to apprenticeship development, such as instigating a panel process to approve standards and assessments

and devising a funding formula that can underpin the allocation of the government funding cap. It is, and is viewed to be, an organic and heuristic process, particularly by the relationship managers who provide support to multiple Trailblazers over time and in parallel.

However, *'building the bridge as you walk across it'* (ie. open policy making) is not without peril; it means that the mechanisms necessary to support developments are not established until it is realised that they are required. However, throughout the relationship managers have been explicit that this has been a learning process for the Department as much as the Trailblazers. An example of this open policy making is the process to revise a standard where it has been trialled and found inadequate for industry needs. It must be noted that policy attention is now turning to precisely such issues, but its mention here provides an illustration of the extent of learning and development work that is still required.

Generally, in the latest round of research there was not a great deal of commentary on the guidance provided for the Trailblazers which suggested that on the whole it supplied the necessary support, although again there was feedback that Trailblazer networks wished to understand the full process, *'the big picture'* at the outset rather than be informed of expectations on a staged basis. Without this, each new task they are informed they have to achieve appears to be a new and unexpected hurdle. This somewhat undermines the goodwill they can build in their employing organisations as they are left unable to outline the resource input required or the duration of the development process.

In the most recent round of research there were indications that more organisations are aware of Trailblazers, and are willing to support their developments. One example of this is the Federation for Industry Sector Skills and Council (FISS) which has developed a toolkit for Trailblazer development which was highlighted to the research team as a practical guide to developments. It may be worth the national team reviewing this and any other toolkits that national level bodies develop in order that a more detailed picture of the resources available can be made available at an early stage for Trailblazers.

'[FISS] produced a really good facilitated toolkit designed to guide you through the development of the standards. I found it a very readable, usable document. It could have been used by anybody performing that facilitator role ... It takes you through the process of forming a Trailblazer and putting in a proposal, right the way through to thinking about your standards and the high-level assessment and the detail that needs to sit behind that ... I got the most use out of that, actually.'

Trailblazer facilitator from a Sector Skills Council

2.6.1 Structures to oversee and govern the standards

Following the creation of the initial standards and assessment models – or in some cases in parallel with their developments – most networks have set about the process of developing more standards. There are several ways in which these developments have been supported, for example by the full complement of employers who contributed to the initial standard, by the subset that took forward the development of the detailed assessment or some other or new group within the broad network. Some Trailblazers are also alert to the need to establish a process and structure for the review of standards.

On this latter point, in some cases employers and networks are seeking to establish a new board to govern the developments related to associated occupations or to use Trailblazer structures such as independent assessment services to lead this task. This may constrain options for the national process to support scaling up, because there is likely to be an expectation that whatever is subsequently established nationally will interact with these sectoral developments, since employers are setting these in place ahead of the national structures being established.

3 Developing standards

The first section of this chapter is based on the documentary review of the Apprenticeship standards. The initial eight Trailblazers developed 13 standards as part of the early phase of their work, all of which were approved at the first opportunity. The eight more recent Trailblazers selected for inclusion in the evaluation developed a further 14 standards, of which nine were approved at the first opportunity and some of which continue in development.

The analysis then details how both the initial and later Trailblazers have dealt with issues such as the definition of occupational profile and occupational competence, overlap between occupations and transferability, and links with existing qualifications and professional registration. The aim is to assess the degree of clarity and accessibility of the final standards and identify potential areas of confusion or discrepancy among sectors. The later Trailblazers were able to draw on the learning from initial Trailblazers through the published guidance which set out a template for the Apprenticeship Standard¹.

Entry requirements and Role profile

An expressed objective for the standards is for them to be ‘accessible and understandable’ for potential learners. Providing details of what employers are looking for when recruiting helps the standards to be accessible and provides the necessary information for potential applicants to assess their own level of prior skills, qualifications and experience against the expectations of employers. This may help employers to attract a suitable calibre of applicants.

Most of the standards provide this information, although there are exceptions, such as Licenced Conveyancer and Nursing. In Nursing this is because there are no nationally agreed minimum entry requirements for the profession; instead, each accredited higher education institution sets its own entry criteria for their pre-registration degree programme. As the Apprenticeship Standard will allow access to this profession it therefore must conform with this, rather than set the entry requirement. Similarly, the Licenced Conveyancer training must conform to the current regulatory standards and new criteria cannot be set for the apprenticeship.

The role, or occupational, profile is also central in giving potential apprentices a clear understanding of the nature of an occupation and of the tasks and duties involved in a given role. The level of detail and clarity provided in this respect varies across standards.

In some standards (eg Power Network Craftsperson) the role profile is briefly sketched and emphasis is placed on describing the core requirements in terms of skills, knowledge and behaviours. Other initial Trailblazers such as Network Engineer, Software Developer, Aerospace Manufacturing Fitter and Mechatronics Maintenance Technician specify the role profile in detail, but using technical terminology and industry-specific language to do

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/287276/bis-14-p194-future-of-apprenticeships-in-england-guidance-for-trailblazers-revised-version-2.pdf

so. These two approaches pose different challenges from the point of view of accessibility and ease of understanding for potential learners. In the first, limited context about the nature of the industry and of the general features of the job is provided while in the second, specialist terminologies are used which may not be readily accessible to the lay person. In this sense, these standards appear to be better suited for the needs of the industry rather than for potential learners.

In other initial standards such as Financial Services Administrator, Food and Drink Maintenance Engineer, Science Manufacturing and Laboratory Technician and the majority of later standards, such as Licenced Conveyancer, Professional Accountant and Golf Greenkeeper, the description of the occupational profile provides a clear but general description of the role, tasks and duties which the occupation entails and also gives a brief overview of the industry or sector within which the apprenticeship sits. This makes them readily accessible and understandable for a potential learner or their parents. The standards from the later Trailblazers seem stronger in this regard, perhaps because a template for the standard was supplied to them by BIS on the basis of the early developments, although the reduced reliance on technical terminology could also reflect their sector profile, with many not being in STEM sectors.

Occupational cross-over and core-and-options approach

Four of the initial Trailblazers and two of the later Trailblazers have opted for some form of 'core-and-options' approach in their standards, to ensure transferability and avoid duplication for occupations within a sector with large overlaps in terms of competencies; however, there are differences in the way in which this was approached.

Most of those using a 'core and options approach', such as the Food and Drink, Electrotechnical, Energy and Utilities, Craft and Butchery standards have specified that the standard covers multiple roles within one occupation that share core requirements, and list the skills and knowledge which are core to all, and then those that are specific to each designated role within the occupation. In Craft for example, there are core skills, knowledge and behaviours, and then options for a range of individual craft disciplines, with five options set out for apprenticeships in the craft occupations that also include an element of design, marketing, conservation, service and repair, and business management. In contrast, the Financial Services Administrator standard lists two potential roles under the main occupation designation, but the specifications do not distinguish between core and role-specific requirements – an aspect that may prove confusing for potential learners.

It would be desirable, for ease of understanding and clarity, to make a **clear distinction** between core and optional or occupation-specific requirements for full competence (in terms of role profile as well as skills and knowledge) when multiple occupations are listed in one standard. In general, however, it appears that the core-and-options approach is a practical and functional way for Trailblazers to deal with occupational cross-over in the new standards. Ensuring transferability of skills within the sector appears to be a main focus in all standards, many of which foresee a 'core' and 'options' approach enabling training to be tailored to firms' (and roles') specific needs or to specific product areas even where there is only a single main occupation listed.

Competencies, skills and knowledge

Trailblazers had the freedom to decide whether to list the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve full occupational competence separately or together. Five early Trailblazers distinguished clearly between the two in their standards, whilst the other three (Aerospace, Life Sciences and Electrotechnical) chose to list skills and knowledge together under the same heading in their standards, possibly to underline the interdependence between the two in determining full competence. Later Trailblazers all list the required skills, knowledge and behaviours required of an apprentice separately, except for Nursing. Nursing is a statutory regulated profession for which the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) set the standards and competencies needed for pre-registration nursing education. The knowledge, skills and attitudes specified by the NMC were linked from the draft Trailblazer Nursing standard.

In general, the interpretation of what is defined as ‘knowledge’, ‘skills’ or ‘competencies’ and ‘behaviours’ varies across sectors. In some sectors, knowledge designates underpinning theoretical knowledge while in others the focus is on the regulatory standards and processes within the sector as well as knowledge of the business environment and of sector-specific products. The type of competencies and functions included under the heading of ‘skills’ also varies according to the type of occupation, with some defined narrowly as technical and vocational whilst others centred on service provision and appropriate occupational behaviours – thus slightly overlapping with the type of attributes captured under the ‘Behaviours’ section.

Overall, it appears that across the standards terms such as skills, competencies, knowledge and understanding are used in a fluid and differing way, to describe a much diversified range of attributes and functions. To an extent, this is a consequence of the diversity in the nature of occupations and sectors covered, and of the inter-connected nature of knowledge and skills in determining full occupational competence. At the same time, however, it would be valuable to ensure that Trailblazer developers share an understanding of what each term is intended to capture and describe; the Department might usefully provide this. Clarity is important to ensure consistency and broad comparability across standards and sectors as the scope of the Trailblazers expands to a wider range of sectors. It would also enable potential apprentices to understand and compare the various learning and competence outcomes when choosing between different Apprenticeship options.

Professional registration, qualifications and progression

Most of the standards clearly outline the opportunity for professional registration for successful apprentices, and where this is not feasible this is typically specified. For example, in Craft there is no single professional recognition scheme and therefore details are provided of the many trade bodies, guilds and associations who work with and on behalf of employers in the sector. The Financial Services Administrator standard specifies that further learning would be required in order to qualify for registration. No mention is made of professional registration in the Culinary Arts and Production Cooking standards, however this may be because this registration is on a pay to join basis rather than qualify (and then pay) to join.

More variety exists however in the approach adopted across the standards towards qualifications and this is especially the case amongst the earliest Trailblazers, where employers were given greater freedom about whether or not to specify qualifications within their standards¹. Some avoid making explicit reference to existing qualifications as components of the Apprenticeship, and some specify that it is up to employers to establish the qualifications to be acquired by the apprentice. Conversely, in both of the Financial Services standards, an extensive list is provided of possible existing qualifications at different levels which the apprentice could undertake, and in some later standards such as Butchery and Conveyancing Level 2 Food Safety and CLC (the regulatory body for licenced conveyancers) academic qualifications are specified.

Both approaches have potential strengths – in terms of ensuring a balance between employers' freedom and flexibility in setting the new standards whilst ensuring continuity with existing and well established qualifications – but both could also constitute a source of confusion for potential learners, due either to lack, or excess, of details about the potential qualifications that will form the apprenticeship. It may therefore be helpful for employers to consider potential apprentices' needs for clarity when setting out their approach to qualifications within the new standards and the way information is presented.

Some of the standards note potential progression routes available to apprentices upon successful completion of the standard, which may be helpful to informing their career decisions. For example, Butchery notes the progression route through Level 3 and Higher Apprenticeships, and the Accounting Technician standard notes that successful completion might lead to credits towards the completion of the Professional Accountant apprenticeship (a partner Trailblazer standard) or Chartered Accountancy qualifications. Overall, this is an area that could usefully be strengthened in many of the standards in order to inform potential apprentices.

3.1 Developing standards and outline assessments

A radical review?

In early analysis the contrasting views that the Trailblazer networks had taken in their work were summarised as falling somewhere on the following spectrum:

- constituting a response to the Richard Review and providing employers with the opportunity to develop the apprenticeships that their industries want and need, and
- being unsure that the Richard Review was needed, nor any real need for a radical overhaul of apprenticeships.

The more recent Trailblazer networks have further widened the range of starting points. In addition to these positions, there were sectors that had already recognised challenges with their existing apprenticeship and taken steps to improve the situation; one that was

¹ The most recent guidance for trailblazer developers sets out some criteria that must be met where qualifications are included in standards. These surround the qualification either being required for professional registration, acting as a licence to practice, being a regulatory or legislative requirement for the occupation, or forming part of recruitment criteria among sector employers.

reviewing the sector's educational and CPD model and which had noted the similarity of this to an apprenticeship model (whilst not having an apprenticeship) when the Trailblazer invitation had been published; and another which had no tradition of [higher] apprenticeships and was attempting to introduce the apprenticeship as an alternate route to the single, prescribed, degree-based route that existed (whilst noting that regulation requirements meant that they could not change the content of the current degree).

As in the previous round, the interviews revealed that the extent to which current apprenticeships (and their embedded NVQs) were seen as meeting the needs of the relevant occupations in different companies and settings had been the main factor affecting extent of change required. As in early Trailblazers, often this meant that the Trailblazer development was viewed as an opportunity to revise any shortcomings whilst retaining and building on those parts that were good. Similarly, employers in the more recent Trailblazers made similar points about the utility of the current model which meant the development focused on tweaking the existing training rather than radically changing.

We wanted to ensure that it was as good as it could be. It was the opportunity for a good spring clean, 'Ooh look at what we did back then, we don't do that now, that's no longer applicable'.

[The Trailblazer standard has been] developed based on the current standard and extended by the behaviours. The standard is not a departure from the current framework and does not contain anything revolutionary. Rather it is an "opportunity for review".

Trailblazer employers

Where the current training model was viewed as inappropriate, a more revolutionary view of development emerged; for example, one employer said of the outgoing framework, *'It was a one-size-fits-all which did not fit all'* hence change was needed. In another example, employers said that while the current Level 2 framework was considered overall to be *'too vague'* and was not meeting the needs of the industry, some parts of the existing *qualifications* were nonetheless good and should be retained. Therefore the intention was to expand and build upon the better parts to create something which would be usable for the whole of the sector. In one example of this, large scale mechanisation had led on the one hand to *'de-skilling'* of a great many jobs, alongside a resurgence of interest in the more highly-skilled *'craft'* end of the business. In addition there were production and retail aspects to the role, with individuals in different parts of the sector involved to very different extents in these role components. Reconciling the two ends of this distribution had been difficult, resolved by creating a single Level 2 standard with a *'core'* and *'options'* approach and a split between *'process'* and *'retail'*, with some shared knowledge, competences and behaviours between the two profiles. Several successive iterations of the standards had been necessary to achieve a model which was considered usable for all parts of the supply chain. While initially there were fears that the new standard would be too narrow, employers ultimately reported being pleased with the outcome.

In another example, a Trailblazer had initially tried to develop a single standard but with a *'stopping off'* point part way through, to represent the different levels of roles within the sector. However, it was difficult to create this type of *'embedded'* approach (ie, with the *'lower level'* role described as a sub-set of the larger occupational standard) and so they

had finally agreed to develop two different standards. This led to an interesting approach to differentiating between the two role levels. This Trailblazer started by developing the higher level standard, and then for the lower level standard they worked backwards by establishing what those individuals involved at this level could not do, or would not be allowed to do, either by employer or by the regulator. Employers then used the consultation to ask specific questions about which of these activities respondents would expect a worker at that level to do: a granular consultation focused on exactly where that comfort level was for employers

For the more recent Trailblazers licencing, legislation and regulation had played a larger role than for those in the earlier developments. This was because of both the nature of the occupations under consideration (for example, Accountancy and Nursing are regulated professions) and because of recent developments in some sectors: for example, the Care Certificate, which itself was largely informed by the Common Induction Standards for the Care sector, was being piloted at the time the Adult Social Care Trailblazer was in development, and whilst not compulsory was seen as likely to become 'compulsory by employer requirement' as had been the case with the CSC in years previously, and hence would have to be heeded in developments for workers in this sector.

Similarly, in developing their standards the Conveyancing sector had considered existing registration requirements for the CLC Licensed Conveyancer qualification, which has a rigorous qualification, assessment and licencing regime as well as some pre-student checks; while the Adult Social Care sector had taken care to ensure that material in the Care Certificate and the '6 C's'¹ was incorporated.

To grade or not to grade?

The Richard Review recommended the introduction of grading for apprenticeships, which is a novel approach in the assessment of competency. This had been a cause for some concern for several of the early Trailblazer networks, with many interviewees commenting on the binary nature of competence. This had led to agreement within some of the earlier Trailblazers that while the competence assessments would not be graded, they would accede to the knowledge tests, and in some cases the behaviours, being graded. The issues of grading were a cause for concern for several of the more recent development groups.

'Basically everything that gets marked gets graded. So inside the assessment process, we have a number of on line tests, and the on line tests will be marked and will be graded. [However], the work based training is less straightforward to mark, [and] won't be a formal part of the grading. ... Because the on the job training doesn't actually get marked, it gets assessed'

Trailblazer employer

However there were examples among the earliest Trailblazers that suggested employers had embraced the concept of grading through linking together competence and behaviour

¹ These are: [care](#), [compassion](#), [competence](#), [communication](#), [courage](#) and [commitment](#)

and thinking through what might set an excellent candidate apart from a competent candidate.

Employers in one of the more recent Trailblazer networks questioned whether it was possible to differentiate the various grades of competence. They argued that, even were this possible, ensuring that such an assessment process was consistent would require a lot of thought and they had expectations that it *'may prove challenging'*. Another group had felt it was not possible to grade performance of the role for which the Standards were being developed, and would have preferred not to do this, but had agreed to accommodate this *'if the guidance remains as it is'*.¹

One of the more recent Trailblazers had decided to adopt the approach taken by several of the early networks, by choosing to retain a competent/not yet competent decision for their standards (ie for competence) and for the synoptic assessment (overall work performance) but agreeing a 'distinction' grade for the knowledge certificate. However, within another group employers had more mixed views and gave different rationales for wanting, or not wanting, to see the introduction of grading:

'I am not a huge fan of' the grading – I don't want it to look like academic qualification, and 'grades' are better assessed by the employer in a reference.'

'I like the grading because it is like academic qualifications and it can give learners something to strive for.'

Trailblazer employers

Recognisably, the inclusion of grading has proved challenging for some Trailblazer networks for a variety of reasons. Policymakers have listened to their feedback and the guidance for Trailblazer Developers has changed on this point as a result of lessons learned from the early stages of work. While the early Trailblazers were instructed that the apprenticeship should be graded, there is now acceptance that this may not be possible or relevant. The latest guidance sets out that each case for exemption from grading will be considered on its merits. The criteria that underpin policy decisions on whether the case will be accepted relate to where all assessments are aligned with professional registration; regulation or with a licence to practise.

What is to be assessed and how?

For many of the more recent Trailblazers the interviews took place too early in the development process for them to have reached a final decision regarding their approach to assessment. However, their comments concerning their early approaches to this topic reflected similar concerns to those expressed by the early Trailblazers.

One key issue is the interdependence of assessment and standards development and of behavioural descriptors. Thus one employer noted that while they had observed the

The guidance on grading changed since this interview took place.¹ Employers tended to discuss this in the context of functional skills but it was inferred that they in fact were referring to PLTS which they may not have known much about since they were previously embedded in other qualification elements

timetable set out for developments, attempting to finalise the standards before moving on to consider assessment, they had in fact kept an eye on the implications of the developments for any future assessment regime, and commented that:

'We realised that some of the ideas were un-assessable and so they were thrown out.'

Trailblazer employer

An employer working with another Trailblazer noted that their group had not done this until later on in the process and as a result were having to return to their draft standard and revise it. They had looked at the standard to identify which elements could be included in the end assessment and what this might look like.

'What can be done as continuous assessment, ie line manager observations or set up specific scenarios for less common tasks or encourage participation in events so all the standards can be met at once.'

Trailblazer employer

This process has brought to light some changes that they would have liked to have made to the standard, now that they have *'looked at it with fresh eyes'*. This serves to illustrate the need to consider the feasibility of assessment when writing standards.

There were similarities in the thinking that had informed developments within some of the early and more recent Trailblazers. There was some discussion around the use of formative assessment and using it as a gate keeping process. For example, one of the recent Trailblazer networks felt that only capable apprentices should advance to the second part of the programme and reach the synoptic assessment. An early Trailblazer network was concerned that the introduction of synoptic assessment should not be taken to mean that it was acceptable for an apprentice to go through the programme and reach this end point without having ever received feedback on their performance:

'I am not happy to train someone for three years and then assess them at the end and then say 'you can't do it'. I want them to have clear evidence of training and experience before the assessment takes place'

Trailblazer employer

Another issue was the location of assessments, ie, where the different assessments will take place.

'...this is at the heart of the employer-led versus provider-led differentiation and we anticipate some challenges. It is a drawn-out process.'

Trailblazer employer

The earlier Trailblazers, at the time of this second round of the research, had reached the point at which they were considering the timing for and length of time that synoptic assessment would take, along with its format. Some had agreed that synoptic assessment would be conducted via one or more projects and would probably last around three days. A question yet to be resolved was the scheduling of synoptic tests – should these be

available 'on demand' or as a window option (ie. an agreed set of planned dates when all synoptic assessments would take place)? A contributory consideration in this decision was whether training providers would have the capacity to offer assessments in parallel were the assessments to be scheduled for such limited time slots.

In addition, there was still some lack of clarity regarding the meaning of 'independent assessment'. There were concerns expressed by the Trailblazers that this meant that apprentices would need to be assessed completely externally to (and not by) their own training provider.

'BIS will probably see independence as meaning that some other company is doing the assessment [than provides the training].'

Trailblazer employer

In the absence of any clearer guidance on this point this Trailblazer was working on the assumption that awarding organisations would have responsibility.

'Awarding organisation will need to set the test, so that it comes in a sealed brown envelope as it would in a university, there might be additional guidance saying "You will need these materials". The provider or equivalent can run the test [itself] but it is set externally. It will be marked to criteria set by the awarding organisation and the awarding organisation has the right to come in and inspect 10% of cases.'

Trailblazer employer

If it was confirmed that providers could deliver the end test then members of this Trailblazer believed this would ensure that the synoptic assessment was scalable (ie, could be undertaken once the apprenticeship was running at full capacity).

Another Trailblazer had consulted with employers (in the Trailblazer group and more widely) and this had revealed a desire for more practical assessment throughout the learning '*rather than just being all at the end*'. Based on this some modelling had been undertaken and three draft mechanisms for measuring or apportioning learning were established. They had taken these possible approaches back to their professional body and were seeking feedback from board members about how practical these were at time of interview.

There also appear to have been quite different experiences with regard to the guidance that different Trailblazers had received in relation to developing their assessment strategy. For example, employers in a recent Trailblazer said that BIS had given them the criteria that would be used in order to assess whether the assessment approach was acceptable, '*so it effectively became the template*' for their work on assessment. In contrast, others had developed assessment in line with their industry requirements but had then received fairly negative feedback; this was felt to have not been handled well, and was largely felt to reflect a lack of knowledge and understanding of vocational education and training and assessment amongst members of the panel that provide advice to ministers on which to make the final decision on approval.

3.1.1 Professional registration

The perceived value of aligning apprenticeships with the requirements of professional registration varied with sector. Some sectors did not have professional bodies, particularly the more recent ones, which limited their interest of this option.

There was still some uncertainty about the exact nature of the link between the final assessment and the professional body registration in at least one of the early sectors, while in one of the more recent Trailblazers the entire qualification is required to map against current professional registration requirements, as the developments were designed to constitute an alternative entry route to this regulated profession. For another of the regulated sectors, the development had been focussed on the requirements set out in the qualification that was a requisite for professional membership, and the Trailblazer had provided an opportunity to *'review the content of that qualification.'*

3.1.2 Approach to transferable skills

Several of the early Trailblazers had recognised that where there are areas of overlap in work activities it will be useful to ensure that units are developed in common across sectors. However, there was evidence that this had not happened consistently across the piece. For example, a more recent Trailblazer reported that their sector contained a number of transferable or portable skills, which overlapped with others, and this *'had been highlighted as an issue in their feedback'*. In the first round of the evaluation there had been talk amongst the Trailblazers of meetings to discuss common units but in the second round it appeared that little had been done in this respect and employers were regretting that this had not been resolved earlier. In particular, concern was expressed that similar units were being developed by several Trailblazer networks with the fear that standards in some industry sectors would be less rigorous than in others.

'There's been no real work on that [transferable/common units]. [One sector] had developed a unit and said it was transferable into [our sector] and [another] but they hadn't talked to us. [Another sector] also wanted to write units that had already been done, [but] they should just have to look at the range statements, the range of equipment. There's probably a lot of duplication, that's the worry, eg there's a [role] in [our sector] and [in another] and there's probably one in [another sector], and their one will be weaker than ours. There should be a bank of units that have been approved and can be taken out and used to avoid duplication, there's been a lot of hard work and we will probably find eg that a unit for a [role] has [already] been developed, it's time and effort, it should be a transferable document, let's look at what can be shared.'

Trailblazer Employer

Indeed, the Relationship Managers had also noted the need to consider this issue although it was not clear whether any guidance on this had been supplied.

'Use of the core and options approach here might mean you can have some things that straddle sectors, we haven't looked at this.'

Trailblazer Relationship Manager

These experiences (and the views of the Relationship Managers on this point) indicate there is a real need for a process to manage common and transferable units, especially as the number of standards in development increases, if duplication and the production of similar standards with different rigour are to be avoided.

'It does not make sense to have the various trailblazers that might use such a unit describe them separately... we want to see a meeting to ensure that they are not duplicating work already done, and also that any standards considered crucial for/by small businesses are not discarded during the development process, that would be disastrous. We need to keep pushing the idea of some kind of oversight.'

Trailblazer Employer

3.1.3 Incorporating behaviours and skills

A point of departure for the Trailblazers from the current apprenticeship frameworks lies in the incorporation of 'behaviours' and 'skills' specified alongside competence and knowledge. The inclusion of behaviours was not specified by policymakers in the original guidance; rather their inclusion has stemmed directly from employers and Trailblazer networks. While still not a requirement, specifying behaviours is now an option highlighted in the latest guidance.

The early Trailblazers adopted different approaches to the description of behaviours, and in terms of how to assess behaviours. One of the early Trailblazers used Gatsby funding to commission a consultant to develop a Behavioural Anchored Rating System (BARS) approach and this was felt by that group to be a potentially useful and practical tool for assessing apprentice behaviours. This model might be publicised more widely amongst the other Trailblazer networks.

Some of the behaviours specified in the more recent Trailblazer outlines appear to originate from the personal learning and thinking skills (PLTS) that were part of the apprenticeship frameworks often embedded within qualifications¹ and there are overlaps between behaviours and 'soft skill' areas. The Trailblazers also vary in how they describe these behaviours, with implications for the assessments that will be designed, and for parity and transferability across sectors.

Communication is an example of this and the standards show some diversity in its respect. It is presented in different formats and depths and in different sections within the standards, variously as a 'behaviour', as part of 'core values and behaviours', and as a 'skill' (see Table 3.1).

The key issue is that the way in which such behaviours (and soft skills) are framed (and indeed where they are located in the apprenticeship) has implications for the way in which assessment is designed (and indeed, whether there is assessment at all, as it is currently not the case that all parts of an apprenticeship will necessarily be assessed). Potentially

¹ Employers tended to discuss this in the context of functional skills but it was inferred that they in fact were referring to PLTS which they may not have known much about since they were previously embedded in other qualification elements

this raises the question of whether other sectors will be willing to accept evidence of these behaviours when presented as part of a Trailblazer apprenticeship. This in turn could mean employers have to invest in re-assessment for apprentices who transfer between sectors after completing, where one apprenticeship is seen as giving more weight to assessment of these behaviours (and soft skills) than another.

Table 3.1: Different ways of describing communication

Accountancy Standard	
Skill	What is required
Communication	Communication Communicates in a clear, articulate and appropriate manner. Adapts communication to suit different situations, individuals or teams.
Craftsperson Standard	
Core values and behaviours	
Communicate and work effectively with others	
Golf Greenkeeper Standard	
Behaviours	
A clear and effective communicator who can use a variety of communication methods to give/receive information accurately and in a timely and positive manner	

Source: Apprenticeship Standards

3.1.4 Quality assuring the process

As with the current apprenticeship frameworks, Trailblazer groups expect that much of the quality assurance process will focus on assessment and outcomes. Several of the recent Trailblazer groups were starting to grapple with how quality assurance (QA) of standards and the training delivered to the standards will operate and where responsibility will lie. Further down the line the earlier Trailblazer groups were still confident that most of the expected QA system would be based to a large extent on current arrangements.

‘Our view is that the current regime of assessors and verifiers actually works quite well with a little bit of tidying up. So I think we will be basing the system on in-company assessors who are likely to be supervisors and people like that, and then out of company owned by the awarding organisation verifiers who will make sure that the standard is being maintained from company to company.’

Trailblazer employer

A particular focus for those who view the Trailblazers as a way to regain the depth and integrity of apprenticeships is the issue of quality of the delivery process. For these, a particular concern may emerge where there are parts of the apprenticeship programme that will not be explicitly assessed.

Among the further points that will need clarification in coming months is the question of who will be responsible in the longer term for overseeing and updating the standards. In at least one case this was seen as inextricably linked to the questions regarding quality assurance:

'It still falls within the current QA system but to maintain the quality of the standard employers will have to have a bigger role in the assurance group, perhaps the same Trailblazer employers as now. You have to maintain engagement to ensure quality.'

Trailblazer employer

While some Trailblazer groups have specified a date for review, there is uncertainty over 'who' will constitute the groups that lead the review in future. For example, those individuals currently contributing to the Trailblazers may move posts or leave, or employers may become less keen to release people to this activity over time. Continuity may be an issue, as may the question of the resource intensity required by the process. Moreover a solution is needed that is scalable as the number of standards created increases.

3.1.5 The approval process for the standards

The initial draft standards that are developed by Trailblazers are reviewed by an informal panel that supplies feedback to help them be developed to final draft quality. On submission of the final drafts, a formal advisory panel takes a view which is communicated to the minister. The minister makes the decision about whether a standard is approved or rejected.

Understandably, those Trailblazers that had had their standards approved by the minister provided little commentary on the process. Among those Trailblazers that had submitted standards that had not been initially approved, some employers thought that the approval process and feedback had not been handled well. It raised questions of transparency of the process and particularly regarding membership of the panel. Some had been particularly demoralised after receiving their feedback and were, according to some in their networks, considering withdrawing from the process and *'going it alone'*. Some felt there was a 'reality gap' between the panel's understanding of an occupation and the realities of that occupation but it was the panel's conceptions that took precedence (at least initially). These employers understandably questioned the knowledge and experience of the panel and felt there should have been an opportunity to discuss the occupation(s) with the panel. For others however, once the detailed feedback emerged from the process they were able to understand more about the various issues, such as the shortcomings in how they had described the role, which meant that people outside the sector would not necessarily be able to understand what was involved or required.

One other point was where there was felt to be an overlap between the developments in one sector and those in another. This will be an important point to resolve, as this will present a particular challenge in scaling up development work. Attention will need to be paid to developing a mechanism that will ensure that such overlaps are avoided when different employer networks take forward development; in particular it will be important to ensure that future Trailblazer networks are aware of existing standards and do not work in isolation or ignorance of other developments.

3.1.6 Scaling up to create more standards

Following the successful development of one standard, many of the Trailblazers are moving onto further developments. Some have mapped their sectors and their early

standards now form part of a suite of Apprenticeships (actual or planned) that allow travel from entry level occupations (at Level 2) through to highly skilled roles at graduate and post-graduate levels. Other networks have had a shadow Trailblazer operating in parallel to the formal developments which have focused on other subsectors with their sector; the approved standards have acted as the template for these and allowed the processes to be tested and then rolled out to the shadow developments.

These Trailblazer groups believe that approval of their early standards has given them a licence to develop more standards. However, there is also an awareness that there needs to be some oversight to ensure that multiple, similar standards for only slightly different occupations are not created. This is an issue that the Department is aware of and grappling with. In one Trailblazer meeting an employer stated that if the Trailblazer supported by [their current SSC] did not develop the standard that they required, they would approach the Trailblazer group supported by another [named SSC] to do this.

It therefore appears that employers are aware of the multiple channels that exist to develop the standards and they therefore feel they have multiple routes to potentially gaining the apprenticeship that they want. However, the risk is that this could lead to significant proliferation and an unmanageable number of standards.

'It is almost a licence to Trailblazer and we've got four on the go... the message [from our employers] has just been "get on with it". We have employers signalling that they want to be involved in our customer service Trailblazer and so we just basically turned it over to them to organise. We talked about our Level 2 and just said get on with it [to employer]. I think we've got that level of trust now, we've got that whole market in terms of access to employers. But I think the real challenge for BIS is the system- without major intervention from BIS or an SSC or somebody, there's not a mechanism in there yet that can cope with this acceleration'.

Trailblazer facilitator

This points to the need for BIS or the Agency to further communicate and promote the ways in which the core plus options model can be used to help ensure that employers are provided with the ability to customise apprenticeships to their particular needs.

4 From standards to detailed assessment and delivery

4.1 Process to develop a detailed assessment

4.1.1 Development processes to get to detailed assessments

The early Trailblazers were required to develop a detailed assessment plan based on the high level assessment approach, which was submitted at the same time as their apprenticeship standard(s). These assessment plans had to provide the detailed content of the standard, the various methods of assessment that would be used to evaluate performance, and the individuals or organisations that would be involved in making assessment judgements.

As with the development of the standards, designing the detailed assessment and reaching consensus among members and national stakeholders required repeated iterations and reviews. It is clear, however, that devising the technical detail of assessment prompted Trailblazers to make even greater use of internal and/or external sources of expertise. For example, while some Trailblazer networks attempted to involve all their members in the, at times, resource intensive process of attending meetings to develop the detailed assessment, others established assessment sub-groups to take this forward. Where this occurred, employers were nominated, or nominated themselves to participate in the sub-group based on their previous experience of assisting in the design of vocational qualifications in the sector.

More commonly, recognising that some employers lacked the technical expertise to independently develop the detailed assessment, facilitators (often Sector Skills Councils; SSCs) had largely led this process. It was envisaged that this would make it less complex and resource intensive for the employers involved, even where assessment sub-groups had been established, as their input would only be needed at critical points to review progress. This was done with the intention of helping to sustain the engagement of Trailblazer members in the longer term. Indeed, where facilitators led the development of the detailed assessment, employers appeared to value this role and recognised the facilitators as enabling more progression towards the final product. In the words of one employer: *“if they [the SSC] had not been there this would not have been possible”*.

Many Trailblazers also involved training providers in developing the assessment plan while some delegated the development task to external training, qualification and awards experts with the Trailblazer network retaining a review role. This typically involved externals attending the employer workshops/steering group meetings to provide feedback on the proposed assessment model and to assess whether implementation was feasible. However, in instances where Trailblazers adopted a more evolutionary approach to standard development and sought to build on existing apprenticeship schemes which were already felt to be employer owned, those Training Providers currently delivering training were asked to submit and help adapt their existing assessment model for the new apprenticeship by incorporating employer feedback as well as BIS guidance.

Trailblazers also sought the input of other external experts in the development of the detailed assessment, such as independent consultants or assessment experts including those commissioned by BIS. While in some cases this had again enabled employers to devise the content, structure and format of assessment, a few employers commented that the guidance offered had not been as helpful as anticipated because the assessment expert lacked industry insight. If such experts are used again in future, it will be important that they are able to adapt their broad knowledge of assessment approaches to the requirements of industries or sectors and in work-based delivery more widely.

In reflecting on the process of developing the detailed assessment, some employers were critical of the short time-frame in which they had to develop the model. One Trailblazer believed that these time restrictions had limited the extent to which they were able to devise an innovative approach to assessment, while others commented that it had impacted negatively on the quality of the plan they submitted.

4.1.2 What detailed assessments look like

The assessment plans submitted by Trailblazers included a number of common elements, which largely resulted from their adherence to BIS guidelines. All models specified that roughly two-thirds of the assessment (between 65 and 75 per cent) would take place at the end of the apprenticeship. The end-point assessments typically involved several components in which a variety of methods were utilised. These included the production of a portfolio of work undertaken in the workplace, the production of a project, presentations, written and practical assessments, learner led CPD (continuing professional development) journals evidencing core behaviours, and panel interviews.

In almost all cases, at least one part of the end-point assessment was synoptic. In a few examples this took the form of project work in which apprentices would be required to combine elements of their learning and evidence their accumulated knowledge, skill and professional behaviours. Other Trailblazers have proposed to undertake the synoptic assessment via a series of practical and knowledge based tests, which would be completed at an external assessment centre and were expected to last between one and three days.

Some of these latter networks already had a well-established, independent industry-led end of training summative assessment for apprentices; in these, employers had attempted to base the new end-point assessment, as far as possible, on this test. Indeed, this is indicative of a general desire among employers to make use of existing assessment practices and workplace processes wherever possible in designing the assessment plan. For occupational areas where end-point assessments are currently not the norm, however, employers expressed concerns in relation to this requirement. Specifically, employers felt that apprentices, particularly those undertaking lengthy training programmes, needed interim assessment milestones in order to provide a better indication of their on-going performance and areas where they need further development. It was believed that this in turn would reduce the pressure placed on the final assessment. For this reason, the proposed end-point assessment incorporated some element of continuous, on-the-job based assessment during the final phase of the apprenticeship, such as line management and appraisal feedback.

The assessment methods utilised towards the beginning of the apprenticeship were again varied, and included practical observations, case studies, presentations, peer group and line management feedback, and appraisals. Many also included tests or exams, either conducted internally or for external qualifications.

On grading, a number of Trailblazers had attempted to apply grades (either 'Pass/Merit/Distinction' or 'Pass/Merit') to each part of their assessment. However, for some Trailblazers, particularly those in the STEM sectors and those with well-established and well-used NVQs, the competency of apprentices was viewed as binary and as such grading was only applied to some elements of the assessment (such as knowledge or behaviours), while the competency or skills were marked on a 'Pass/Fail' basis.

Not all Trailblazers were able to provide details of how their respective standards aimed to ensure independence of assessment. Of those that did, the approaches cited included panel assessments involving a Training Provider as the recognised assessment expert or an assembled panel of industry experts which included employers. According to national stakeholders, some Trailblazers had found it challenging to reach agreement with BIS as to what constitutes a reasonable level of independence in assessment, with employers expecting to play a greater role in delivering judgements than anticipated nationally.

4.1.3 Views of the panel approval process for the assessments

The detailed assessment plans developed by Trailblazers are independently reviewed by an advisory panel prior to final decision by the minister and publication alongside the apprenticeship standard. This is the same panel that reviews the standards as they are developed.

Similar to the approval process for the standard, those Trailblazers that had had their detailed assessment plans approved did not comment particularly on this process. Among those Trailblazers whose assessment plans were rejected in the first instance, employers and stakeholders commented that they had received little guidance from BIS regarding the level of detail that needed to be included in the plan: however, for these employers, the lack of detail had been criticised by panel. This was compounded by the feedback that these Trailblazers received from their relationship managers during the development of the assessment, which had suggested that the department was broadly supportive of the approach that had been taken.

For some, the assessment plan was rejected because it had not been communicated to the panel that key components of their standard that varied from national guidance had been previously agreed with BIS. This led to significant frustration.

Trailblazers wanted to understand the composition of the panel and whether their industry or industry in general was represented; some felt that there should have been an opportunity for employers to explain the assessment plan. For these reasons, employers and stakeholders believed that the panel review process lacked transparency, and some reported that feedback had not initially been forthcoming in a timely manner as to why the initial assessment plans had not been approved; they felt that this represented a real risk to delivery in 2014/15.

4.2 Process to estimate the costs of training

4.2.1 Estimating costs of delivery

Trailblazers established during the early stages of the policy initiative were required to estimate the costs of delivering their apprenticeship in the academic year 2014/15. This information was used by government to inform their decision on the level of core government funding that each apprenticeship would receive under the new financing model. Many employers and training providers commented that they had found this process difficult. The cost of the apprenticeship would very much depend on the extent of additional guided learning hours required for the new standards, the level of innovation in delivery, compared to current programmes, and the exact methods that would be used in assessment: details that had not been finalised when Trailblazers were asked to estimate costs. As one training provider involved in a Trailblazer network observed: *‘the devil is in the detail, but the detail was not there’*.

Some Trailblazers looking to source their training externally approached providers for quotations. For the reasons above, providers were only able to submit an indicative price. In some instances this price had to be based on the costs of training and assessing apprentices under existing schemes, which did not account for any additional elements decided by employers. One provider was critical of the lack of guidance around how to calculate their costs and felt that the process had lacked rigour.

Employers that were seeking to upscale an existing employer-owned apprenticeship in their sector found the process more straightforward. They were either already knowledgeable of the costs of training an apprentice in their own company, and could account for any changes in delivery or assessment that had been discussed by the Trailblazer, or they were able to request this information from the small number of providers that they currently used to deliver this training.

4.2.2 Views of the funding caps granted

Regarding the levels of core government funding that were allocated to the early Trailblazer networks, those employers whose cap was at the level they had expected commented that they were broadly satisfied with this outcome. One Trailblazer that received the highest funding band stated that this was the level required in order to facilitate delivery. They were seeking to add value to apprenticeships and address a current skills shortage in what was perceived to be quite a niche sector. The delivery of the apprenticeship standard thereby required investment in specialist training equipment.

Some Trailblazers that were initially allocated a lower than anticipated level of funding expressed a more negative view. They commented that the funding cap made delivery unviable for employers, and wider industry take-up would therefore be limited. These sought information on the criteria that had informed the allocation of these funding caps, and were told of the assessment criteria that were used alongside the anticipated delivery costs to arrive at this decision. Employers had not previously been aware of these criteria and were critical of the fact that they had not had the opportunity to provide evidence against them. As a consequence, some interviewees commented that the process had lacked transparency.

It should be noted that the affected Trailblazer subsequently appealed this funding decision, which was quickly overturned by the department. Further, BIS has since made these assessment criteria explicit to all Trailblazers, and now also have a standard template for Trailblazers to use in estimating the costs of delivery to ensure greater consistency, although it is not yet in a position to confirm funding for training delivered in 2015/16.

4.2.3 Views of the funding model and reforms

Many employers viewed the principles underpinning the new funding model for apprenticeships in England positively. For example, several commented that the 2:1 ratio of core government funding for every £1 spent by the employer was a simple principle to understand and was a lot clearer than the previous funding model. However, it appeared that some employers had yet to fully consider how their own contributions would be financed under the new model and some believed that employer-delivered training elements would count as co-investment whereas this is not the intention of policymakers.

Large organisations were satisfied with the greater buying power and control that the employer-routed funding model would afford them in sourcing off-the-job training for their apprentices. These liked the idea of being able to negotiate with training providers and ensure that they would be responsive to the company's business needs and training requirements *'It gives us a lot more control and better value for money'*. These observed that the new model would increase competition in the provider market, and would act as a driver of improved choice and quality. A few employers were able to cite examples of instances where, under the out-going system, providers had only appeared interested in undertaking a tick-box exercise and doing the minimum that was required to receive government funding: an issue that they believed the new funding model would help to address.

Several concerns were raised, however, regarding the extent to which SMEs would be able to engage with the new funding regime. Some large employers believed that while they have always invested in apprenticeship programmes, smaller companies may find the cash contributions off-putting. They also commented that the threshold at which incentives are offered to small companies (ie. organisations with fewer than fifty employees) should perhaps be raised to encourage greater take-up among SMEs.

Employers also highlighted the fact that SMEs will have only limited buying power under the new funding system, and it could prove difficult for employers with only a small number of apprentices to source appropriate training provision (ie customised to their needs). Concerns were also expressed in relation to the increased administrative burden that would be placed on small companies as a result of employer-routed funding and the uncertainties remaining about what would be expected of employers.

'This is now not just a provider understanding the funding to work out how it fits in with their business model, it's employers understanding what does this mean for me, what's the transactions and the transactional processes that I need to get set up [...] if they're suggesting that all these small businesses need to be audited in some form or other, that is going to be a massive turn off and it's going to be a logistical nightmare.'

Trailblazer employer

Some employers wanted greater clarity regarding how and when the new funding model will be introduced before they could make any firm plans. Their organisations needed to be able to estimate the resourcing requirements for company apprenticeships over the next few years before committing to going ahead. This in turn would inform their recruitment decisions.

4.3 Delivery plans

Many Trailblazers planned to engage in some form of small-scale, controlled delivery over the next year. In almost all cases, it was envisaged that this would be in a small number of Trailblazer member organisations. For some networks, however, the timetables and scale of delivery were still uncertain, and were partly dependent on the speed at which BIS was able to respond to their proposals.

Several Trailblazers were committed to undertaking a formal pilot of the apprenticeship standard in order to test delivery. These Trailblazers had decided to judge these pilots against a number of success criteria to determine whether the programme adequately addressed the needs of both employers and learners. These criteria included the quality of the learner experience, the quality of training provision and the calibre of the trained apprentices and their contribution to the achievement of business outcomes.

The small scale of (formal or informal) pilot programmes meant that delivery could be controlled more effectively. Many employers anticipated that there would be some unforeseen issues in implementing the standard and small-scale delivery would simplify the process of making adjustments were necessary.

‘Theoretically it sounds like it will work very well, but inevitably when you put it in the workplace there will be things that we haven’t thought of that will come to light’.

Trailblazer employer

One Trailblazer network wanted only large companies to be involved in the pilot, so that any problems that did arise caused minimum disruption to the day-to-day running of the business.

Employers engaged in early delivery were also keen to test retention and completion; many of the new apprenticeship standards aim to deliver a programme of learning that lasts between two to four years. Employers therefore wanted to determine whether learners are likely to remain on and complete an apprenticeship of this length..

As indicated, not all employers involved in developing the new apprenticeship standards would be involved in delivery. Some employers commented that the standards their Trailblazer had initially chosen to develop were not directly relevant to their business (often because the specified level of training was not required, or it was in a specialist topic that was not relevant to their broader objectives), and that it had not been a condition of their involvement in development that they would deliver the new apprenticeships. Where companies had operations in other parts of the UK besides England, there were additionally issues concerning the lack of cross-border consistency in apprenticeships and this meant that they were unable to engage in delivery at present.

4.4 Future governance structures

Trailblazers were asked to consider the governance arrangements that might apply for the new apprenticeship standards once wider delivery commences. Trailblazers recognised that it is important to establish oversight of the new standards because, *'unless you've got a governance model in place then you risk the machine running out of control'*. In addition there are some potential risks as Trailblazers scale up in the number of standards they develop and manage as well as in their operation over time and a governance structure could help manage and reduce those risks.

Several of the Trailblazer networks were seeking to establish or use an existing Industrial Partnership (IP) to fulfil this governance remit. In broad terms, these bodies would be responsible for skill and workforce development in the sector and they would help extend the current scale and impact of employer-ownership in the industry, which would complement the principles underpinning apprenticeship Trailblazers. Trailblazers differed in the role they envisaged the new IPs performing with regards to the new apprenticeship standards. Some groups said that they would assist in quality assurance and in supplying information, advice and guidance to employers about the new programmes. Others saw IPs providing the infrastructure to develop and plan new standards, and to ensure that all the occupational standards within the sector are aligned.

In many cases, the Trailblazers that were proposing to adopt the IP model currently had an SSC facilitating their activity. As the new apprenticeship standards moved towards delivery on a wider scale, the roles and responsibilities that were presently undertaken by this body would gradually be assumed by the IP. In one instance, the SSC was recruiting new staff to help support the work of the IP.

The fact that recognised IPs would be funded by the UKCES appeared to be a major incentive for adopting this model. Many employers spoke of the difficulties that could arise in attempting to sustain the initiative in its current form; due to the resource intensive nature of Trailblazer activities it was felt that they would lose the engagement of members over time.

Alternative governance models included establishing an independent assessment service. Some networks saw this organisation, with support from the sector IP, as taking ownership of the quality framework for the apprenticeship and approving providers for delivery, as well as being responsible for refreshing the standard. They also saw the body as being involved in establishing commonality with other apprenticeship standards: *'that body can rationalise and look for the coherence and the overlaps and the connectivity across Trailblazers'*.

However, some Trailblazers reported difficulties in establishing a long-term, sustainable governance structure. Employers from one Trailblazer reported that they had *"no natural hub to drive governance"* of the new standards, as the UKCES had twice refused to back an IP within the sector and their SSC is neither well-respected by employers nor financially viable.

5 Measures of success and outputs

The early Trailblazers launched their approved standards as part of National Apprenticeship Week in 2014, and their assessment methodologies were reviewed by a panel in July 2014. Some were starting delivery from September 2014. The standards of the more recent Trailblazers were reviewed by a panel in June 2014, and those with standards that were approved by the minister were working towards submission of an assessment methodology in February 2015.

While the Trailblazers have appreciated the opportunity for greater cross-industry networking and collaborative working, they will all measure success of the process through outcomes over the long-term, when the standards are operational, apprentices are on programme and achieving qualifications.

Notably, most employers interviewed did not discuss the number of enrolments as a measure of success; instead, they discussed outcomes rather than output measures when thinking about what would indicate success for their Trailblazer. That said, some employers discussed one potential success measure as being no loss of apprenticeship volumes within their industry, which suggests an eye to outputs over the longer term.

Table 5.1 outlines what employers and other central members of the Trailblazer groupings, such as SSCs, hope to achieve through the process, how they will measure the success of the Trailblazers, and the stakeholders that are they perceive will benefit. The shaded boxes show expected areas of impact.

Table 5.1: Overview of employer measures of Trailblazer success

Employer measure of success	Area / stakeholder group likely to benefit			
	Economy	Sector	Employer	Apprentice
Skills shortages met				
Higher quality apprenticeships (inc. professional registration), delivering what employers want				
Well-functioning secondary market for apprentices				
Parity of esteem between vocational and academic pathways				
Improved social mobility				
More labour market entry routes				
Clearer progression routes and career pathways				
Better understanding of apprenticeships among young people, parents, schools etc				
Increased employee engagement				

Source: IES 2014

Employers have a range of motivations for participating in the Trailblazers and will measure the success and effectiveness against whether or not these **expectations are realised**. Employers have determined the job roles covered by the standards and are

motivated by the opportunity to use them to recruit and train apprentices to fill identified skills shortages both within their organisations and across their sector.

By building the standards around industry-identified skills shortages and skill needs, employers anticipate high quality programmes will result that will deliver the skills they need because the standards will be the best possible fit to the identified job role. Several employers reported that their apprenticeship standard will help to guarantee the transferability of skills between companies, creating a strong secondary market for apprentices as they develop their career and move between organisations. Employers believed that by helping to develop the standards, they would be assured of the programmes' quality, understand the skills and competencies that apprentices will gain, and be assured that these skills and competencies are relevant to their organisation.

Trailblazer employers are passionate about using the Trailblazers to create entry and progression routes for young people. They hope that the standard will be a simple and accessible device to explain the content of apprenticeships to young people, parents, teachers and careers advisers, and will prove to be a useful marketing tool to engage high quality prospective candidates. One Trailblazer developing a Higher Apprenticeship also hoped that Trailblazers will enable the creation of alternative pathways to higher level qualifications, particularly for young people who do not want to use student loans to fund higher education. In addition, in several instances, going back to first principles to develop the standards has enabled employers to develop standards that complement and support career pathways within their organisations and across the sector.

The parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes was highlighted as a concern by employers. Many hoped that the Trailblazer approach will enable them to deliver high quality training opportunities that will increase perceptions of parity between academic and vocational routes. For example, one said: *'to pitch standards as high as is reasonably achievable in each circumstance'*, while another said, *'I am quite proud of the foundation we have built, compared to what we had, it's providing a better vocational alternative to an academic pathway'*.

Including externally recognised qualifications and professional registration in the standards is seen as a way to increase the quality of recruits and, when recruited, to maximise commitment to the organisation. Employers note that they would measure employee engagement through increased staff retention and reduced sickness absence, for example.

The main benefit from the Trailblazer process to date arises from joint working between employers on the skills agenda. While many of the Trailblazer networks built on existing working relationships, such as the Employer Ownership of Skills Pilots, or Industrial Partnerships, the Trailblazers' work has served to increase employer collaboration further by giving a tangible project on which to work jointly, which would deliver benefits to all, while managing to avoid the problems usually associated with competition or confidentiality between businesses. Employers have learned from each other and developed a better understanding of sector-wide requirements through the process. Several are now seeking further ways to collaborate in relation to skills, such as in the delivery of Traineeships, sector benchmarking, or developing additional Trailblazer standards.

While the Trailblazers have helped to develop and strengthen employer relationships and joint working, the outcomes sought by employers from the Trailblazers will depend on the success of implementation. Some of the initial Trailblazers started delivery in September 2014, with others planning a January start. However, at the time the interviews were conducted, there remained a degree of uncertainty in the process and if these issues are not resolved at the speed employers expect this could represent a risk to engagement with the approach and to delivery. Once the standards are being delivered, employers highlight the importance of being able to evaluate and refine their models in order to maximise benefits.

The initial Trailblazers are in relatively specific sectors and job roles, with much common ground between the employers involved, including in the outcomes they expect. Some of the later Trailblazers are seeking to draw together a standard for a more disparate set of roles, such as Craft. More widely, in cases where employer experience and interests are more distinct, but nevertheless apprentices are employed in similar roles, such as Business Administration, employers were concerned that the Trailblazer approach may become more challenging as there will be fewer unifying factors among the employer networks.

6 Messages for national support

6.1 Support from relationship managers

Each Trailblazer has been allocated a relationship manager as a single point of contact for queries, to provide information and clarification about the policy position and to support the groups in the development of their standards, assessment and as they move into initial delivery. For the initial Trailblazers the relationship managers were staff seconded to this role from within the Apprenticeship Unit and the Department. Once their assessment plan was agreed these Trailblazers were transferred to relationship managers within the Skills Funding Agency (the Agency) in order to provide the model for 'steady state' operation. Later Trailblazers were supported either by staff from within BIS, or Agency and UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) staff seconded into BIS, until the point at which they submitted their standards. Later Trailblazers now have a relationship manager within the Agency. Going forward there will be a team of six relationship managers within the Agency overseeing all Trailblazers, including those due to be announced later in October.

Employers in the initial phase had appreciated the opportunity to explain directly to a BIS representative the issues and challenges they face, what is important to them and why. Employers believed that while these relationships helped them to understand the policy position and wider processes, they also helped BIS to understand the employer perspective and to develop policy accordingly.

The views of Trailblazers about their relationship managers and the national support in the later phase were more mixed. Several felt frustrated at the lack of responsiveness of their Relationship Manager and their inability to respond to queries and to offer clear guidance about the current policy position. This was at least partly because at the time national policy had not always been determined. Some felt that their Relationship Managers were not knowledgeable about, and had not acquainted themselves with the realities of work in their sector.

For the early Trailblazers now developing further standards there was particular anger that issues which they thought had been addressed and resolved were once again having to be re-opened and renegotiated:

'We are having to fight the same battle again for new Trailblazers'

Trailblazer employer

Since the evaluation interviews were undertaken, BIS has issued some further guidance and updated policy, giving Trailblazers in later phases the opportunity to negotiate and flexibly determine certain elements of their approach, such as the use of grading.

For the more recent Trailblazers, by the mid-way point for developing the standard it was clear that the process was becoming more established (although some Trailblazers remained critical that no 'road map' had been created for the more recent Trailblazers). The Relationship Managers had recognised the need to review the end-to-end process for Trailblazers, learn lessons from the early Trailblazers in order to identify where things have

worked well and where improvements could be made. In particular, the Relationship Managers recognised the need to join up and simplify the standards development, assessment development and delivery preparation processes, and develop the most efficient and effective process possible. They were moving to a stage at which future guidance would not be for the latest tranche, but, rather, will be guidance for all future Standards Setters/employers. It may be worth Relationship Managers exploring the FISS toolkit, noted in Chapter 2, which was mentioned by some as being a more practical steer to the development than the BIS guidance.

A less clear picture emerged in respect of national support for the development of detailed assessments. The Department commissioned some assessment experts to assist Trailblazers in developing their assessment plans. Some made use of this but in some cases this led to questions about the particular expertise of these experts, particularly where they lacked sector specialism. The role played by these individuals may require further consideration in future developments.

6.2 National Workshops

National workshops have been held at regular intervals for both initial and subsequent Trailblazers. Employers have broadly welcomed the opportunity to meet the wider group of employers involved in Trailblazers and to discuss and share their approaches, especially where they share common ground. Value has also been gained from Trailblazers critiquing each other's standard since this can deliver new insights and ideas: *'we call it 'stolen with pride'!*

The perceived short notification times for the national meetings caused difficulties for many employers given that these are often very senior people with busy diaries and who in addition often need to follow business protocols for release from their day job. The travel time and expense and associated opportunity costs of attending full-day meetings in London also caused difficulties, particularly for SMEs, with lengthy journeys and an overnight stay often being required.

6.3 Sustainability

Guidance issued in October 2014¹ stated that the early Trailblazers covered eight sectors and eleven standards. The more recent Trailblazers covered by this report encompassed 29 sectors, and subsequently, a further 37 sectors are developing 75 standards. In total there are now 74 sectors developing over 120 standards between them. Beyond this, it is uncertain how many more Trailblazers will be established. There are questions regarding gaps in coverage, counterbalanced by recognition that the main apprenticeship areas have already been covered. Future decisions about additional Trailblazers may be guided by labour market information tempered by a recognition that some areas are more likely than others to be successful in introducing apprenticeships. Linked to this is an acknowledgement that a key question remains: *'what is a job, what is an occupation?'*; as the Trailblazers extend into less well-trodden areas of work, the Relationship Managers

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/366063/bis-14-p194b-Guidance-for-developers-of-apprenticeship-standards-and-related-assessment-plans.pdf

recognised that they would have to get to grips with this key definition (although also recognising they had not done so yet).

In improving the guidance for future standards developers the Relationship Managers recognised that they will have to be clearer about what was being required. This is indicative of the extent of learning that is emerging, although also is an illustration of the perils associated with ‘building the bridge as you walk across it’.

‘Some thought they were just developing standards, assessment came as a shock to them. There are issues about managing expectations and what they are committing to. There’s some argument for an agreement that all employers on the group would sign. We need to be more honest about our expectations.’

Relationship Manager

One employer also commented on the way in which requests by BIS were framed which seemed to assume on-going involvement whereas the prevailing view emerging from several employer groups was that the same resource may not exist in future. This is undoubtedly a risk to sustainability both in terms of the development of new standards, and to the on-going governance and review process (see section 7.2). For example, one employer commented:

‘Can a company continue to support it? Well, ‘that is the fundamental question’. There is no answer...If you say ‘will you go on a working group’, no problem. But if it’s forever, in addition to your day job then it’s a different question. It is reasonable for the government to get advice from companies but not for government to expect someone to do this as a voluntary job in the long term. We can comment, we can steer, we can’t do [it forever].’

Trailblazer employer

In addition, should sufficient of the original individuals not be retained within the Trailblazer groupings then this may create issues of a lack of continuity, collective memory and understanding of why things were developed as they were, with implications for the subsequent review process.

6.4 Implementation

Employers also stressed that there has been, and still is, uncertainty in terms of fundamental issues relating to implementation, such as how the funding will work, and on-going responsibilities for maintaining the currency and governance of the standards. They need these issues to be resolved quickly, as they will have implications for future commitments (currency and governance) and for implementation, notably the buy-in of SMEs and quality (funding). The Relationship Managers conceded that funding had been one of the least well-articulated areas and needed to be firmed up.

The Relationship Managers were also starting to recognise the problems introduced by moving to a less-well specified standard. While current National Occupational Standards (NOSs) specify the range of situations and/or equipment and/or consumables or clients to be involved in as assessment of competent performance, the new standards do not.

“There is an issue about how you standardise training, eg there are different ways to drill holes. There is a danger that the Trailblazers will produce something that’s specific to them [rather than an industry standard]. The standard should define this but it doesn’t.... The occupational brief should list all the types of hair, types of process eg bleaching etc, not just the dyeing that your salon does.”

Trailblazer employer

There was also recognition that communication with training providers had been left rather late in the day, which had potential consequences for delivery.

“There is an issue about how we get info out to training providers. I feel for the Training Providers, they are lost souls. We have to balance the current system. They keep saying ‘tell us what we have to do’. They are all waiting for some clear guidance.”

Trailblazer employer

The Relationship Managers felt that an internal guide could be developed based on the issues discussed at their review meeting and the experiences reported by the Trailblazers.

6.5 Views on Gatsby Foundation support

The Gatsby Foundation is providing support to some of the early Trailblazers. It is a charitable organisation that supports innovative work, including that related to the development of the technician workforce in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). It has offered financial support to Trailblazers that align with its charitable objectives and whose approach includes alignment between the standard and professional registration requirements. The Gatsby Foundation produced some guidelines for applications to support the development of the Trailblazers¹. These note that funding can be used to support Trailblazers in any way that employers determine is appropriate, and suggest that this might include to support research, consultation with the wider sector, co-ordination costs (such as procuring a project manager) or to cover the participation expenses of smaller organisations.

Four of the eight early Trailblazers successfully applied for this funding to help in developing their standards (or the associated processes, such as the development of an assessment tool). In three, the monies were used to fund the work of consultants to provide administrative and operational co-ordination, in the other it is used to help the Trailblazer engage with the relevant professional body and to work to develop an independent assessment service. Where the monies were used to fund administrative and operational co-ordination, employers noted that this enabled their participation, as they would be unable to take on this depth of role themselves. One Trailblazer that had received Gatsby Foundation funding would have liked this to have been released earlier in order to cover the direct and other costs the partners had incurred; moreover, this potentially reduced barriers to SME involvement.

1

<http://www.gatsby.org.uk/en/Education/Projects/~//media/Files/Education/Guidelines%20for%20Gatsby%20Support%20of%20Trailblazers%20Phases%201%20and%202.ashx>

The more recent Trailblazers were in theory also able to access Gatsby Foundation funding. However, the lack of synergy between the later Trailblazers and the STEM focus of the Gatsby Foundation appears to have meant that none of those selected to participate in the evaluation received Gatsby Foundation funding. A couple made initial enquires, but through preliminary discussions it became clear they were not in the priority sectors to receive support (ie STEM).

7 Strengths and risks

This chapter draws together some interim messages arising from the evaluation to date and considers some risks that have emerged to the roll out of Trailblazers – that the Department may wish to consider as the process continues.

7.1 Strengths so far

The Trailblazer groups mostly think the approach is an improvement on what they had previously; there are a few dissenting voices who say the standards and assessment models are no different from the outgoing frameworks but the majority indicate there has been genuine progress towards increasing quality and employer ownership. Employers believe that by helping to develop the standards, they can be more assured of the quality of apprenticeships; better understand the skills and competencies that apprentices will gain, and be assured that these skills and competencies are relevant to their organisation. The Trailblazers are an opportunity to regain the credibility and value of apprenticeships in employers' eyes and to secure them as a platform for progression. Several employers noted that they have designed their standards to help secure the transferability of skills between companies, creating a strong secondary market for apprentices as they develop their career and move between organisations. By building the standards around industry-identified skills shortages and skill needs, employers anticipate high quality programmes will result that will deliver the skills they need. As noted in Section 5, the implementation and delivery of the standards will determine whether the perceived strengths in the design process result in the anticipated improvements.

While it may appear challenging, the similarity between some of the Trailblazer standards and the current apprenticeship frameworks may also be positive. Some of the Trailblazer groups have been unapologetic in affirming the value of their current model and thereby adopting an evolutionary approach. By doing this, they have protected the training and assessment models that they believe fit best within their industries. It is a strength of the Trailblazer process that employers have been able to consider for themselves whether what they have is fit for purpose or otherwise, and to arrive at the solution that they think is best for their industries.

7.2 The Trailblazer model is also introducing apprenticeships into new areas, creating new vocational pathways to higher level occupations. The flexibility to determine the training route at all levels appears to be particularly valued. Risks to success

Despite the very positive feedback, the discussions with employers and others as part of the evaluation have identified several risks to successful delivery and therefore meeting the measures of success they have identified for the Trailblazers. Below some of the potential sources of risk to success and the ways in which these may be avoided or minimised are set out.

- **Operating two sets of funding rules:** There are a number of risks to the scale of delivery under the new standards. There will be a period with differing funding rules for Trailblazer apprenticeships, which requires employer cash contribution, and the

current system. This creates incentives for the continuing use of existing frameworks in the short-term, and could risk some of the Trailblazer standards remaining untested in the wider sector, as seems currently the case for one of the early Trailblazer networks.

- **The pace of development led to standards or assessments that require further refinement:** Employers have been working at a fast pace to produce their standards and assessment plans. Some have been particularly innovative in their design, including for example planning joint working between employers in the assessment process to ensure consistency. They need to test the feasibility of their developments in practice, for their own organisations and for the sector. It is therefore likely that refinements will be required to potentially the standards and assessment methods. As it stands, most networks are unsure about the processes for making revisions and for on-going review and governance of the standard to ensure its currency. Some voiced concern about the level of commitment and resource they had already contributed to the Trailblazer process; particularly the SMEs involved, and some questioned whether their level of involvement could be sustained. Crown Copyright for the standards rests with HMSO (with rights delegated to BIS) but many of the Trailblazers are unclear regarding what this really means in terms of use, governance, maintenance and change. Communication is needed to ensure that all Trailblazer networks understand who is the responsible body when changes are required
- **Aspects of the standards required by BIS are not satisfactory to employers in practice:** Employers generally feel they have been in the driving seat throughout the design and development process, albeit working within the confines of the overall parameters set by BIS, such as the requirement for grading. There are examples where the Trailblazer networks have implemented these requirements in order to progress their standards, but remain unconvinced about their feasibility and applicability to their sector. As delivery of the standards begins, aspects of the process specified by BIS, such as the use of synoptic assessments, grading and independence need to be shown to clearly add value to the experience or there is a risk that the Trailblazer standards will not deliver what employers want. There needs to be more clarity about what options exist for revision should certain elements be shown to be unworkable.
- **Potential for confusion:** Several of the Trailblazer networks have expanded their work to start the development of additional standards. As the process expands the number and diversity of apprenticeship standards and the methods through which these are assessed will increase, as will those operating under different sets of BIS criteria (different waves of Trailblazers are working towards different proportions of end-point assessment for example). Consideration should be given to how to create a clear understanding of the design, content and potential of the new apprenticeships among potential apprentices, their parents, and careers professionals in schools, particularly during the transition and testing phases.
- **Proposed assessment models prove to be unaffordable in practice:** Trailblazers are required to design their assessment models prior to receiving their funding band allocation. While Trailblazers are encouraged to consider the affordability of their

assessment proposals, the initial stages of delivery will need to test how this works out in practice and whether providers and employers can viably deliver the proposed model within budget. If it proves unfeasible to deliver assessments within the suggested budget, BIS will need to consider leeway for renegotiation on this point.

- **The process results in many similar qualifications that are sector specific:** The majority of the standards to date have focused on sector specific job roles. The process has yet to be tested with job roles that span occupations and which potentially could be more challenging to design and develop standards for, such as maintenance technicians. It is possible that the existing Trailblazer networks will produce sector specific versions of standards that could have greater reach spanning several sectors.
- **Lack of co-ordination of progression pathways across the whole apprenticeship portfolio (and other qualifications):** As the Trailblazer groups develop additional standards they plan to create progression pathways within their sectors. In the medium-term, whether the standards offer progression routes and have value and transferability both within and across sectors will be a key measure of success for apprentices and for employers who hope to see a well-functioning secondary market for apprentices where apprenticeship qualifications convey quality.
- **Level of Relationship Management involvement decreases for future Trailblazers:** Early Trailblazers have had a significant amount of support from BIS Relationship Managers throughout the process. Over time the number of relationship managers has doubled, while the number of Trailblazer networks developing standards has increased from eight to 74. A consequence of this is that relationship managers will not be able to attend employer meetings in all instances. Initial Trailblazers found input from BIS helpful at these events to guide their discussions and ensure their products would be likely to comply with the overall Trailblazer guidance. The national workshops are generally felt to be helpful, and relationship managers can liaise with their Trailblazers via other methods (ie email, phone), but the support needs of Trailblazer networks to interpret the guidance and apply it to their sector are likely to remain the same unless detailed and clear guidance can be supplied.

7.3 Concluding points

In concluding this first published interim output from the evaluation, it must be stated that the messages arising from the research are very positive. It is clear that the Trailblazer process to date has engendered a great deal of employer engagement and has resulted, in a relatively short time, in a set of new standards and assessment models that are believed to meet employers' needs and can act as a template to future developments.

There are also significant points of learning emerging for the Department about how to work with these networks and provide the support they need. Now that the process is rolling out, the Department has much deeper insight into the process and has the opportunity to extend the written and other forms of guidance. It is apparent that interest in the Trailblazers is growing and support organisations (such as FISS) are also issuing guidance. Some commentary suggests that such documents can be useful but it would be

hoped that documents produced by the Department and the Agency would be seen as the primary source of guidance. However, the establishment of an official toolkit (or kits) alongside guidance might be worth consideration.

As was expected, learning points have emerged from the work to date that speak to the structures and support necessary to continue the roll out of the new model. There are some potential risks emerging, some of which have been identified, that require national attention in coming months. The ability to manage these risks and set up **a structure and process that allows Trailblazers to truly take ownership** of their development is the key challenge for the national policy team and one which they are tackling head on. The structure for a steady state has begun to emerge as the latest guidance for Trailblazer Developers demonstrates.

Tips for future Trailblazers

Employers have welcomed the Trailblazer approach and being put in the driving seat of designing the standards. However, they also identify the need for *genuine* employer engagement. The evidence demonstrates that how this is achieved can differ and does not necessarily entail an employer leading the whole process nor administrating establishment of the new standard: while some employers are successfully fulfilling this role, other Trailblazers show that having an intermediary or facilitator to support developments can be equally effective, as long as they act as an ‘honest broker’.

Trailblazers have adopted a range of approaches that fall between evolution and revolution. Finding the right approach for each occupation and sector along this spectrum is an important initial task. While some employers have welcomed the opportunity to work from first principles, others emphasised that Trailblazers should *‘not throw the baby out with the bath water’*. For these latter employers, the existing framework is seen to work relatively well in meeting their needs although requires some changes.

These two perspectives indicate that a useful starting point for Trailblazers’ developments can be to ask some questions to identify the extent of change required and thereby the focus for developments:

- Does the existing framework meet the industry’s needs? Why/why not?
- How well does the existing framework work for the industry? In what way(s) does it meet needs/in what way(s) does it not?
- What, if anything, is worth keeping from the existing framework/what aspects must be changed?

The work of the Trailblazer networks also demonstrates that developing a consensus on the standard within the Trailblazer group, and among employers in the wider sector, should involve some key questions:

- Does the standard describe the job in the employer’s organisation (and if not, how does the job differ from the description *to start to identify the changes required*); and
- Will the standard have a credible reputation in the industry i.e. will employers be willing to recruit someone who has been trained to this standard (and if not, what elements should be changed?).

While the initial work may involve these questions being asked of employers with active involvement in a Trailblazer network, the wider consultations on the standards and assessment models could use the same questions to ensure that developments have credibility across the sector.

What makes an effective Trailblazer group?

The groups developing the new standards are characterised by employers who have passion and interest in developing skills for the wider industry and not simply the needs of their own company. They are keen to ensure that apprentices have a high quality training experience. Many already pay for additional training to ensure their apprentices have a full complement of skills by the end of their apprenticeship and which indicates their interest in seeing an apprenticeship developed that better meets the needs of their industry.

Future Trailblazers should consider the following issues:

- **Size and structures.** While the success of the current Trailblazers in involving a wide range of employers is considerable, very large groups (25+ individuals) can be unwieldy and take a longer time to reach decisions. Where large numbers of employers are involved, Trailblazers should consider the formation of action or working subgroups to lead developments, with subgroups reporting back to and/or consulting with the larger group.
- **Ensuring the right expertise around the table.** While employers are experts on their sector, they may have less experience in developing and articulating training and assessment programmes. The Trailblazer network should ideally include those with training or assessment expertise, or alternatively draw in that expertise through engagement with training or assessment organisations. Expertise and support might also be garnered from earlier Trailblazer groupings.
- **Managing the administration and delivery of Trailblazer outputs.** This research demonstrates that developing the standard and detailed assessment can be a resource intensive process which some employers have been able to support while others have not. Appointing a facilitator to lead on the administrative side of developments can reduce the resource burden upon employers. Their work may involve scheduling meetings as well as developing draft standards and assessments based on feedback from employers. However, one size does not fit all and each network will need to agree the structures that will work for their context. Ensuring that facilitators act as an honest broker, facilitate and do not impose the agenda, and consult widely on the products of the development process is crucial to success where facilitators are used. Where a facilitator is appointed, employers within the Trailblazer network should monitor their role.
- **Timing of contributions and deciding when is the right point to bring in expertise from organisations such as the Professional Bodies, Awarding Organisations, Sector Skills Councils, and National Skills Academies.** While it is important that employers should remain in control of the content of standards and assessments, these organisations are likely to be able to supply considerable bodies of expertise that may speed developments. Trailblazers may wish to consider whether to take advantage of that expertise early on, or delay engagement until a point when they have already reached a decision regarding the main points of the apprenticeship architecture. The experiences of the current Trailblazers suggest that this decision may be informed by the expertise that employers themselves bring to the table.

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