

Apprenticeships in Scotland Set to Fall Sharply as New Research Reveals 1 in 3 Employers Plan to Stop Recruiting

4 months ago



Scotland is facing a significant decline in apprenticeship recruitment as a new report from the [SNIPEF](#), the Plumbing and Heating Federation, reveals that one in three employers do not intend to recruit an apprentice over the next three years.

The projected decline marks a clear break from historic recruitment patterns and raises serious concerns about whether Scotland will have the skilled workforce required to meet future public safety and decarbonisation demands.

The findings, published in SNIPEF's new [Apprenticeships Under Pressure](#) report, draw on the views of employers across Scotland's plumbing and heating profession and show that while employers remain committed to high training standards, rising costs and financial pressures are making apprenticeship recruitment increasingly unaffordable. The top barriers identified are limited funding support (67%), high wage costs (65%), and the cost of workplace supervision (47%).

Employers are also clear about where the problem lies. More than three quarters (77%) rate current Scottish Government support as poor or inadequate, and almost all (93%) say increased funding is the single change needed to make recruitment viable. A majority (62%) also believe costs should be shared equally between employers and government, reflecting the balance that previously helped sustain training across the profession.

Fiona Hodgson, Chief Executive of SNIPEF, said: "Plumbing and heating employers have a long history of

supporting apprenticeships. Many of today's business owners came through the system themselves and know the value it brings to young people, to the profession and to Scotland's wider economy. But they are being asked to carry more and more of the burden while government support has not kept pace with the reality on the ground.

"We cannot expect employers to absorb these pressures indefinitely. When the financial risk becomes too high, fewer businesses take on apprentices, and it is young people who lose out. Scotland cannot afford to close off one of the most effective routes into skilled work, good careers and genuine social mobility."

England expands apprenticeship funding as Scotland faces growing pressure to keep pace

The publication of SNIPEF's research comes as the UK Government announces 50,000 new apprenticeship places in England, backed by a £725 million reform package that will remove the 5% co-investment cost for small and medium-sized employers training under-25 apprentices. These measures apply only in England, where technical apprenticeships already attract significantly higher funding, in some cases more than double Scotland's contribution, in contrast to Scotland's college contribution rates, which have been frozen for almost a decade.

In addition, employers in England can draw on unused Apprenticeship Levy funds to help cover training costs, giving them practical and visible routes to support apprenticeship places. By contrast, Scottish employers cannot access levy receipts in this way and have no clear transparency over how levy income allocated to Scotland is used.

Commenting on the growing contrast in approach, Fiona Hodgson said: "The UK government has sent a clear signal that apprenticeships are a national priority, with reforms designed to help employers pay less towards training, carry less risk and access more visible support.

"In Scotland, employers already rely on government to fund college training, but they have no direct access to unused levy funds and no equivalent mechanisms to channel surplus contributions directly into front-line apprenticeship places.

"If Scotland does not match this clarity and ambition, there is a real risk that our businesses will feel less supported and that young people here will see fewer visible opportunities than their peers elsewhere in the UK."

Other findings from the report

- Employers overwhelmingly support the current four-year apprenticeship as the gold-standard route into a safety-critical profession, with more than 80% stating it remains essential for producing competent, job-ready tradespeople.
- Two-thirds of member businesses (67%) currently employ apprentices, demonstrating that the profession continues to invest heavily in skills despite mounting financial pressures.
- Both smaller firms and larger employers report similar motivations for taking on apprentices and identify many of the same pressures, showing that challenges are system-wide rather than isolated.
- Employers are open to enhanced entry routes that strengthen job readiness with 45% supporting a college-first or pre-apprenticeship pathway to help spread early-stage costs and improve candidate preparation.

- 82% of employers strongly favour 16–19-year-olds as the primary entry point, reflecting a longstanding commitment to creating meaningful opportunities for school leavers and supporting social mobility.