



**APPG on Apprenticeships: Apprenticeships and mental health**

**Tuesday May 18 14:00-15:00**

**Chair:** Emma Hardy MP, Co-Chair, APPG on Apprenticeships

**Speakers:**

- Laura Burley, Open University
- Mike Thompson, Founder, Gen Healthy Minds
- Anna Morrison CBE, Director, Amazing Apprenticeships
- Katie Parslow, Degree Apprentice, Warner Media

**Also in attendance:** Lord Aberdare

Emma Hardy MP opened the discussion, welcomed attendees, and handed over to Laura Burley, Apprenticeships Ambassador at the Open University (OU).

Laura Burley explained the Open University's mission around apprenticeships, stating that it is one of the largest higher degree and apprenticeships providers in the UK. The OU want to help widen access to education and apprenticeships via the workforce. She added that the OU is looking into how they can best support disabled apprentices and those suffering with mental illness. Their 2019 research surveyed 700 businesses employing apprenticeships, culminating in report their *Access to Apprenticeships* report. The report found that over a third of employers saw a rise in mental health conditions among apprentices versus other employees, with a third saying they were under pressure because of exams. The report concluded that employers needed to provide support for apprentices to maintain good mental health in the form of training – the OU have done some of this themselves with their own apprentices. Laura Burley raised concerns that little financial support is available for training providers to cater for an apprentice with a mental disability. She also noted that there is very little awareness among employers of what support is available for an apprentice struggling with their mental health and concluded by adding another finding from her research – that many apprentices felt fearful about disclosing a mental health condition at their interview. She handed back to Emma Hardy MP.

Emma Hardy MP thanked Laura Burley and recommended attendees look at her *Access to Apprenticeships* report. She then handed over to Mike Thompson, Founder of Gen Healthy Minds.

Mike Thompson briefly introduced himself and ran through Gen Healthy Minds' mission, displaying a presentation on its work. He said that its mission is to help apprentices live healthy, happy, and successful lives, adding that 75-80% of graduates sit alongside the positive side of mental health continuum, meaning they experience mostly good mental health. However, mental health issues among apprentices were increasing even before the COVID-19 pandemic, and have accelerated during the various lockdowns, with influencing factors including isolation, job insecurity, personal factors, and the apprentice's partnership with their provider. Employer response has happily been better than pre-lockdown, but is still far too reactive, not proactive. Mike Thompson said that a more practice preventative model was required, as well as a partnership with providers. He concluded that the best practice support framework includes a supportive community around an apprentice, developing positive behaviours, providing online advice and support and specialist support when required. Mike Thompson then handed back to Emma Hardy MP.



Emma Hardy MP thanked Mike Thompson and noted his contributions, especially regarding the timing of interventions. She then handed over to Anna Morrison CBE, Director of Amazing Apprenticeships.

Anna Morrison introduced herself and ran through Amazing Apprenticeships' background, stating that they work in different areas of the apprenticeship ecosystem, and work a lot with training providers and employers, attempting to attract a more diverse cohort of apprentices, and work with apprentices themselves to support them. She stated that Amazing Apprenticeships had started supporting mental health program even before the pandemic. Their research found that apprentices did not feel properly supported even before the pandemic. During the pandemic, apprentices and employers didn't feel properly supported in terms of facilitating good mental health. While Amazing Apprenticeships created guidance materials to help successful providers, they also noted worrying comments regarding apprentices with diagnosed situations, who felt like they needed help and weren't sure how or where to get it, and didn't feel they were being taken seriously enough, with 84% of apprentices reporting having concerns about their mental health. Anna Morrison noted that these kinds of incidents have been happening very recently, so more needs to be done now. She noted that there is often a class-based divide regarding apprentices' mental health, with wealthier providers able to provide resources such as private health care to apprentices and will be better able to help cater for an apprentice's mental health than a provider with fewer resources. Anna Morrison stated that there are three main areas in which to do better – signposting to services to ensure timely access of support, increasing “safe space” communities, and prevention – equipping providers and employers with better preventative measures, so a situation doesn't get to the point where it becomes a case of crisis intervention.

Emma Hardy MP thanked Anna Morrison and handed over to Katie Parslow, Degree Apprentice at Warner Media.

Katie Parslow introduced herself and briefly ran through her background. She stated that her position was guaranteed by Warner Bros even during the restructuring process they underwent during the pandemic. She noted that the pandemic has created a 24/7 working culture and being an apprentice makes that harder still. She stated that Warner have implemented good safeguards for employee wellbeing, for example having no calls on Friday and earlier finishes during summer. She said that other companies should consider following their lead to safeguard employee wellbeing and mental health. She added that working from home has prevented networking opportunities that are normally available in an apprenticeship. Personally, her mental health has improved during the pandemic – she stated that the measures Warner have implemented have helped safeguard her mental health. She concluded by stating that companies should encourage networking and improved team connectivity to help mental health and handed back to Emma Hardy MP.

Emma Hardy MP thanked Katie Parslow and complemented the range of practical measures taken by Warner to help protect her mental health. She then opened the discussion up to questions from the audience.

Lord Aberdare asked what was being done to extend positive mental health safeguards to all apprentices.

Mike Thompson answered that employers recognise that their youngest employees are most vulnerable to poor mental health. He stated that it is important to focus on people from day 1, or ideally even earlier, during school and recruitment process. Early intervention key to prevent problems later. Katie Parslow agreed, stating that support in school would have been helpful for her, as coming into a team as the youngest person can be quite daunting.



James Deller thanked speakers for their contributions. He asked about role models – do people in organisations practice what they preach? He further asked what can be done to incentivise/reward people for working appropriate hours rather than overworking.

Martyn Price stated that he wanted to embed mental health toolkits into apprenticeship curriculum and asked speakers if they thought that appropriate.

Anna Morrison answered that it would be a critical and useful addition to the apprenticeship program and needs to be done collectively between provider and employer rather than leaving the onus on one party.

Simon Phipp asked if mental health should be employer-based – do employers have a duty of care?

Ellie Socha asked what evidence there was that employers were taking mental health more seriously in apprentices.

Anna Morrison said that was the case but noted that flexi-job apprenticeships could complicate the situation.

Mike Thompson agreed that employers were primarily responsible but added that the training provider has a duty of care as well. He stated that providers need to move away from looking at mental health as just health and safety and start to look at it as a safeguarding issue. He stated that we need a universal standard for looking after mental health, which needs to be embedded into training and support.

Annabel May asked if a real living wage and basic employee rights would improve apprentices' mental health.

Emma Hardy MP thanked audience members and asked panellists for closing thoughts.

Katie Parslow said it was a very interesting discussion and agreed with Annabel May's point regarding wages and employee rights.

Mike Thompson stated that he supported a move towards a real living wage for apprentices and agreed that more needed to be done to support their financial security.

Anna Morrison agreed, and said that she "*detested*" the current National Minimum Wage for apprentices. She added that financial security was massively helpful to mental health.

Laura Burley added that flexibility was important, as was awareness by both provider and employer of the available support for an apprentice's mental health and wellbeing.

Emma Hardy MP thanked attendees and wrapped up the discussion.