

Developing the Orthoptic workforce: National Apprenticeship employer support funding 2026/27

Implementation Guidance for Employers

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Introduction

To support growth in the Orthoptic workforce, NHS England is proposing to offer training grants in 2026/27 for employers to develop apprenticeships in Orthoptics. Apprenticeships help employers to develop skilled, motivated and qualified staff, and can support efforts to address workforce shortages.

Apprenticeships are work-based training programmes which are designed to help employers train people for specific job roles. Apprentices can have paid employment while they achieve a nationally recognised apprenticeship standard or framework. Apprenticeships bring a number of tangible benefits to the NHS and other organisations. They can create skilled, motivated and qualified employees and, if used properly, can help to address skills shortages across the workforce.

Funding offer

To help grow the Orthoptic workforce, NHS England is offering training support grants nationally to employers for the following apprenticeship programme starting in September 2026

- Level 6 Orthoptic degree apprenticeship - **£8,300** (per apprentice, per year for 3 Years). Total Maximum per learner = **£24,900**
- NHS England has agreed to provide a funding package of £24,900 per apprentice for all programmes within the scope of this funding. The funding available from NHS England has been calculated based on a typical 3-year apprenticeship programme at a rate of £8,300 per year.

The overarching aims of the offer is to:

- Support Trusts in developing the Orthoptic workforce and develop the pipeline of individuals along the career pathway
- Support existing and new staff to develop in their roles and along the career pathway (this includes existing support workers, assistant practitioners and aspiring Orthoptists)
- Grow the number of orthoptists
- Increase access to and provide new routes into orthoptics through supporting the apprenticeship pathways
- Help bridge inequalities by removing traditional barriers to entry and supporting people from diverse backgrounds to earn while they learn
- Strengthen rural and coastal workforces by enabling individuals to train locally, reducing the need to relocate and helping services attract and retain staff in areas that traditionally face workforce shortages.



Level 6 Apprenticeship Payments

This proposed support would be available as a pro-rata payment. The level 6 Apprenticeship payments may span up to three years depending on start dates and programme length. The funding available from NHS England has been calculated based on a typical 3-year apprenticeship programme at a rate of £8,300 per year, but actual payments will be paid pro-rata to reflect any accelerated or part-time programmes.

The grant could be used by employers (in addition to the apprenticeship levy) to support and facilitate their trainees completing a recognised apprenticeship training programme. The training grant is to support trainees commencing the programme within this current financial year and NHS England funding must be expended in the financial year 2026/27. The next planned cohort for the Orthoptic apprenticeship is in September 2026.

Expressions Of Interest (EOI) Process

Employers should submit their request for funding via this national online survey link below –

Expression of Interest: Funding for National Orthoptic Apprenticeships (2026-2027)

The expression of Interest survey will open on April 27, 2026, and close at midnight on May 29, 2026


Please note that neither employers nor NHS England are making a commitment at this stage. Employers should wait for confirmation from NHS England about which training posts will receive funding before enrolling candidates on the programmes. Please make sure you read the funding guidance in full before completing the funding request form.

Employers will be contacted at the earliest opportunity to confirm whether your EOI will be supported and, where necessary, informed of next steps in the process.

Procurement

To support this project NHS England and Salisbury NHS procurement have undertaken a national procurement process to identify an education provider to deliver the Orthoptic apprenticeships. Employers are strongly encouraged to be on the framework.

This service is managed and owned by Salisbury NHS Foundation Trust and aims to deliver a range of support for employers to increase their uptake of Apprenticeships. We suggest that service leads encourage their teams to work directly with their apprenticeship leads, rather than completing the forms themselves. This helps reduce errors



and makes sure apprenticeship teams are aware of upcoming enrolments and funding requests.

Completed orders should be sent to sft.commercial@nhs.net please, but **only when the learner(s) places are confirmed by the supplier.**

Order forms will be supplied.

Course Providers

Please see the details below for Orthoptic apprenticeship courses, including recruitment and intake timelines.

Level 6 Orthoptic Degree Apprenticeship:

Orthoptic Degree Apprenticeship – University of Sheffield

[BSc \(Hons\) Orthoptics degree apprenticeship | Allied Health Professions, Pharmacy, Nursing and Midwifery | The University of Sheffield](#)



FAQ's and further information

When do learners need to start an apprenticeship to be eligible for the grant?

The grant is available for apprenticeship programmes that start in the financial year 2026/27 (April-26 – March27). The next planned cohort for the Orthoptic apprenticeship is in September 2026, so this cohort would be eligible.

How does my organisation apply for the grant/s?

Employers should submit their request for funding via this expression of interest online survey – [Expression of Interest: Funding for National Orthoptic Apprenticeships \(2026-2027\)](#)

If I submit a request for funding, will my organisation be guaranteed the funding?

No, neither you (the employer) nor NHS England is committing to anything at this point in time; this is an expression of interest phase. Employers are advised to wait for confirmation from NHS England as to which training posts will be awarded funding before enrolling candidates on the programmes.

When will I hear about the outcome of my request for funding?


Employers will be contacted at the earliest opportunity to confirm whether your request will be supported and, where necessary, informed of next steps in the process.

What are the entry criteria for learners?

The criteria below are the standard requirements for each programme. However, the teaching team will consider prior learning from candidates, which may be different from the qualifications listed below and experience within Orthoptics will also be considered on an individual basis.

Level 6 Orthoptic Degree Apprenticeship:

- 120 UCAS tariff points which can be achieved through relevant level 3 qualifications including Access to Higher Education (60 credits: 45 at level 3 with a minimum of Dist: 15 Merit: 24 Pass: 6), A-Levels, T Levels or BTEC (distinction, distinction, merit)
 - Or Level 3 qualification in a Health and Social Care related course
- Level 2 English qualification (GCSE Grade 4-9, GCSE Grade A-C, Level 2 Functional Skills English, Key Skills Level 2 Communication or equivalent) (**under 19s only**)
- Level 2 Maths qualification (GCSE Grade 4-9, GCSE Grade A-C, Level 2 Functional Skills Maths, Key Skills Level 2 Application of Number (Numeracy) or equivalent) (**under 19s only**)

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- Health or care experience to demonstrate an insight into the professional values and behaviours associated with health and care environments.
 - Employers are responsible for ensuring apprentices meet occupational health requirements and have passed appropriate vetting procedures, which may include a Disclosure and Barring Service Check and Right to Work check. This is evidenced through the submission of supplementary evidence as part of the selection process.
 - Apprentices will have been identified by the organisation as being able to succeed in the programme, and employers may set additional entry requirements as part of the selection process prior to assessment for entry by the University.
 - Applicants must complete an occupational health assessment and an Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check as part of the selection process and any offer made will be subject to these.
 - The apprentice must be employed in a Orthoptic Department and must have the support of their manager that they will be able to complete the apprenticeship. Apprentices can be either new or existing employees.

English language requirements

There must be a demonstration that the learner's level of English is good enough to successfully complete the course. The requirement to apply for registration with the Health and Care Professions Council: GCSE English Language at grade 4/C. Applicants for whom English is not a first language will require an overall IELTS score of 7, with no subtest below 6.5. This IELTS score is the threshold needed to apply for registration with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).

Professional experience

A completion of English language at GCSE A-C (or equivalent) as listed above. There may be an exemption if a candidate has at least 12 months of employment with the employer supporting the apprenticeship programme, in a role that involves regular communication in English. Include an official letter from the current/most recent employer that confirms:

- English language proficiency, in listening, reading, speaking and writing
- the dates of employment
- The use English in the role

How much are the course fees?

All course fees will be covered by the apprenticeship levy in England for the apprenticeship route. The levy is accessible to all Orthoptic employers in England and not limited to those who pay into the levy. The apprenticeship course fees for Orthoptic apprenticeships are:

- Level 6 Orthoptic Degree Apprenticeship: £24,900 is supported by levy funding

How do I access apprenticeship levy to pay for the course fees?

There are three ways to access funding to pay for apprenticeship training. This levy funding does not cover salary costs; you will have to fund the apprentice's salary. Employers can use the training grant to go towards employment costs.

1. **Apprenticeship Levy:** Employers with a pay bill over £3 million each year pay the apprenticeship levy. Levy-paying employers can spend their apprenticeship levy funding on apprenticeship training.
2. **Reserve government co-investment:** If you do not pay the apprenticeship levy, you can reserve funding, where the government pays 95% of the training costs, and the employer pays the remaining 5%.
3. **Levy Transfers:** Levy-paying employers can transfer some of their annual levy to other employers. These transfers cover 100% of the training costs of the apprenticeship (you still need to cover salary).

Can apprentices spend their time across several sites?

There are several benefits to exposing the trainee to several sites and experiences, ensuring appropriate supervision requirements are in place. Apprentices will need to have clinical experience in Orthoptics. Provision of a suitable breadth of clinical experience in Orthoptics remains the responsibility of the employer.

How many hours will the apprentice work per week?

Apprentices should be employed on at least a 30 hrs per week contract (of which 40% will be 'off the job' training to include study and tasks related to their development).

What activities is the apprentice expected to be involved in?

Apprentices will undertake a range of activities dependent on the learning environment in which they work and develop their knowledge and skills in practice. Activities should allow them to meet the requirements of the apprenticeship standard and link to the agreed learning outcomes as outlined in the learning plan. As the apprentice grows in confidence and competence, they will become an integrated part of the workforce. When progressing through the apprenticeship, their skills and confidence will grow, meaning that they will be able to take on more tasks in the workplace.



Can part time staff undertake the apprenticeship?

Orthoptics Level 6 apprenticeship does not have a part time offer.

Eligible candidates must be employed for a minimum of 30 hours per week to undertake this apprenticeship. This threshold ensures sufficient time for theoretical study and practical application, enabling the apprentice to meet the regulatory KSBs and SoPs. Apprentices must be available for the synchronous teaching sessions with the university, and the remaining hours of employment can be worked out around this.

Can I use the apprenticeship levy to pay for my apprentices' salary?

Apprenticeship levy, reservations and transfers do not cover salary costs. Your organisation will need to fund the apprentice's salary. The training support grant however can contribute to the employment costs.

What does "off the job training" mean?

Off-the-job training is the amount of time that should be spent on occupational off-the-job training during an apprenticeship. Off-the-job training is a statutory requirement for an apprenticeship. It is training, which is received by the apprentice, during the apprentice's normal working hours for the purpose of achieving the knowledge, skills and behaviours of the approved apprenticeship referenced in the apprenticeship agreement.

Contact details

For enquiries regarding **the Level 6 Orthoptics Degree Apprenticeship**, please contact:

University of Sheffield Apprenticeship team

T: 0114 222 2036

E: ahpnm-apprenticeships@sheffield.ac.uk

For enquiries regarding **the training support grants and levy funding**, please contact:

The National AHP Programme Team
Education Reform
Workforce Education & Training Directorate
NHS England

Email: england.ahpnatprog1@nhs.net