



Professional Apprenticeships and SMEs

RESEARCH REPORT

Understanding barriers,
opportunities and service
requirements

DAMAR
TRAINING



Greater Manchester
Chamber of Commerce

FOREWORD

Jonathan Bourne, CEO at Damar Training



Small and medium-sized enterprises form the backbone of the UK economy, accounting for 99.9% of all private sector businesses and employing over 16 million people. Yet when it comes to business and professional apprenticeships - in fields such as accounting, business admin, customer service, legal services, HR and marketing - SMEs remain significantly underrepresented.

This is not due to lack of ambition or commitment to workforce development, but rather because of perceptions and barriers that make apprenticeships feel inaccessible, complex or poorly suited to the realities of running a smaller business.

At Damar Training, we believe this represents both a challenge and an enormous opportunity. That's why we commissioned this research. We wanted to understand what really matters to SME leaders like you when it comes to apprenticeships - not theoretical ideals, but practical realities.

The good news that most of the SMEs we surveyed see real value in apprenticeships. The even better news is that the barriers that would prevent deeper engagement aren't insurmountable. By understanding SME challenges, providing clear information and delivering proactive support, training providers like Damar can help more SMEs benefit from apprenticeships. And, with nearly one million UK young people out of work, education or training, there is a moral and economic imperative to act.

This report translates our findings into actionable guidance. For those of you considering apprenticeships, you'll find practical advice on what to ask providers upfront, how to prepare your team and what to expect. For those already engaged, you'll find ways to get better results.

The research shows that when providers prioritise transparency, flexibility and genuine support - and when employers actively prepare and engage - apprenticeships deliver real value. Our role is to make that happen consistently.

I hope you find this report useful. Your feedback helps us serve you better.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Bourne'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jonathan Bourne

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report presents findings from a survey of SME leaders, managers, business owners and HR professionals conducted by Damar Training in collaboration with Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce. The survey was designed to understand current engagement with business and professional apprenticeships, identify barriers to adoption and establish the specific service requirements that would make apprenticeships more accessible and effective for smaller businesses.

This report provides actionable guidance for both SMEs considering apprenticeships and training providers seeking to effectively serve this market.

Key Finding: Strong Demand Among SMEs

The research shows that 61% of SMEs demonstrate positive engagement with or openness to apprenticeships – including current users, past users willing to re-engage and those considering apprenticeships for the first time. This represents substantial latent demand that training providers can unlock by addressing identified barriers and service gaps.

Why SMEs Aren't Engaging: Opportunities for Providers

Four primary barriers are potentially preventing deeper engagement: unclear or unpredictable pricing, poor communication from training providers, unrealistic time commitments and lack of ongoing support. By addressing SME concerns around financial transparency, communication responsiveness, realistic time expectations and structured support, providers can dispel myths and misunderstandings about apprenticeships while building trust with this underserved market.

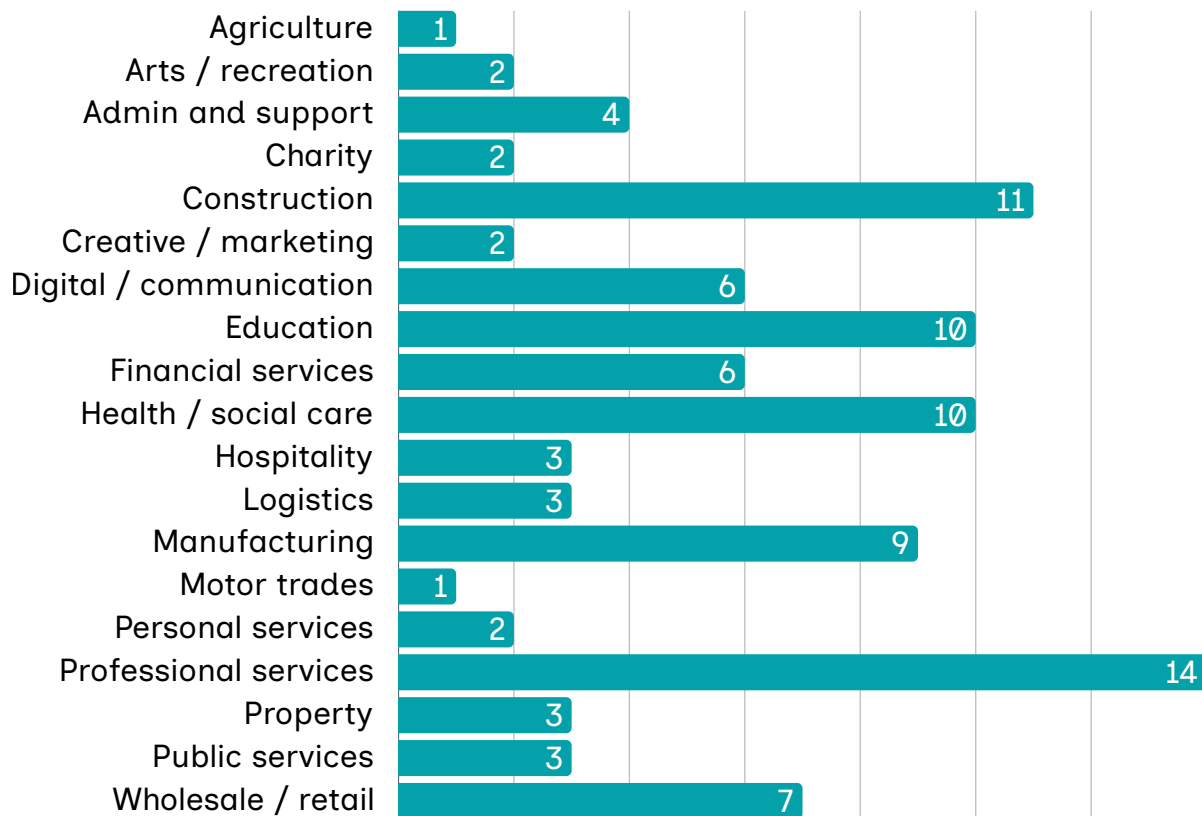
The core insight from this research is clear: SMEs are not resistant to apprenticeships. They recognise the value and see genuine opportunity. What they need is a considered service approach – one characterised by transparency about costs and commitments, flexibility in programme design and delivery, and genuine support throughout the journey. Training providers who can deliver on these requirements have significant opportunities to engage this market and build sustainable, long-term partnerships with SME employers.

SURVEY RESPONDENT PROFILE

The survey captured responses from 219 SME representatives across a diverse range of industries, company sizes, job roles and geographic locations. This breadth ensures the findings reflect the varied landscape of small and medium-sized enterprises.

Industry Sectors

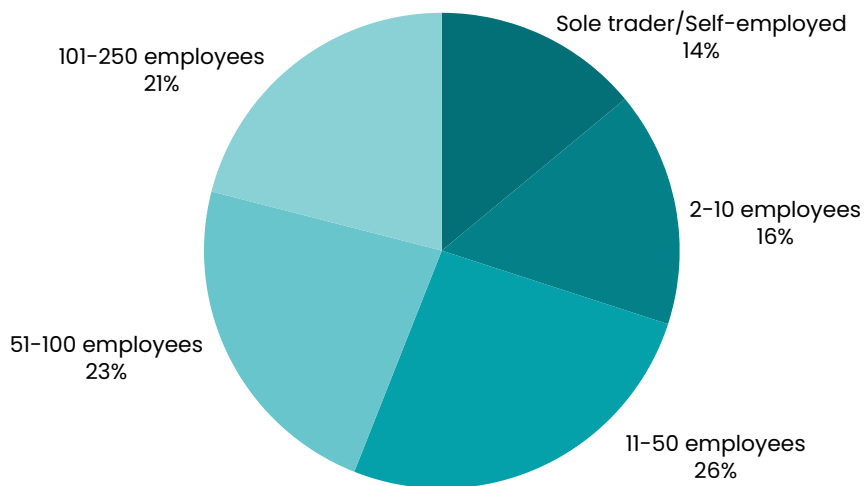
Respondents represented 20 distinct industry sectors, with the highest percentage of respondents from professional, scientific and technical services (14%), construction (11%) health and social care (10%) and education (10%).



Although the focus of this research was on business and professional apprenticeships, this sector profile demonstrates how these programmes are applicable to, and of potential value across, all industries.

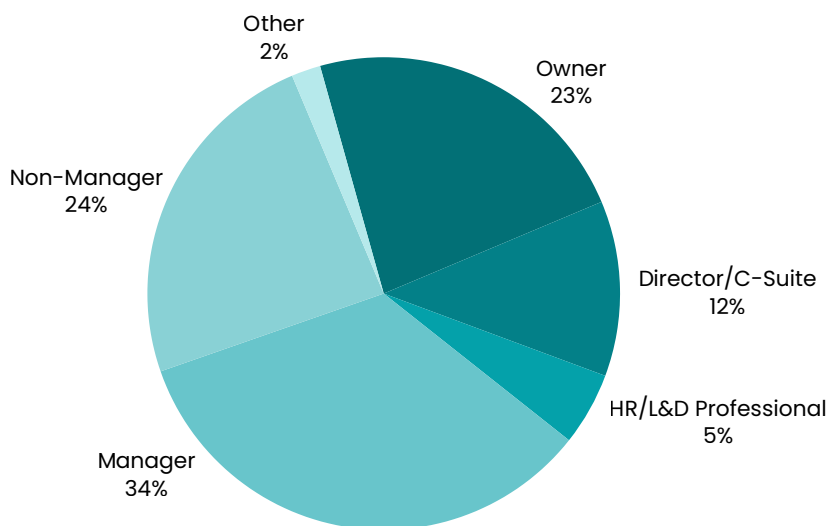
Company Size

The survey captured responses from businesses across the full SME spectrum with the highest number of respondents in the 11-50 employees category (see chart on following page).



Respondent Job Roles

Survey participants were primarily owners, senior leaders, managers or HR professionals (74%) – key decision makers and influencers within SME organisations when it comes to apprenticeships.

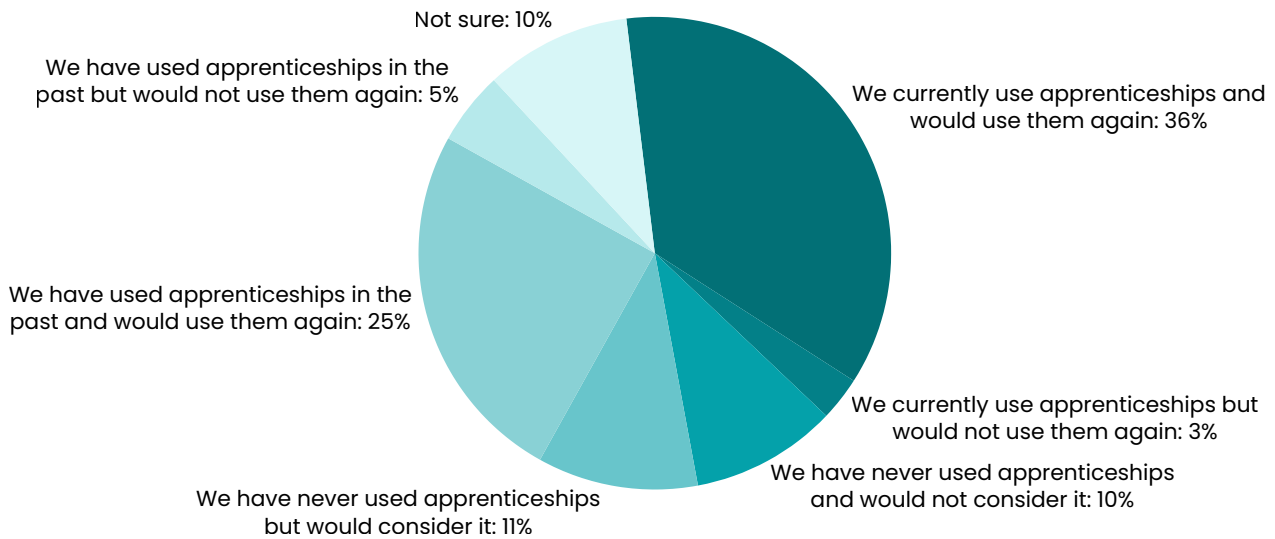


Geographic Distribution

While the survey was conducted in partnership with the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce, responses were not limited to the Greater Manchester region. 47% of respondents were within Greater Manchester, 19% elsewhere in the North West and 34% outside of the North West.

Apprenticeship Engagement

The survey asked respondents to characterise their organisation's relationship with apprenticeships (see chart on following page).



When we aggregate these responses, 61% of SME respondents show positive engagement with or openness to apprenticeships, including current users, past users willing to engage again and those who have never used apprenticeships but would consider doing so.

This finding challenges the assumption that SMEs are fundamentally resistant to apprenticeships. Instead, it suggests that the majority of SMEs recognise the potential value of apprenticeships and are either already engaged or open to engagement under the right conditions.

SME DECISION-MAKING

Priorities for Initial Conversations

When SMEs first engage with a training provider about apprenticeships, what information do they prioritise? Understanding these priorities is essential for providers seeking to build trust and demonstrate relevance quickly. The survey asked respondents to rank their information priorities and the chart below shows the percentage of respondents ranking each information priority in their top three.



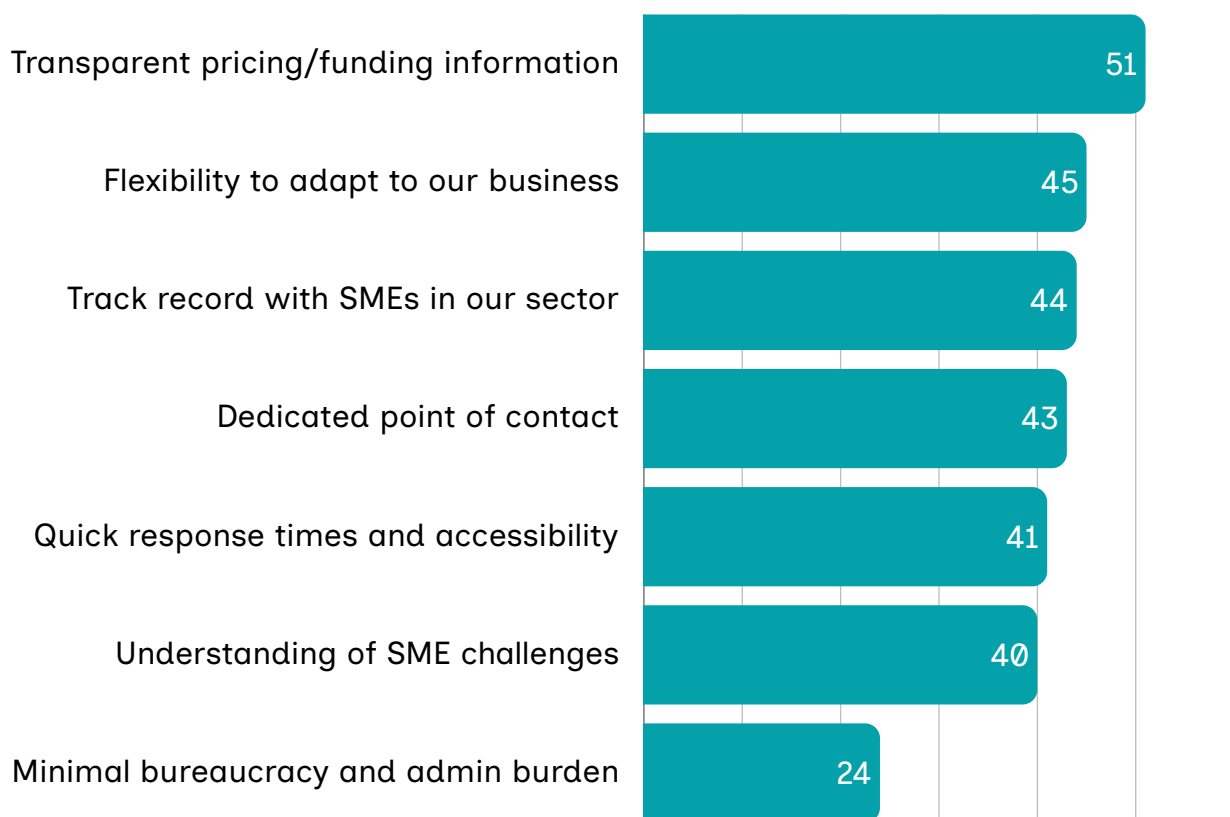
The priority given to "total costs and available funding" sends a clear message (with 37% selecting it as their top priority and 82% selecting it in their top three): SMEs need upfront financial transparency. Training providers who lead with clear, comprehensive financial information – including total costs, funding available, employer contribution required and any additional expenses – will build trust more quickly than those who defer financial discussions.

The second-highest priority was understanding the time commitment required from the employer. This reflects the reality that for SMEs, time is often more constrained than money. Providers who can clearly articulate time requirements – and ideally offer flexibility in how that time is structured – will address a primary SME concern.

The third and fourth highest priorities – specific programmes relevant to the business and the processes involved – reflect SMEs' need for practical, actionable information including which specific apprenticeship standards are available in their sector and how the apprenticeship process works from initial inquiry to completion.

Criteria for Provider Selection

Beyond initial information priorities, what factors influence SMEs' decisions about which training provider to work with? The survey asked respondents to rank the factors that would make a provider stand out and the chart below shows the percentage of respondents ranking each factor in their top three.



Consistent with the information priorities discussed in the previous section, transparent pricing (21% respondents ranking it first and 51% ranking it in their top three) emerges as the most important differentiator. This reinforces that financial clarity is not just an initial information need but a fundamental trust factor that influences provider selection.

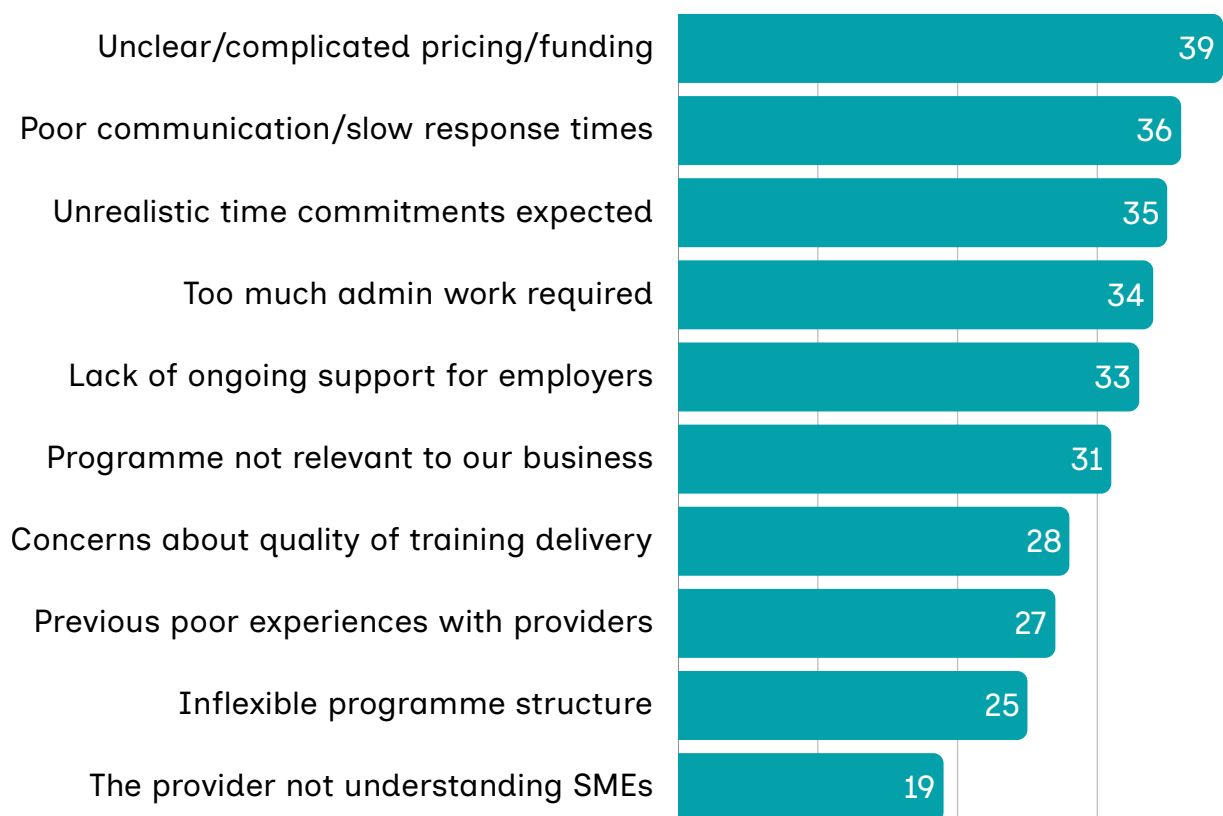
Five other priorities all had comparable rankings:

- Flexibility to adapt to business needs (18% ranking it first and 45% ranking in their top three)

- Proven track record in the SME sector (16% ranking it first and 44% ranking it in their top three)
- Dedicated single point of contact (12% ranking it first and 43% ranking it in their top three)
- Quick response times and accessibility (12% ranking it first and 41% ranking it in their top three)
- Understanding of SME-specific challenges (15% ranking it first and 40% ranking it in their top three).

Barriers to Apprenticeship Adoption

While the majority of SMEs show positive engagement with or openness to apprenticeships, barriers remain. The survey asked respondents to identify which factors have prevented or would prevent their organisation from using apprenticeships, allowing multiple selections. The results reveal challenges that training providers should address.



That 39% identified unclear or unpredictable pricing as a barrier reinforces the findings from previous sections: financial transparency is not merely a preference but a fundamental requirement for SME engagement.

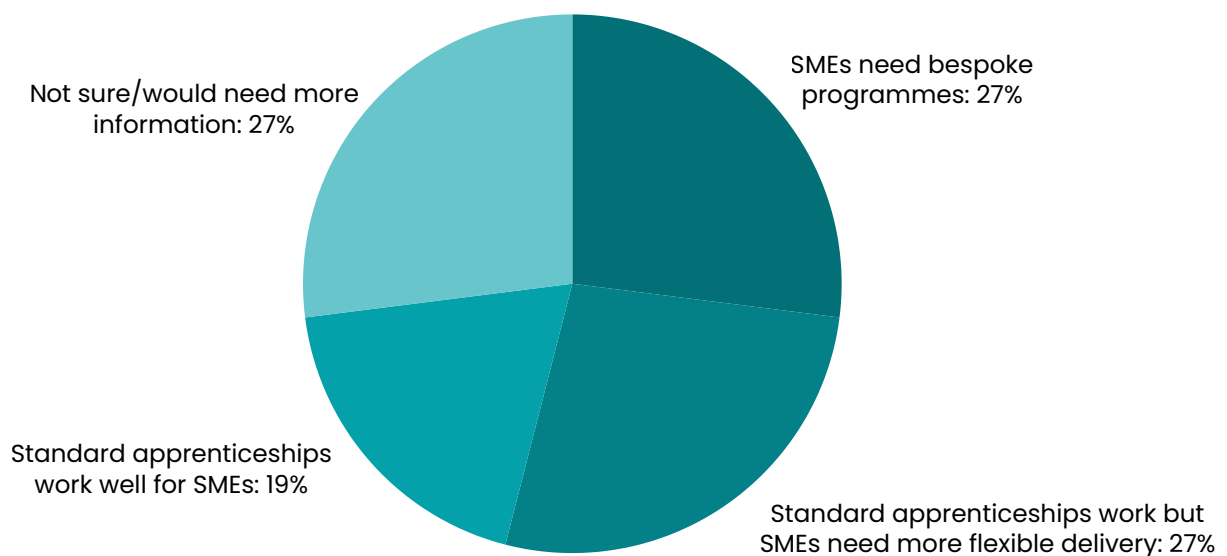
The next most cited barriers were poor communication (36%), unrealistic

time commitments (35%), administrative burden and complexity (34%) and lack of ongoing support (33%). These barriers reflect the resource constraints that characterise SMEs. Unlike larger organisations with dedicated training or HR departments, SMEs must absorb apprenticeship-related time and administrative work within existing roles and require a responsive provider and ongoing support in order to manage these elements.

SME APPRENTICESHIP DESIGN

Programme Requirements

A key question for training providers is whether SMEs require fundamentally different apprenticeship provision or whether existing programmes can serve all business sizes with minor adaptations. The survey asked respondents whether they believed SMEs need specialised apprenticeship programmes, revealing a divided but instructive picture.

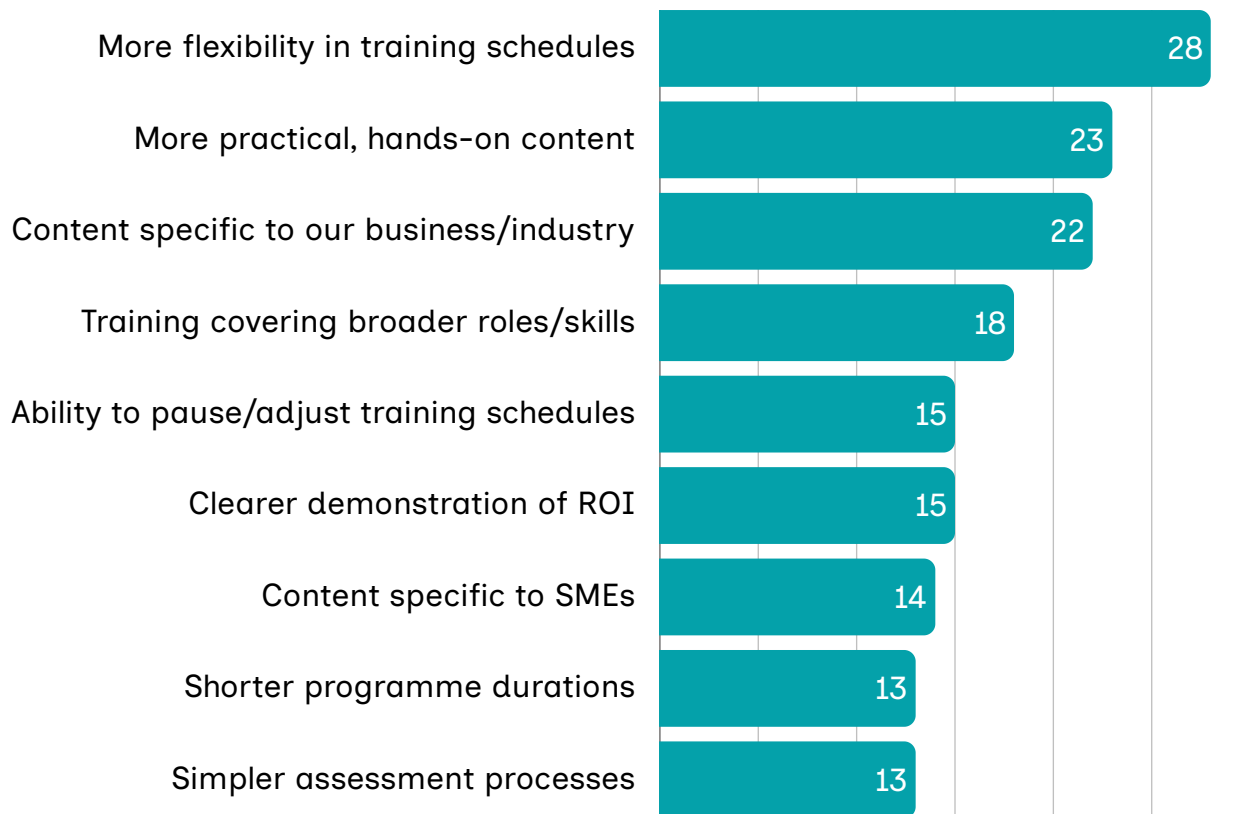


When we combine the first two responses, 54% of SMEs believe that specialised provision is needed – either in the form of bespoke programmes (27%) or through more flexible delivery of standard programmes (27%).

This finding suggests that while the content of apprenticeship standards may be broadly appropriate, the delivery model and service approach often are not. The goal should be equivalence of outcome (same qualifications and skills) but differentiation of process (how those outcomes are achieved).

SME-Specific Needs

To understand how apprenticeship delivery should be adapted for SMEs, the survey asked respondents to identify the distinctive needs of smaller organisations compared to larger employers. Respondents could select multiple options, revealing clear patterns (see chart on following page).



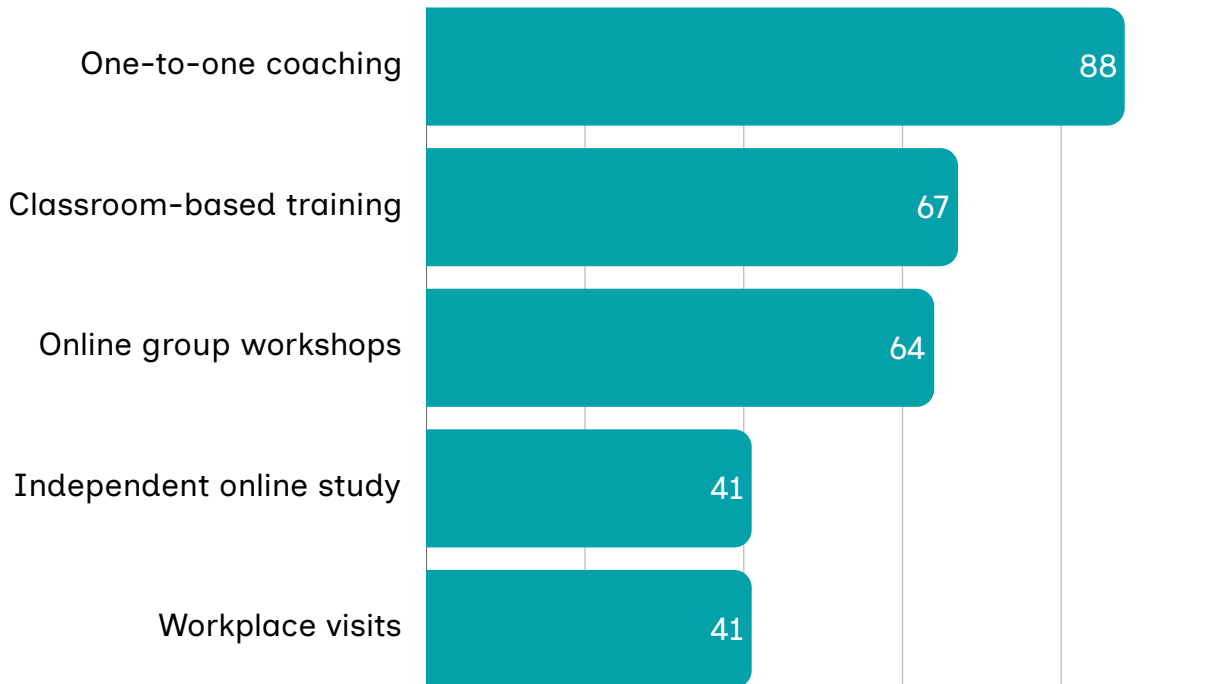
That 28% identified flexibility in scheduling and delivery as a distinctive SME need reinforces the consistent theme throughout this research: SMEs cannot accommodate rigid, standardised training schedules. This need for flexibility likely reflects variable workloads, lean staffing, operational unpredictability and the need for SME employees to cover multiple functions.

The preference for practical, hands-on training content (23%) and content that’s specifically applicable to their business/industry (22%) reflects the reality that SMEs need apprentices to contribute productively quickly and therefore require learning content with obvious practical application to their specific sector.

SME APPRENTICESHIP DELIVERY

Delivery Requirements

Understanding SMEs' preferred training delivery methods is essential for designing effective apprenticeship programmes. The survey asked respondents to rank their preferences among common delivery methods and the graph below shows the percentage of respondents ranking each method in their top three.

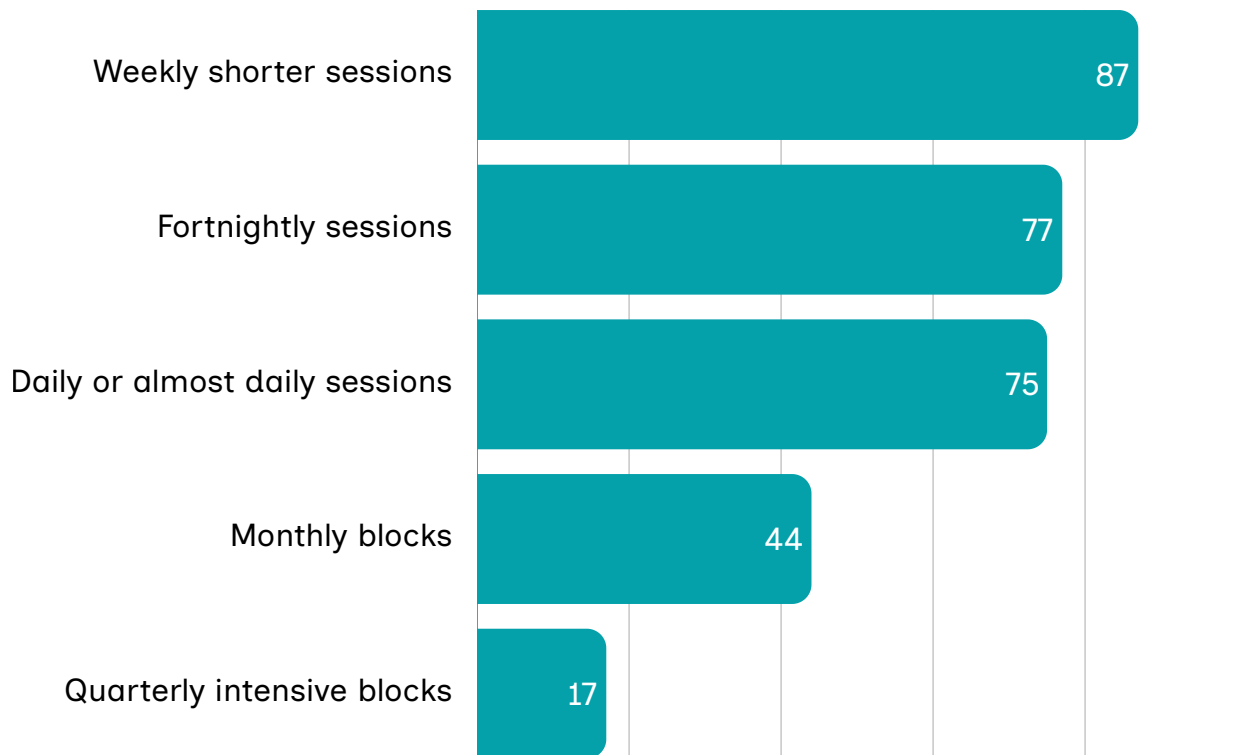


That 88% ranked one-to-one coaching or mentoring in their top three (and 40% ranking it as their top choice) reflects the preference for sessions that are personalised, flexible, relevant and time-efficient.

Group classroom (23% ranking it first and 67% ranking it in their top three) or online sessions (14% ranking it first and 64% ranking it in their top three) were the next preferred options. This suggests that when used, they should only be done so selectively, for foundational knowledge or qualification preparation, rather than as the primary delivery method.

Scheduling Requirements

Beyond delivery methods, the scheduling and frequency of training sessions significantly impacts SME engagement. The survey asked respondents to rank their preferences for training schedules and the graph on the following page shows the percentage of respondents ranking each method in their top three.

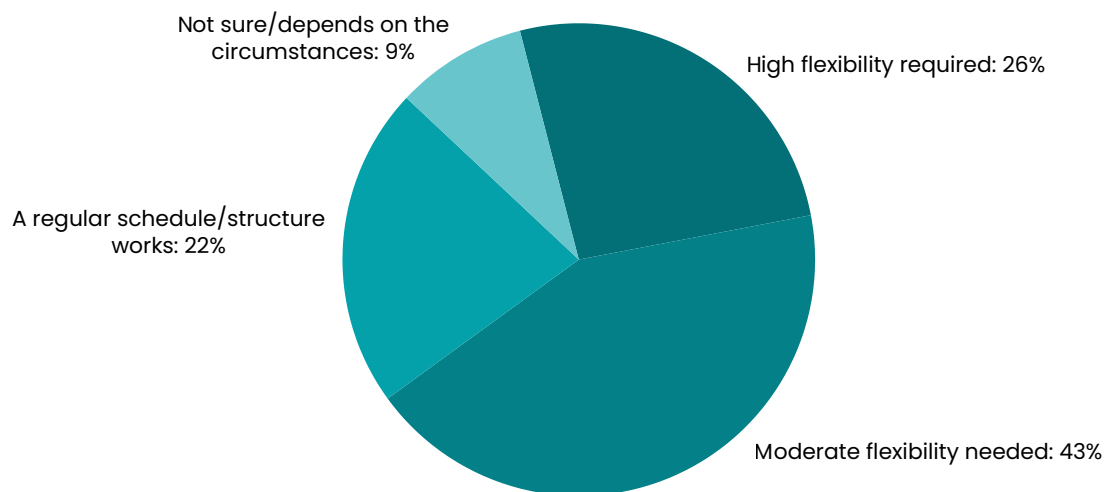


That 87% ranked weekly shorter sessions in their top three (and 40% ranking it as their first preference) suggests this schedule strikes the optimal balance for SMEs between regular engagement, manageable disruption, predictability and responsive support. It also aligns with the earlier finding that SMEs prefer one-to-one coaching – weekly coach engagement would provide the personalisation and continuity that SMEs value.

Daily short sessions ranked nearly as highly (34% ranking it first and 75% ranking it in their top three). Fortnightly sessions were ranked first by 15% of respondents and in the top three by 77% of respondents. Once again, this mix of responses shows that different SMEs can require different scheduling, depending on their business needs.

Flexibility Requirements

While previous sections have established that flexibility is important to SMEs, it is valuable to understand the degree of flexibility required. The survey asked respondents to characterise their organisation's flexibility needs (see chart on following page).



When we combine the first two categories, 69% of SMEs require moderate to high flexibility in training delivery. This reinforces that flexibility is not a niche requirement but a mainstream need for the majority of SMEs. These organisations likely experience variability in workload, face unpredictable operational demands or operate in fast-changing sectors where priorities shift frequently.

The largest single group - nearly 40% of SMEs - need moderate flexibility. They can work with standard schedules but need the ability to make adjustments when necessary, such as occasionally rescheduling sessions, adjusting the pace of learning or modifying content emphasis.

SUPPORT FOR EFFECTIVE APPRENTICESHIPS

Support Requirements

Beyond training design and delivery, what support do SMEs need to successfully manage apprenticeships? The survey asked respondents to identify essential support requirements, allowing multiple selections:



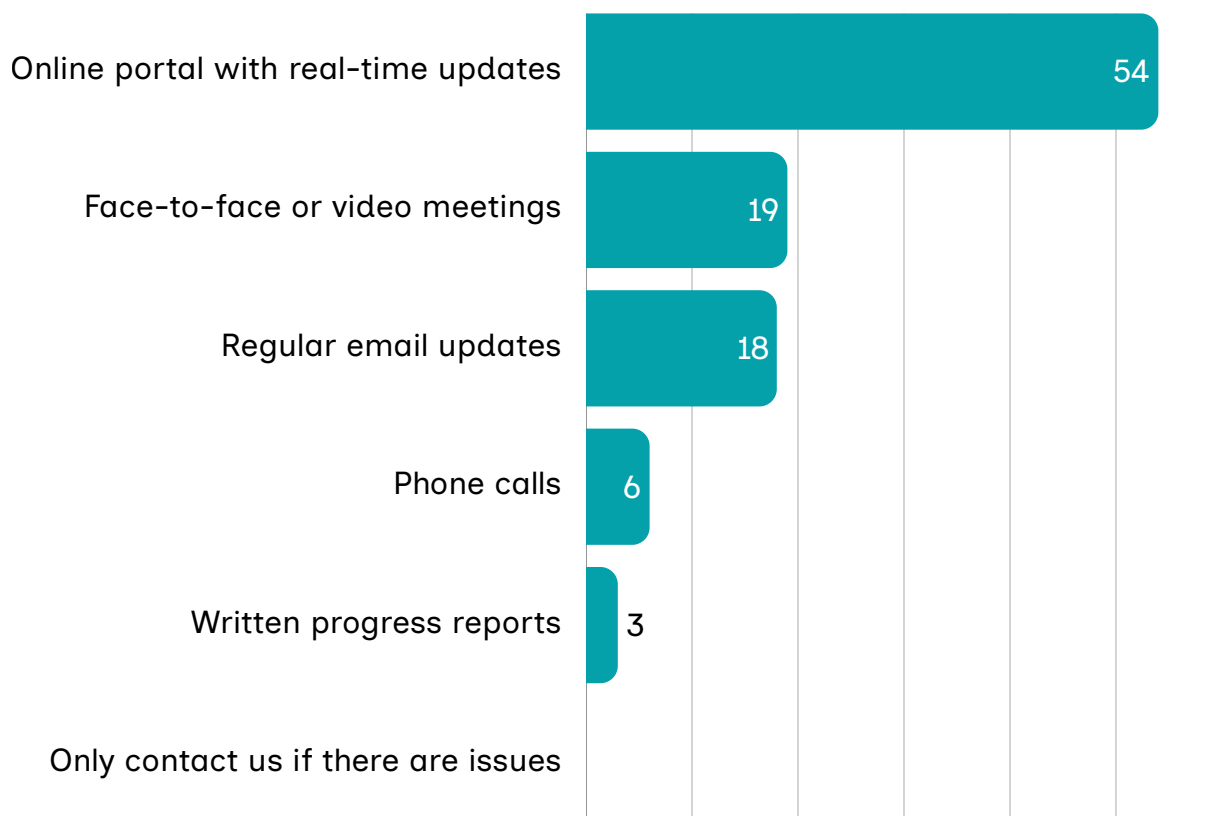
That 42% of respondents identified clear guidance on employer responsibilities as essential reflects a fundamental need: SMEs need to understand what is expected of them. Many SMEs are unfamiliar with apprenticeships and may be uncertain about what they need to provide, the training provider's responsibilities, their legal obligations and how much time they need to commit.

The second-highest priority – progress tracking and reporting (38%) – reflects SMEs' need for visibility into apprentice development without administrative burden.

37% also identified responsive communication as essential. This reinforces earlier findings about poor communication being a major barrier.

Monitoring Progress

Given the importance of progress tracking identified in the previous section, the survey asked respondents to select their preferred method for tracking apprentice progress:



That 54% chose online portals with real-time updates as their preferred method represents a strong mandate for digital, self-service progress tracking, offering convenience, real-time visibility, transparency, accessibility and reduced administrative burden.

Some respondents had a preference for meetings (19%) or regular email updates (18%). The ideal approach may be a combination: an online portal for detailed, real-time information, supplemented by regular email updates highlighting key developments, upcoming milestones or issues requiring attention.

KEY CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Findings

This research, based on responses from SME leaders, managers, owners and HR professionals, reveals a more positive picture of SME engagement with professional apprenticeships than might be expected, but also highlights barriers and clear service requirements.

61% of SMEs demonstrate positive engagement with or openness to apprenticeships, including current users, past users willing to engage again and those who have never used apprenticeships but would consider doing so. This represents substantial latent demand that training providers can unlock by addressing the barriers and service gaps identified in this research.

SMEs have interconnected, multifaceted expectations about what they need from training providers:

- **Financial transparency:** Upfront, clear information about total costs, employer contribution, available funding and any potential additional expenses is the single most important factor in both initial conversations and provider selection.
- **Clarity on employer responsibilities:** SMEs need explicit guidance on what they must provide, what the training provider handles, their legal obligations and realistic time commitment. This clarity directly influences their confidence to engage.
- **Personalised service:** One-to-one coaching is the overwhelming preference for training delivery because it allows personalisation, flexibility, relevance and time-efficiency. Dedicated account management is a key differentiator that builds trust.
- **Flexible delivery:** SMEs need flexibility in training schedules, with weekly shorter sessions preferred over intensive blocks or infrequent sessions. This reflects variable workloads, operational unpredictability and the need for employees to cover multiple functions.
- **Practical, sector-specific content:** SMEs require learning that has obvious practical application to their actual work, not generic content. They need apprentices to contribute productively quickly.
- **Minimal administrative burden:** SMEs want simple, digital progress tracking that provides visibility without creating additional work. They need clear guidance on their responsibilities rather than complex administrative processes.
- **Responsive communication:** Quick response times and proactive communication are critical to building and maintaining trust, particularly when issues arise.

Recommendations for SMEs

If you're considering apprenticeships for your SME, here's how to set yourself up for success:

Ask the right questions upfront

Before committing to a provider:

- Clarify total costs, employer contribution and potential additional expenses
- Confirm time commitment and your responsibilities vs. the provider's
- Understand the support available, flexibility options, and communication channels
- Identify your dedicated contact and expected response times.

Prepare your supervisor

The person supervising your apprentice in the workplace day-to-day is critical to success. As an employer, you should:

- Define their specific role in the apprenticeship programme
- Allocate protected time for check-ins and progress discussions
- Facilitate direct communication between the supervisor and training coach
- Make clear that supporting apprentice development is a business priority.

Support your apprentice effectively

Your apprentice's success depends significantly on the working environment you create:

- Assign meaningful work that applies their learning directly
- Provide regular, specific feedback and celebrate progress
- Help them connect training to their actual role
- Expose them to different business areas
- Be patient - mistakes are part of learning.

Monitor progress actively

Don't wait for problems to escalate. Stay engaged:

- Attend progress reviews and maintain regular provider contact
- Ask your apprentice how things are going
- Flag concerns early rather than letting problems escalate
- Track whether they're developing the skills you need.

Recommendations for Providers

Training providers can unlock the SME market by redesigning services around SME operational realities:

Lead with financial transparency

- Show clear pricing and break down government funding in plain language
- Provide cost comparisons to recruitment and external training alternatives.

Design flexibility as default

- Offer multiple scheduling and delivery options (one-to-one, group, blended)
- Allow pace adjustment and modular progression based on apprentice needs
- Regularly review and adjust plans with employer feedback.

Prioritise personalised coaching

- Deliver primarily through one-to-one engagement with consistent coaches
- Tailor content to each apprentice's actual work context
- Involve supervisors in three-way conversations and offer multiple coaching formats.

Provide structured support

- Provide clear written guidance on employer vs. provider roles
- Create practical resources for line managers supervising apprentices
- Proactively contact employers to discuss progress and provide escalation paths
- Connect SME employers for peer learning.

Demonstrate SME understanding

- Eliminate jargon; speak in business terms
- Respond quickly and reach out proactively
- Acknowledge time and resource constraints; work around business cycles
- Share success stories from similar businesses.

Focus on practical relevance

- Lead with hands-on, real-world application over theory
- Tailor content to actual sector practices and generalist roles
- Use real business challenges as the curriculum.

The Path Forward

The findings of this research are encouraging: the majority of SMEs are engaged with or open to professional apprenticeships, and the barriers to greater engagement are addressable through better service design. Training providers who can deliver transparency, personalisation, flexibility and minimal administrative burden will unlock substantial demand and help more SMEs access the benefits of apprenticeships.

For Damar Training, this research provides a clear roadmap for supporting SME engagement with business and professional apprenticeships. Whilst we currently provide SME employers with the flexibility and support required, we are committed to implementing these findings further in our own practice and sharing them with the wider training provider community.

The opportunity to expand professional apprenticeships among SMEs is significant - not just for training providers, but for the SMEs who need skilled workforces to grow, for the individuals who can access rewarding careers through apprenticeships and for the broader economy that benefits from a more skilled, productive workforce.

CLOSING REMARKS

Subrahmaniam Krishnan-Harihara, Director of Business Policy & Research at Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce



The findings from this joint survey resonate with what we are hearing from employers. Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce is the designated employer representative body leading the development of the Greater Manchester Local Skills Improvement Plan (GM LSIP). Closing skills gaps in professional and business services and equipping workers with the right skills and competencies requires a significant increase in employer uptake of professional apprenticeships.

This is central to the implementation of the GM LSIP and in delivering the ambitions set out in the Greater Manchester Strategy and the Local Growth Plan.

The barriers that this survey has identified: opaque costs, administrative burden and inflexible delivery are hindering employers from accessing a funded training opportunity. It confirms what the GM LSIP found - the main challenge is often not that training is not available. The challenges are around employer awareness and accessibility of training. Importantly, the barriers that this survey has uncovered are not unsurmountable problems; rather, they are service design issues that have practical solutions. Tackling these challenges is critical to serving the needs of SMEs. There is strong appetite amongst SMEs for apprenticeships, but they require effective engagement and support.

Achieving economic growth and productivity gains depends on people having the right skills and on employers having the confidence to invest in workforce development. Through the GM LSIP and wider employer engagement, Greater Manchester Chamber is committed to advocating for provision that is transparent, flexible and best meets the operational requirements of SMEs.

Subrahmaniam Krishnan-Harihara

ABOUT THE PARTNERS



Damar Training is a specialist apprenticeship training provider dedicated to making apprenticeships accessible and effective for small and medium-sized enterprises. We focus on professional apprenticeships including accounting, business administration, customer service, data protection, legal and travel, delivering high-quality training that combines rigorous qualification standards with flexible delivery designed for the realities of organisations of all sizes.

Our approach is built on the principles revealed in this research: transparency in pricing and processes, one-to-one coaching as our primary delivery method, genuine flexibility in scheduling and delivery, dedicated account management for every organisation and ongoing support for both apprentices and their employers. We believe that SMEs should have the same access to high-quality apprenticeship training as larger organisations, delivered in ways that work for their specific contexts and constraints.

Damar Training is committed to continuous improvement based on client feedback and research insights. This report represents our ongoing effort to understand and respond to the needs of the SME community, ensuring that our services genuinely serve the businesses and individuals we work with.

For more information about Damar Training and our apprenticeship programmes, please visit damartraining.com.



Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce is the region's leading business organisation, representing thousands of businesses across all sectors and sizes throughout Greater Manchester. As the voice of business in the region, we advocate for policies and practices that support business growth, economic development and workforce development.

Our partnership with Damar Training on this research reflects our commitment to evidence-based advocacy and support. By understanding the real barriers SMEs face in accessing apprenticeships and the specific service requirements that would make apprenticeships more accessible, we can better advocate for policy changes, promote best practices among training providers and connect our members with providers who genuinely understand and serve SME needs. For more information about Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce and how we support SMEs, please visit www.gmchamber.co.uk.