

Apprenticeships insights: Timely Completion Rates

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Executive Summary

Timely completion rates – the proportion of apprentices who complete their apprenticeship framework within the expected programme duration - are an important indicator of the quality and effectiveness of apprenticeship provision. Completing within expected timescales supports learner motivation, confidence, progression and career development, while also reflecting the effectiveness of programme planning, assessment arrangements, employer engagement and learner support.

The review found that timely completion rates improved gradually over the three-year period ending 2024/25. In 2024/25, 70% of apprentices completed within one month of their expected end date, compared with 64% in 2022/23. During the same period, the proportion of learners completing more than six months late reduced from 16% to 10%. Despite this improvement, timely completion rates remain well below pre-pandemic levels and around 20% learners still completed more than three months beyond their expected end date, demonstrating that late completion remained a considerable sector-wide issue.

Health, public services and care, and construction and the built environment were the most consistently underperforming sectors for timely completion. Across these sectors, providers faced a combination of structural and operational challenges, including qualification reform, staffing shortages, assessor turnover, delays associated with external assessment requirements and weak employer engagement and support.

The review identified substantial variation in timely completion rates between providers. Although providers delivering large volumes of health and social care and construction provision generally faced greater challenges, the scale of variation remained considerable across the sector. Provider approaches to planning, monitoring and supporting learner progress were an important factor in determining timely completion outcomes.

The strongest providers demonstrated a clear strategic focus on timely completion and embedded it securely within quality assurance and performance management arrangements. Effective providers used learner tracking systems proactively, intervened early where progress slowed and planned programmes carefully around learner capability and expected completion dates. Strong assessor relationships, effective employer engagement and clear learner targets also supported stronger outcomes.

However, the review also identified inconsistencies in the recognition of prior learning, the quality of target-setting and the effectiveness of employer engagement across the sector. In addition, current funding arrangements and programme duration rules sometimes limited flexibility within apprenticeship delivery, meaning that learners did not always progress or complete at the pace they were capable of.

Introduction

This report was commissioned by Medr in 2025. It draws on evidence gathered through Estyn's core inspection cycle (2022–2025), findings from Estyn Annual Reports, and extended link visits undertaken with each of the 10 apprenticeship commissioned contract holders across Wales.

This report presents a national insight into timely completion rates across apprenticeship provision. It identifies key strengths and areas for improvement identified across the sector, with a particular focus on the factors influencing timely completion rates. It is intended for policymakers, Medr, training providers, employers and other partners involved in the design, delivery and oversight of apprenticeships.

Timely completion rates are an important quality indicator because they provide a strong measure of the effectiveness of apprenticeship provision and the extent to which learners are being supported to progress successfully through their programmes. Timely completion reflects not only whether learners achieve their qualifications, but also whether apprenticeship programmes are sufficiently well planned, structured and monitored to enable learners to make appropriate progress within the expected timescales.

For learners, completing an apprenticeship within the expected timeframe can have a positive impact on engagement, motivation and confidence. Apprentices who complete on time are more likely to sustain momentum in their learning, gain formal qualifications promptly and progress into higher-level learning or employment opportunities. Timely completion can also influence career aspirations, progression within the workplace, wage increases and promotion opportunities as well as contributing positively to learners' sense of achievement, self-esteem and confidence as skilled practitioners.

Estyn uses timely completion rates as a key quality measure during core inspections and other monitoring activity. Inspectors consider both overall completion performance and the proportion of learners completing beyond their expected end dates when evaluating standards and the effectiveness of leadership and quality assurance arrangements. No national data is currently collected, verified or published regarding learner timely completion rates. Estyn therefore collects and analyses provider-level data during inspection activity.

Typically, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Estyn would have considered around 90% of learners completing on or before their expected end date to be an acceptable benchmark. However, since the pandemic, the proportion of learners completing on or before their expected end dates has reduced across most learning areas and programme levels.

During Estyn's core inspection cycle between 2022 and 2025, seven of the ten providers inspected received a recommendation to reduce the proportion of learners completing beyond their expected end dates.

The findings of this report are based on a range of evidence. During the provider extended link visits, inspectors met with senior and middle leaders, practitioners and staff responsible for quality and performance. They reviewed providers' systems for tracking learner progress including learner e-portfolios and gathered evidence from employers and learners. The review focused on apprenticeship frameworks across all learning areas, including foundation apprenticeships, apprenticeships and higher apprenticeships from levels 2 to 5. Inspectors also analysed the last three years of provider derived data for timely completion by sector and programme level.

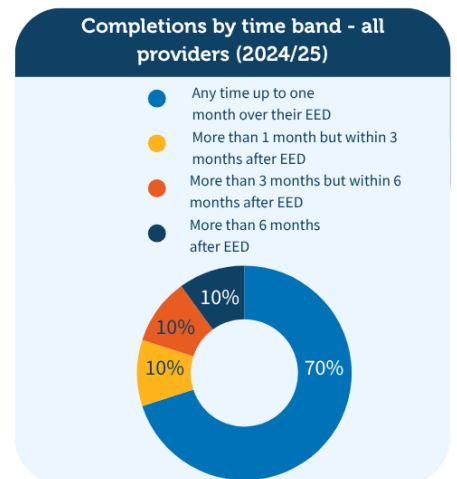
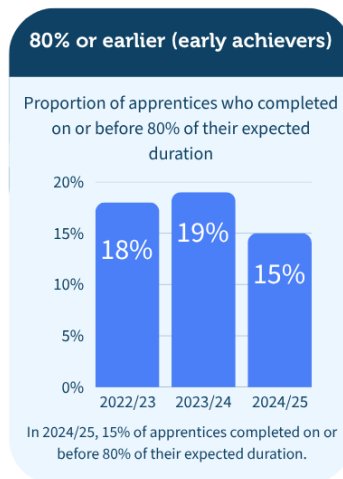
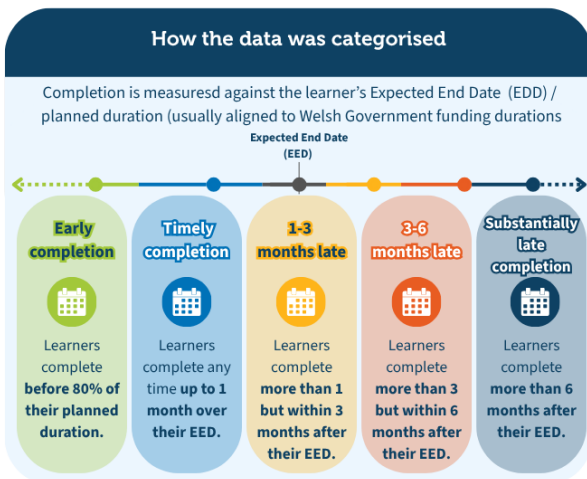
Analysis of the timely completion data

Timely completion rates for apprentices

Analysis of all providers - Wales

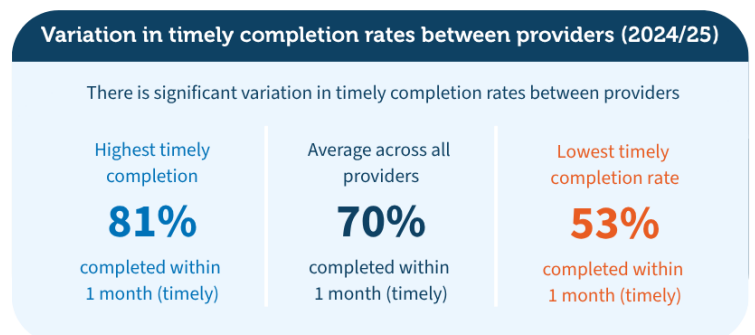


The expected end dates used in this analysis were the dates set by Welsh Government (WG) as part of learner funding allocations



Trends over time - all providers

Time band	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	Trend (2022/23 to 2024/25)
Any time up to one month over their EED	64%	66%	70%	↑ Increasing
More than 1 month but within 3 months after EED	9%	10%	10%	→ Stable
More than 3 months but within 6 months after EED	11%	10%	10%	→ Stable
More than 6 months after EED	16%	13%	10%	↓ Decreasing



For the purposes of this review, apprenticeship timely completion data was requested from providers using a series of completion time parameters based on the learner's expected end date. The expected end dates used in the analysis were those set by the Welsh Government and Medr as part of learner funding allocations. For the purposes of this report, apprentices who completed within one month after their expected end date were classified as having completed in a timely manner.

The data was analysed using five completion categories. Apprentices who completed within 80% or less of the planned programme duration were identified separately as early completers. This group formed a subset of the overall timely completion category. The remaining categories were apprentices who completed within one month of their expected end date, those who completed between one and three months after their expected end date, those who completed between three and six months after their expected end date, and those who completed more than six months after their expected end date.

Completion rates

The data for 2024/25 shows that overall timely completion rates have improved when compared with the previous two years. In 2024/25, 70% of apprentices completed within one month of their expected end date. This represented an increase of six percentage points over the three-year period and indicated a steady upward trend in timely completion. However, despite this improvement, timely completion rates remained well below pre-pandemic levels

Although timely completion rates improved overall, a minority of apprentices continued to complete outside the timely completion definition used for this review. In 2024/25, almost 30% of apprentices completed more than one month after their expected end date, with around 20% still completing more than three months late.

The data shows a gradual reduction in the proportion of apprentices completing substantially late. In 2022/23, 16% of apprentices completed more than six months after their expected end date, reducing to 10% in 2024/25.

The data shows considerable variation between providers in relation to timely completion rates and the proportion of apprentices completing substantially late. The gap between the strongest and weakest performing providers remained substantial across all years reviewed. While differences in provider performance were likely to have been influenced in part by the sectors and frameworks delivered, the scale of variation indicated that apprentices experienced markedly different timely completion outcomes depending on their provider.

Sector analysis

Health, public services and care, and construction and the built environment were the most consistently underperforming sectors for timely completion.

Health, public services and care continued to face a range of structural and operational challenges, including qualification reform, assessor turnover, staffing shortages, weak employer release arrangements and delays associated with external assessment requirements, particularly within higher apprenticeships at level 4 or above. Although a few providers improved timely outcomes through stronger performance monitoring and targeted interventions, improvement across the sector remained inconsistent and provider dependent rather than sector wide.

Construction and the built environment also experienced considerable challenges. Qualification reform, including the removal of the level 2 apprenticeship pathway, resulted in level 3 becoming the principal entry route. Providers reported that a minority of learners found the increased demands of level 3 programmes challenging and, as a result, took longer to complete or were more likely to leave before achieving their framework. Since the introduction of the new qualifications, attainment and timely completion rates have declined, particularly at level 3. Delays associated with external end-point assessment and difficulties gathering workplace evidence further affected learner progress. Although providers reduced the proportion of very late completers over the last three years, late completion rates in high-volume provision remained too high.

In contrast, ICT, professional services, engineering, agriculture and education generally demonstrated stronger and improving timely completion rates. These sectors typically benefited from clearer programme structures, more stable staffing and stronger employer engagement. Other sectors, including hair and beauty, hospitality, business administration and service industries, showed more variable performance, with outcomes often dependent on provider effectiveness, workforce stability and inconsistent employer release for off-the-job learning.

Early completions

The review highlighted tensions created by the current funding rule, whereby providers receive reduced funding if learners complete their apprenticeship earlier than 80% of the Welsh Government funding duration for the framework. As a result, inspectors explored whether funding arrangements influenced provider decisions around early completion.

Across the visits, leaders increasingly viewed timely completion as learners completing when ready rather than managing achievement against funding thresholds. However, inspectors identified too many cases where learners capable of completing early remained on programme longer or undertook additional activity in order to avoid completion below the 80% threshold. In several providers, learners and practitioners told inspectors that apprentices were not permitted to complete before reaching the 80% point of the planned duration.

Over the review period, the proportion of learners completing within 80% or less of the planned duration reduced from 19% in 2022/23 to 15% in 2024/25.

Planning for learner progress

In the strongest practice, providers planned delivery, assessment and learner support carefully from the outset of the programme. Learners benefited from individual learning plans that included clear milestones, realistic assessment targets and planned dates for essential skills, reviews and external assessments. These plans take a holistic view of the programme and include short, medium- and long-term targets and

assessors used these plans effectively to monitor progress and maintain learners' focus on timely completion. In the best examples, assessors planned backwards from expected completion dates and reviewed progress regularly through structured learner reviews.

At **Cambrian Training**, leaders and practitioners maintained a strong organisational focus on learner progress and timely completion through structured planning, regular learner reviews and clear accountability arrangements. Assessors used detailed milestone planning effectively to support learners to understand programme expectations and maintain momentum towards completion. Providers adapted programme delivery flexibly around learner and employer circumstances and maintained strong communication with employers to support workplace learning and assessment opportunities. Leaders monitored learner progress closely through quality assurance and performance management processes and intervened early where progress slowed. This consistent focus on learner progression supported stronger timely completion outcomes across apprenticeship provision.

Effective providers used initial assessment and learner profiling well to tailor programme duration and sequencing to learners' prior experience and capability. They also planned proactively for potential barriers to progress, including external assessment arrangements. Where providers recognised prior learning effectively, learners were able to progress more quickly and complete earlier where appropriate.

However, recognition of prior learning remained too inconsistent across the network. In weaker practice, providers relied too heavily on standardised programme structures and funding durations rather than adapting delivery to individual learner progress and capability. As a result, not all learners progressed at the rate they were capable of.

Assessor expectations, support and challenge

A key strength across nearly all providers was how assessors developed strong and supportive relationships with their learners. In the strongest practice, assessors balanced support with high expectations and maintained a clear focus on learner progress and timely completion. They set challenging but realistic targets, intervened quickly where progress slowed and planned effectively for external assessment activity.

Where practice was less effective, assessors placed too much emphasis on learner well-being and support at the expense of challenge and accountability. In these cases, learners missed or delayed targets, particularly in the later stages of programmes. This often resulted in repeated interventions and increased pressures on assessor caseloads.

Employer engagement and shared responsibility

Providers with stronger timely completion rates established effective partnerships with employers. In

these cases, employers understood the content and requirements of apprenticeship frameworks and played an active role in supporting learner progress. They contributed meaningfully to learner reviews, supported workplace learning and provided opportunities for learners to develop skills and gather assessment evidence. However, in too many cases, employers did not participate fully in learner progress reviews or take sufficient responsibility for supporting learner progress. Employer mentoring and coaching were also inconsistent, particularly where workplace pressures limited opportunities for off-the-job learning and assessment activity.

Learner ownership and programme flexibility

In the most effective practice, programmes were adapted well to learners' needs and prior experience. Providers used flexible delivery approaches appropriately, including face-to-face, remote and blended learning. Where learners understood the structure and requirements of their apprenticeship clearly, they took greater ownership of their learning and progress. These learners monitored their own progress effectively, engaged positively with targets and completed assessments at an appropriate pace.

However, learner ownership of progress remained too inconsistent, particularly at level 3 and above. In weaker practice, learners relied too heavily on assessors to direct and monitor progress, limiting their independence and slowing progress towards timely completion.

Provider approaches to improving timely completion rates

Strategic leadership and organisational focus

Across providers, there was variation in the extent to which timely completion was viewed as a strategic priority. In the strongest providers, leaders articulated a clear organisational focus on timely completion and recognised it as an important indicator of the quality of the learner journey and the overall effectiveness of provision. These providers understood the wider benefits of learners completing within expected timescales, including learner motivation, progression and confidence. As a result, timely completion was embedded securely within governance, self-evaluation and quality improvement processes and monitored routinely through established performance management arrangements. Leaders used performance information effectively to challenge underperformance and set realistic targets.

At **Skills Academy Wales**, leaders strengthened strategic oversight of timely completion across consortium delivery through collaborative governance and robust performance monitoring arrangements. Leaders used regular benchmarking and challenge meetings to identify variation in timely completion rates across subcontractors and to share effective practice between partners. Staff

used structured learner progress reviews and detailed tracking and monitoring systems effectively to identify learners at risk of delay early and intervene promptly. Leaders also adapted delivery approaches flexibly around learner and employer needs, particularly where workplace or assessment barriers emerged. These approaches supported sustained improvements in timely completion rates and reductions in substantially late learner completion.

However, this strategic clarity was not consistent across all providers. In a few cases, leaders focused more heavily on overall completion rates rather than whether learners completed within expected timescales. In these providers, timely completion data was not scrutinised with sufficient rigour and leaders lacked a clear understanding of current performance. Where this was the case, providers were less likely to identify emerging concerns early or implement effective improvement strategies.

Use of data and performance monitoring

The effectiveness of data use and learner monitoring varied across providers. In the strongest practice, leaders and managers used data predictively rather than relying solely on retrospective reporting. Comprehensive digital tracking systems provided near real-time oversight of learner progress against planned end dates and enabled staff to identify emerging risks early. In a few particularly effective providers, refined dashboards and risk-rating approaches helped staff identify learners at risk of delay well before their expected completion date, supporting targeted and timely intervention.

At **B-wbl**, leaders embedded timely completion securely within organisational performance management and partnership oversight arrangements. Leaders and managers maintained detailed oversight of learner progress, assessor caseloads and subcontractor performance through regular scrutiny meetings, milestone tracking and predictive use of learner data. Staff identified learners at risk of delay early and implemented targeted interventions to maintain learner momentum before learners approached their expected completion date. Clear accountability arrangements ensured that timely completion remained a consistent focus across delivery teams and partnership provision. This strategic and data-informed approach contributed to stronger timely completion rates and reductions in substantially late completers across the provider.

Effective providers also embedded accountability for learner progress within routine quality assurance and performance management processes. Regular communication between assessors, learners and employers ensured that progress, expectations and emerging risks were understood clearly by all parties. In weaker practice, monitoring arrangements were overly reliant on manual systems and interventions often occurred too late, when learners were already at risk of exceeding their expected end date.

The lack of any published or verified data around timely completions meant there was a limited ability to benchmark performance against national data or peer organisations, restricting leaders' capacity to

evaluate how well they were performing in a wider context.

Programme design and learner-centred planning

The most effective providers designed apprenticeship programmes around learner progression and timely achievement rather than adhering rigidly to funding durations or fixed delivery models. Flexible programme structures, effective recognition of prior learning and well-planned sequencing of assessment activity enabled learners to progress at a pace aligned to their capability and prior experience. In the strongest examples, providers also planned effectively for workforce capacity, essential skills delivery and external assessment activity, helping to minimise avoidable delays. However, in too many cases, learners who were capable of completing earlier than planned, remained on programme longer or undertook additional activity in order to avoid completion below the 80% threshold.

Providers also highlighted that fixed-duration funding models did not always align well with employer requirements or learner circumstances, particularly for learners requiring additional learning support. In sectors including health and social care, and construction, delays associated with external assessment further reduced flexibility and contributed to later completion.

Reflective questions

To continue improving timely completion rates for apprentices, providers and Medr should consider the following reflective questions:

For providers:

- How can timely completion rates be embedded more securely within self-evaluation, quality improvement planning and performance management arrangements?
- How can assessors improve the use of short-, medium- and long-term target setting to support learner progress towards key milestones and timely completion?
- How can assessors balance learner support with appropriate challenge and accountability more effectively to maintain progress towards timely completion?
- How can provision planning better take account of learners' prior experience, existing knowledge and capability when determining programme duration and assessment planning?
- How can employer engagement in the learning process improve, so that employers play a more active role in supporting learner progress and protect off-the-job learning time?
- How can planning for all aspects of apprenticeship framework delivery, including external assessments and essential skills be strengthened, to minimise avoidable delays to completion?

For Medr

- How can national approaches to measuring and reporting timely completion rates be strengthened to improve consistency, benchmarking and sector-wide accountability?
- How can funding and programme duration arrangements better support flexible, learner-centred delivery models that recognise the increasing complexity of learner support requirements?
- How can employer responsibilities within apprenticeship learning agreements be strengthened further, particularly in relation to off-the-job learning and engagement in learner reviews?
- How can Medr work with key partners to improve the consistency, efficiency and timeliness of external assessment arrangements to support learner progress and timely completion?