

# Developing future skills through Level 2 and 3 apprenticeships

## BAE SYSTEMS

**BAE Systems** is one of the UK's largest advanced engineering organisations and the largest defence manufacturer, with major operations across shipbuilding, aerospace, cyber and space.

Delivering long-term national security programmes depends on specialist technical skills that are increasingly difficult to source externally.

To secure this capability, BAE Systems has built one of the UK's most substantial apprenticeship pipelines, with a significant focus on developing Level 2 and Level 3 talent.

## How BAE Systems uses apprenticeships to build a sustainable talent pipeline

BAE Systems' apprenticeship approach is centred on developing sovereign skills - the specialist expertise required to deliver critical defence and engineering projects. As the national supply of these skills tightened, **the company has focused on growing skills capability within its own workforce, embedding Level 2 and Level 3 apprenticeships as the foundation of its early-career strategy.**

In September 2025, BAE Systems recruited nearly **1,200** apprentices, **78%** of whom were under 24. Around **two-thirds** trained at Level 2 or Level 3, contributing to specialist areas such as welding, pipefitting, mechanical and electrical fitting. These are roles essential to the business – and increasingly challenging to hire for on the open market. Over 2025 and into 2026, across the organisation, more than 5,100 apprentices were in training at any given time, with a further 1,100 being recruited for 2026 intake.



**Recognising that the talent pipeline begins long before apprentices join the organisation, the company invests heavily in pre-apprenticeship activity.** This includes STEM outreach in schools, high-quality work experience placements and careers engagement designed to help young people understand the pathways available and prepare to meet entry requirements. The company has also developed its own training academies in Lancashire, Cumbria and Glasgow as well as offering wrap-around support structures to ensure apprentices receive the technical, pastoral and professional development they need to thrive.

## The benefits: strong retention, reliable skills supply and sector-wide impact

BAE Systems sees apprenticeships as a long-term investment in business sustainability. The company's apprenticeship strategy is closely aligned to its workforce plans, helping ensure a dependable talent pipeline for roles that are otherwise difficult or impossible to fill. This reduces reliance on a tight technical labour market and improves resilience across the organisation.



The approach is delivering strong results: **more than 95% of apprentices remain with the company after completing their programme**, and many go on to build substantial careers, including in specialist and leadership roles.

**Several of the company's managing directors began as apprentices**, reinforcing the value of early-career investment.

BAE Systems' investment has positive spill-over effects on the wider sector. Through its collaboration with suppliers, development of apprenticeship standards, and targeted use of the levy, the organisation helps strengthen skills across engineering and manufacturing more broadly. For industries facing persistent shortages, this kind of leadership plays a critical role in maintaining national skills capacity.

## Overcoming challenges: widening access and supporting young people to succeed

Creating opportunities for a diverse range of young people is a core part of BAE Systems' early-career strategy. Around **30%** of apprentices come from the most deprived communities, and the company has developed strong partnerships with organisations such as The Prince's Trust and Movement to Work. Through these programmes, BAE Systems has offered more than 1,000 work experience placements, with over 350 young people progressing into apprenticeships.

Supporting apprentices to succeed is fundamental. The company uses a structured safeguarding "traffic light" system, with dedicated skills coaches and specialist pastoral teams to identify and respond to individual needs. These approaches contribute to consistently high apprenticeship achievement rates of c. 90% across recent years – significantly above sector norms.

By widening access and providing targeted support, BAE Systems has built a more diverse early-career workforce – strengthening team performance, improving retention and enriching the organisation's culture.



## BAE Systems' advice for other employers

BAE Systems encourages employers to **view apprenticeships as a strategic investment**. Their experience shows that starting at Level 2 and Level 3 offers a strong foundation for developing the specialist skills organisations need, particularly where external supply is limited.

They advise **planning early, engaging schools and communities, and providing clear entry routes so young people understand how to access opportunities**. Offering work experience and being transparent about requirements can significantly strengthen future recruitment pipelines.

***Make it an Apprenticeship***

The company is clear that apprenticeships deliver long-term value. **High retention, loyalty and a workforce trained to the organisation's standards outweigh the initial investment.**

Many of their senior leaders began their careers this way, demonstrating the progression routes apprenticeships can unlock.

Finally, BAE Systems emphasises the importance of supporting a diverse talent pipeline. Working with partners, removing barriers and providing the right support not only broadens access but enhances performance and resilience across the workforce.

## **Dr Jacqueline Hall, Head of Apprenticeships and Skills, advises:**

“Start where you are, create the opportunities you can, invest in Level 2 and Level 3 pathways, and commit to growing the skills your organisation and sector will need in the years ahead.

Apprenticeships are one of the most reliable ways to build that future.”

