

No. A pharmacy apprenticeship isn't just for a national chain with a large HR team and a levy account. Independent pharmacies and smaller groups can use apprenticeships too, although the funding route, employer contribution and course availability depend on the employer's circumstances and the rules in force when training starts.

That distinction matters because community pharmacies face a difficult staffing equation: demand for services is rising, recruiting experienced people can be hard, and a rota still needs to work while someone learns. An apprenticeship won't fix those problems overnight. But with a clear role, a capable supervisor and a realistic plan for protected learning, it can help a pharmacy develop people it may otherwise struggle to recruit.

This article focuses on England, where apprenticeship funding and Pharmacy First arrangements apply. Funding rules differ across the UK, and they can change, so treat any figures or route descriptions as a starting point—not a substitute for checking current government guidance and getting a provider's written advice.

Why the question is coming up now

Pharmacy First adds work to an already busy setting

England's Pharmacy First service launched in January 2024. It enables community pharmacies to manage specified clinical pathways, alongside services such as managing referrals and supplying some medicines under the service arrangements. For patients, that can mean convenient access to care. For the pharmacy team, it can mean more consultations, follow-up, documentation and coordination with other parts of the health system.

The effect is not identical in every pharmacy. Workload depends on local demand, staffing, opening hours, service uptake and how well the team has organised its processes. A service can bring income, but it also takes time and trained people to deliver. Adding a new service to a rota that already has gaps doesn't make those gaps disappear.

Workforce pressure is real—but be precise about the claim

It is common to hear that pharmacy workforce numbers are "falling". That phrase needs a date, a geography and a denominator. Does it refer to registered pharmacists, pharmacy technicians, all community pharmacy staff, vacancy rates, or the number of people working full-time equivalents? Those measures can move in different directions.

National workforce datasets also take time to publish and may not capture every role or employer in the same way. So rather than relying on an undated headline, owners should check the latest workforce information for their nation and compare it with their own evidence: vacancies, unfilled shifts, turnover, agency use and the number of hours spent covering essential duties. Whatever the national trend, a pharmacy that cannot fill its Saturday rota has a local workforce problem today.

Why recruitment alone often falls short

Recruitment matters, but it is a weak plan if it is the only plan. In a tight labour market, several employers may be competing for the same experienced candidates. A pharmacy might advertise, interview and still lose a promising applicant to a role with different hours, pay or location. Repeating the advert does not necessarily change the result.

Recruitment-only strategies can also leave a business exposed when a valued team member moves on. A vacancy then triggers a familiar cycle: the manager covers shifts, other staff take on extra duties, service capacity tightens, and the team has less time to support a new recruit. That pressure can make the next hire harder to settle in.

An apprenticeship gives an employer another route: recruit for potential, then build job-specific skills over time. It is not a quick substitute for an experienced dispenser or pharmacist. It is a way to develop a person for a defined role, while being honest about the time, supervision and assessment the training requires.



Apprenticeships are not just for levy-paying chains

The **apprenticeship levy** is a funding mechanism for larger employers in England. Eligible employers pay the levy into a digital account and can use that account, subject to the rules, to pay for approved apprenticeship training and assessment. Many smaller employers do not pay the levy. That does not automatically exclude them from apprenticeships.

Smaller employers may be able to access **non levy employer funding** through the government's co-investment arrangements. Under the usual model, the employer pays a share of the eligible training and assessment cost and government funds the rest. There have also been arrangements that can provide full funding for certain apprentices—for example, based on age and employer size—but eligibility conditions apply.

Funding rules, percentages, age conditions and employer obligations can change. Check the current Department for Education and apprenticeship funding guidance before agreeing a start date. Ask the training provider to confirm in writing which funding route applies to your business and apprentice, what you will pay, and what costs sit outside the funded training and assessment.

Employer situation	Possible training funding route	What to check
Large employer that pays the levy	Use eligible funds in its apprenticeship service account, subject to current rules	Account balance, approved training costs, expiry rules and any additional costs
Smaller employer that does not pay the levy	Potential co-investment, with government contributing toward eligible costs	Current employer contribution, eligibility, provider arrangements and start-date rules
Employer or apprentice meeting specific eligibility conditions	Possible full funding under applicable arrangements	Age, employer size and all other conditions in the current guidance

This is a guide to the broad routes, not a funding quote. "Training cost support" does not mean every cost of employing and training an apprentice disappears. Wages, paid working time, supervision, equipment and the impact of releasing someone for learning all need to be considered separately.

What can an apprentice contribute—and when?

An apprentice is an employee who learns while working towards an approved apprenticeship. They are not a source of cheap labour, and they should not be counted as a fully trained team member from their first shift. The employer must provide appropriate work, supervision and time for learning, while the training provider delivers or coordinates the training and assessment required by the standard.



For a pharmacy, the right apprenticeship depends on the role you need to fill and the person's thebusinessdesk.com starting point. Pharmacy support roles and technician pathways involve different responsibilities and training requirements. The apprentice's work must stay within their competence, and registered or otherwise regulated duties must follow the relevant professional and legal requirements.

In the early weeks, the apprentice may need close support with workplace routines, communication, systems and safe ways of working. Over time, they can take on more tasks as they demonstrate competence and receive the appropriate sign-off. That progression should be planned—not assumed because a busy dispensary needs another pair of hands.

How to make the staffing pipeline work in real life

"Build a pipeline" only means something if the pharmacy can explain what happens each week. Before recruiting, map the job, the learning and the supervision onto the rota.

1. **Choose a real role.** Write down the tasks the apprentice may learn, the skills the pharmacy needs and the boundaries they must observe. Don't create a vague position in the hope that the training will solve every staffing problem.
2. **Check the working pattern.** Decide when the apprentice will work, when they will study and who will supervise them. Protect learning time rather than expecting coursework to happen after a full shift.
3. **Name a workplace supervisor.** Identify a person with the capacity and capability to support the apprentice. If the named supervisor is routinely covering the counter, prescriptions and service appointments at once, the plan needs another layer of support.
4. **Agree the provider's role.** Confirm how often the provider will meet the apprentice, how progress will be recorded, how concerns will be raised and what happens if the learner falls behind.
5. **Plan safe tasks by stage.** List what the apprentice can observe, practise and perform with support as they develop. Review the list when their competence changes.

6. **Review progress regularly.** Put short check-ins on the calendar. Ask what the apprentice has learned, where they need more practice and whether the rota is giving them the right opportunities.
7. **Plan beyond the qualification.** Discuss the role you expect the apprentice to move into after training. There is no value in promising progression if the business has not considered the hours, responsibilities or support available.

This approach helps the pharmacy spot problems early: missed learning time, a supervisor without enough capacity, or a mismatch between the apprenticeship and the day-to-day job. Those issues are much easier to address in month one than after several months of frustration.

Questions to ask about non-levy funding and providers

Before committing, ask the provider for clear answers rather than relying on a general statement that funding is “available”. The TEND Training pharmacy apprenticeship training category page is one place to explore pharmacy apprenticeship options. Use any course information there as the start of a conversation, then confirm the details that apply to your vacancy and your apprentice.

- Which apprenticeship standard and job role does this course support?
- Is the programme available in our location and for our proposed start date?
- Which funding route applies to our organisation and this apprentice under current rules?
- What is the employer contribution, if any, and what is included in the quoted training cost?
- What costs are not covered, including wages, supervision and learning time?
- How will training fit around our opening hours and service commitments?
- How will the provider and employer monitor attendance, progress and workplace competence?
- What support is available if the apprentice struggles or the original supervisor leaves?

When an apprenticeship may not be the right answer

An apprenticeship is not automatically a good fit for every vacancy. If the pharmacy needs an experienced person to take responsibility immediately, an apprentice will not meet that need on day one. If no one can supervise the learner or protect time for training, wait until the business can put that support in place.

It may also be the wrong course if the proposed job does not match the apprenticeship standard, or if the employer expects the provider to manage all workplace development. Training works best when the provider and pharmacy each understand their responsibilities—and the apprentice knows what good progress looks like.

The answer: small employers can use apprenticeships, with a plan

Apprenticeships are not reserved for chains with levy money. In England, smaller employers may be able to use **non levy employer funding** and other support routes, subject to current eligibility and funding rules. The practical question is not simply, “Can we afford the course?” It is also, “Can we give this person the work, supervision and learning time to become competent?”

With Pharmacy First adding activity for many teams and recruitment remaining uncertain, developing staff can be a useful part of a wider workforce plan. It should sit alongside sensible recruitment, retention and rota planning—not replace them. Confirm the funding before enrolling, build support into the week, and treat the apprentice as a colleague in training rather than a spare pair of hands. That is how an apprenticeship can become a staffing pipeline: one role, one learner and one supported step towards competence at a time.