

PAL Festive Newsletter - December 2025



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Welcome to PAL's Festive Newsletter

Firstly, PAL would like to wish all our clients and stakeholders a happy and safe Christmas. We want to thank you for working with us this year, a year we can all agree on that has been notable for the number of significant changes to vocational and apprenticeship delivery.

2026 will start to see the implementation of the proposed changes for all of us, and partnership working will be vital to ensure the experience of all learners and employers remains positive and adds value to individuals and business goals.

This newsletter looks to summarise the latest information from Skills England, Ofqual and the Department for Education (DfE). We know there are still missing bits of the jigsaw and varying perspectives and interpretations on what reliable and valid assessment looks like. PAL's aim is that our role as an Assessment Organisation is to design and develop robust assessments, provide our Centres with good support and guidance, and ensure assessment delivery - regardless of who is doing the assessing - is fit for purpose.

Achieving credible and pragmatic assessments, requires input from ITPs, colleges, employers and apprentices, and in 2026 our PAL accounts and development teams will be actively seeking your insights and ideas, which we will look to incorporate into our assessment specifications. It is the season for consultations the Ofqual regulatory Framework proposal consultation is complete, and the outcomes can be found [here](#). Further guidance from Ofqual regarding the framework can be found [here](#), this is not the final framework document but provides an indication regarding the direction of travel. Particularly relevant for Centres is the guidance regarding synoptic assessment, marking and conflict of interest.

PAL will be providing guidance regarding the content early in the New Year.

Ofqual has launched a [10-week consultation](#) on the draft regulatory framework for apprenticeship assessment. The consultation, which closes on 11 February 2026, covers the [proposed conditions, requirements](#) and [statutory guidance](#) that will underpin how apprenticeship assessments are regulated in the future.

Here is looking forward to 2026 - it is going to be a busy one.

If you have any questions about any aspect of apprenticeship delivery or what the changes in the post-16 skills and education paper mean and why they matter, please feel free to contact us:

Rupert Crossland, our Director of Audit and Compliance and regular speaker at Training Provider networking meetings, and his team can be contacted for any questions you have regarding funding. You can contact Rupert directly via his email: rupert.crossland@professionalassessment.co.uk

Paul Kelly, our Qualifications Director, and his team are available if you want to know more about PAL's approach to qualification and apprenticeship design and development and the proposed changes to vocational qualifications you can contact Paul at paul.kelly@professionalassessment.co.uk

Ioana Dincu, our Business Operations Director, and her team are available for any questions you have regarding delivery of apprenticeships either on the current plans or the new plans as they are launched. You can contact Ioana directly at ioana.dincu@professionalassessment.co.uk

PAL Updates

Staff Update – Exciting News!

Candice Craven, our Support Services Lead, whom many of you have worked with over the years, is stepping into a new role as **Assessment/Account Manager**. Starting in the new year, Candice will be reaching out to her account contacts and looks forward to continuing the strong relationships she has built with you.

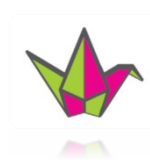


You can reach Candice anytime at candice.craven@professionalassessment.co.uk

We are also delighted to welcome **Sara Mahoney** to the PAL team! Sara joins us as our new **Support Services Lead**. She brings a wealth of experience in the sector and is a fantastic addition to the PAL management team. Her expertise and fresh perspective will help us continue to deliver exceptional service to our clients.

You can reach Sara at epasupportservices@professionalassessment.co.uk

Padlets - PAL's Library of Resources



A quick reminder about our Padlets. They are the online library of resources tailored for providers, employers, and apprentices. They are hosted on your epaPRO account for easy access. Each Padlet contains essential documentation, guidance, and helpful materials to prepare the apprentices for assessment.

They are simple to use - no login required. Just bookmark the link to stay up to date as new posts are regularly added. Padlets are discussed and shared with apprentices during the planning meeting with their PAL assessor.

Please share these Padlets with apprentices and trainers at the very start of the apprenticeship to ensure they have everything they need from day one.

Have Your Say in Assessment Design

Developing assessment instruments for the reformed apprenticeship standards and designing qualifications should not happen in isolation. We want our assessment and qualification services to be relevant, fit for purpose, and valid, and to meet this aim we need your views and ideas on what you believe is needed in terms of content and works in terms of delivery.

We appreciate we are all asked to give feedback and consult on a range of issues, so we will look to collect and curate your feedback through discussions and account management activities. The proposed changes across vocational learning are challenging, so it is vital that changes to delivery practices work for you, your employers and your learners.



PAL and ReadSpeaker Partnership

As our customers will be aware, PAL uses ReadSpeaker to deliver consistent, accessible testing experiences for your learners. ReadSpeaker is an industry-leading **text-to-speech** software tool, designed to ensure learners with approved reasonable adjustments are not disadvantaged, for example, to ensure fairness for learners with dyslexia. ReadSpeaker has produced a case study on our use of their software tool which can be found [here](#).

Event Co-ordinator ST0168

On the 10th of November 2025, Skills England published a revised version of the Event Assistant Apprenticeship standard. Renamed as Event Co-ordinator, the new version will be available for new starts from the 10th of February 2026. The funding band remains the same at £9000.

Here is a comparison table of the main changes between the two assessment plan versions.

Aspect	Version 1.0	Version 1.1 - from 10/02/2026
Title	Event Assistant	Event Co-ordinator
EPA Window	3 months	3 months
Funding	£9000	£9000
Assessment Methods	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Portfolio of evidence 2. Project 3. Professional discussion 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Project 2. Professional discussion underpinned by a portfolio
Gateway Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ English and maths qualifications in line with the apprenticeship funding rules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ English and maths qualifications in line with the apprenticeship funding rules ➤ Portfolio of evidence
Portfolio of Evidence	<p>Must include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Performance review information (minimum of 6 and a maximum of 12 pieces) ➤ Feedback from leaders/peers (minimum of 6 and a maximum of 12 pieces of each) ➤ At least one documented project, or some smaller projects, that demonstrate competence ➤ A learning journal/diary, which includes at minimum monthly updates 	<p>A minimum of 6 and a maximum of 12 pieces of evidence which must include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Performance review information ➤ Feedback from leaders/peers ➤ A learning journal which must include monthly updates on the apprentice's progress
Overall Grade	Fail, Pass, Merit, Distinction using the exceptional performance indicators	Fail, Pass, Merit, Distinction
Resits and Retakes	<p>Resit typically taken within 3 months of the EPA outcome notification</p> <p>Retake typically taken within 3 months of the EPA outcome notification</p>	<p>Resit typically taken within 2 months of the EPA outcome notification</p> <p>Retake typically taken within 3 months of the EPA outcome notification</p>



In the new year, PAL will be in contact with all our clients who deliver the standard to support transition and share the library of resources available.

Level 5 Coaching for Professionals Higher Technical Qualification

PAL is now ready to **offer** a Level 5 Diploma in Coaching for Professionals (Higher Technical Qualification). The qualification **aligns** with employer-led occupational standards (the KSBs used in the current apprenticeship standard), offering learners a wider range of ways to learn and train in the required knowledge, skills, and behaviours.

PAL has been approved by Ofqual and Skills England to deliver this Level 5 Coaching for Professionals vocational related qualification, and this is eligible for public funding. We are planning a **Spring 2026** launch date. Please contact PAL for further details, and if you would like a copy of the factsheet and specification.

This qualification is designed to support individuals in the development of professional coaching skills and applying these core skills for successful coaching practice. The content of the qualification has been developed so that it represents **best practice**, and up to date knowledge and skills required for learners to succeed in their roles.

The units in this qualification are assessed through a diverse range of assessments, including knowledge-based written reports, scenario-based written reports, contextualised assignments, and a portfolio of evidence which includes observation. The assessments are externally set and externally quality assured by PAL and marked and internally assured by the Centre. This qualification is suitable to be delivered in either a classroom or workplace setting.

Level 2 Health and Social Care Foundation Apprenticeship

As mentioned in one of PAL's previous newsletter, we have expanded our portfolio to include **Foundation Apprenticeships**, starting with the Level 2 Health and Social Care Foundation Apprenticeship FA0007. This entry-level programme combines paid work with structured training, supporting young people (16–21) as they transition into the workforce.

The Health and Social Care Foundation Apprenticeship covers adult care and healthcare support roles, with progression routes into employment or further apprenticeships such as Level 2 Adult Care Worker ST0005 Apprenticeship. It includes two assessment methods: a Knowledge Test and a Practical Portfolio, which can be assessed by Centres or by PAL directly. Centres wishing to deliver assessments can apply for **PAL Centre approval** - current clients benefit from a waived approval fee.

If you are interested in offering this apprenticeship or shaping future standards, please reach out to Ioana Dincu.

Hospitality Standards - Review of the Current Assessment Plans

In November, Skills England have announced that they have paused the revision work for the standards listed below and have updated the Revisions and Adjustment Status report.



- Hospitality Supervisor ST0230
- Hospitality Manager ST0229
- Senior Production Chef ST0232
- Chef de Partie ST0227

PAL will update our clients when these apprenticeship standards are returned to a revision phase by Skills England.

Government Reforms Update: Post-16 Education and Skills

The Department for Education (DfE), supported by Skills England, has announced major reforms through the [Post-16 education and skills white paper - GOV.UK](#) published in October. These changes aim to simplify the qualification landscape, align education with employer needs, and create clear, high-quality routes for learners.

What's Changing?

There will be three main Level 3 routes from 2027:

- **A Levels** – well-known academic route.
- **T Levels** – technical qualifications with industry placements.
- **V Levels** – new vocational qualifications designed for students who want broad, sector-based learning without specialising too early. V Levels will provide flexible combinations with A Levels or other V Levels, offer broad vocational content aligned to occupational standards and replace many existing vocational qualifications (such as BTECs).

There will be two new Level 2 pathways:

- **Further Study Pathway (Foundation Certificates)** - one year duration, strong focus on English and maths alongside vocational content.
- **Occupational Pathway** - for students aiming to enter a specific Level 2 occupation and develop technical knowledge and skills with classroom-based learning combined with practical skills development.

The rollout begins in September 2027, with full implementation by 2030/31 academic year.

PAL has responded to Ofqual's expression of interest for engagement opportunities on V Levels, Foundation Certificates, and Occupational Certificates for the following Sector Subject Areas: Business, Administration and Management, Education and Early Years, Health and Care Services and Hospitality and Catering.



As we navigate the sector changes together and develop our own organisational strategies to support our stakeholders, PAL is here to connect with you and discuss any questions you may have.

Apprenticeship Standards and Plans

As you are probably aware, Skills England have approved the three standards below as an illustrative example of a revised assessment plan under the 2025/2026 apprenticeship assessment reforms:

- Assistant accountant ST0002
- Data technician ST0795
- Early years educator ST0135

Early Years Educator will consist of 2 assessment methods. An Observation assessment is prescribed in the assessment, and the second method is to be determined by PAL. Please watch out for a **consultation** process starting soon; we will be collecting feedback from our stakeholders on their experiences with Professional Discussion and Case Study assessment methods to gauge your opinions on the validity of both methods.

In these reformed apprenticeships, several of the Knowledge and Skills statements have been identified in the assessment plan by Skills England as “mandatory” and these must be included in every series of assessments for an apprentice. The **remaining** majority of Knowledge and Skills are to be “sampled”, which means they will appear across all PAL assessments provided to Centres/customers and will vary by apprentice. However, PAL must ensure that the designated “Assessments Outcomes” are achieved in full, and therefore it is necessary to include more than just the mandatory Knowledge and Skills in every assessment to achieve that goal.

This revised approach is, of course, a shift away from the current model in which all KSBs must be met by an apprentice in order to achieve a Pass grade. Furthermore, in the new and revised model, Behaviours are no longer assessed and are to be “confirmed” by the employer.

PAL can assure you that we will provide customers with all of the details needed to ensure the successful adoption of this revised apprenticeship approach before they are launched.

Please note that Skills England have announced that the revised Early Years Educator apprenticeship remains to be at this stage “an illustrative example of a revised assessment plan under the 2025/2026 apprenticeship assessment reforms”. The revised [apprenticeship](#) is available here.

The current end-point assessment plans remain in place until Skills England’s General Requirements and Ofqual’s revised regulatory framework are published. This is currently expected to be Spring 2026.

Adult Care Worker ST0005 and Carpentry and Joinery ST0264, the other two standards due to have been published in the first batch, have been postponed for publication and are currently still in development and refinement with Skills England.

Through recent webinars and participation at sector conferences, Skills England have confirmed that the apprenticeship standards in scope for the revisions under the reforms published this February are grouped into three batches. The first one, which will compile of approximately 100 standards, is



expected to be published by the end of this calendar year, the second one in early spring, and the last one late spring next year. It is important to mention that the list will consist of the standards that Skills England are working on, following the three stages of development (drafting, expert review and approval), rather than “live” reformed assessment plans. Skills England’s intention is to have all apprenticeship standards in scope for revision by August 2026.

Skills England recognises the crucial part that involving all relevant stakeholders has via the expert pools and they will invite employers, providers and awarding organisation to feed into the reformed assessment plans – most input will mostly be via consultations, surveys and targeted groups.

For now, however, we continue to be in full EPA mode, and we expect to do so for the majority of 2026.

For an overview of the changes and roles and responsibilities, please refer to [Skills England’s update](#) - Annex A includes roles and responsibilities, Annex B includes the general structure of the new assessment plans and Annex C includes the three broad types of plans.

Centre Approval

Please contact us if you would like a copy of our straightforward Centre Requirements Guide or a no obligation chat about Centre approvals or the changes to the apprenticeship assessment plans and what that means for future delivery.

Centre assessment only applies to the new look apprenticeship plans, so there is no requirement for Centre approval for any current registered apprentices.

Ioana and her team will provide regular updates regarding assessment plan changes, new issues and releases.

Qualification Achievement Rates (QAR)

The DfE has now made 2024/25 R14 QAR data available on the View Your Education data portal.

This is effectively provisional data. Providers have until 5pm on Friday 30 January 2026 to inform DfE of any issues in the QAR data, if it appears inconsistent with expectations of results and how the rules have been applied.

If though the issues relate to 2023 to 2024 ILR data, it is no longer possible to request adjustments to data from that year.

DfE state that has not been possible to migrate the Campus identifier field into the new QAR VYED reports for this release, but this will be available in R14 final reports.

Any queries regarding QAR should be put to the DfE’s customer help portal at: [Home - Customer Help Portal](#)





Budget 2025

The Budget brought some important changes for FE:

Full Funding for Apprentices under 25 in SMEs:

Training for apprentices under the age of 25 employed by non-levy paying employers will now be fully funded, eliminating the co-investment requirement. This builds upon the 2024 policy change, which removed the co-investment obligation for SME-employed apprentices aged under 22. This will be implemented from the new funding year in August 2026.

Changes for Levy Payers:

The 10% top-up for levy payers will be discontinued. Levy paying employers will, in future, only receive the same amount that they pay in. Employers will have reduced spending power and consequently will become more selective in the apprenticeships they purchase.

Levy funds will now expire after 12 months. Employers therefore must make decisions about using their levy more quickly, not being able to defer it for suitable candidates more than a year away from planning to start. Providers should expect a faster engagement in employers seeking to use levy and be ready to accommodate this.

Once a levy payer has utilised their levy account, any further apprenticeships they wish to purchase will require a 25% contribution from the employer, with DfE funding 75%. This higher contribution could lead employers to consider the timing of apprenticeships for their employees as their levy funds become fully committed and then defer new starts until their levy account has more funds available.

Providers may wish to target these points when engaging with levy paying employers to ensure they enable employers to get the maximum return on investment from their levy, and in so doing maintain satisfaction with their provider.

Streamlining of Apprenticeship Standards:

A "streamlining" process will be implemented across apprenticeship standards to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. This likely means those standards with negligible numbers on programme being rationalised. Something for providers and employers to consider if such niche standards are their business.

Increase in Apprentice Minimum Wage:

The minimum wage for apprentices aged under 19, and 19 and over in their first year, will rise to £8.00 per hour. The minimum wage for 18–20-year-olds will rise to £10.85 per hour. The national living wage for workers aged 21 and over rises to £12.71 per hour.

Youth Guarantee:

The budget allocated £820 million over the next three years for the Youth Guarantee initiative. This is intended to ensure that every 18 to 21-year-old has access to a place at college, and apprenticeship or personalised job support. After 18 months of unemployment, 18–21-year-olds will be offered paid work, not benefits.

PDSATs and FRM reports

DfE provider data self-assessment toolkit, commonly known as PDSAT, software to run 2025/2026 data files is now available. As with every year, at this stage we have only the PDSAT data reports side of the software. The audit sampling software becomes available typically around February or March.

How do you act on a learner reported in the PDSATs? In some cases, you will amend the data to clear the issue. In other circumstances, your data will be accurate, but you will need to ensure the learner file demonstrates compliance. If you can't locate supporting evidence, you will need to update the data.

There are no new PDSAT reports this year, and the only reports removed from last year's offering are 201 and 203 that related to apprenticeship frameworks, and 301 and 302 relating to traineeships.

The Funding Rules Monitoring (FRM) reports are also now available on the DfE dashboard, with the latest reports being based on R03 data.

The FRM reports have had no significant changes since last year, except FRM37 will not pick up apprenticeship starts since 1 August 2025 due to the changes in off-the-job training rules for starts since then.

For both PDSATs and FRMs, as the first reports since the start of this funding year, there will be an accumulation of potential issues over those months, so allow more time to examine the entries. And if you are approached by data colleagues seeking to resolve entries in the report, please give them all the assistance they need.

Not only is it important to use PDSAT and FRM for your own assurance over the robustness of your data, and therefore your funding. DfE can run the reports at any time to seek assurance on the validity of your data and funding.

Our audit and compliance department at PAL is well versed in reviewing PDSAT and FRM reports for its clients. If you require assistance in reviewing your PDSAT or FRM reports, please Rupert directly via his email:

rupert.crossland@professionalassessment.co.uk

