Planning and preparing

This section outlines St Monica Trust's journey to recruit young people, detailing the need for change, strategic objectives, risk management, infrastructure upgrades and key individuals involved.

St Monica Trust launched its apprenticeship programme to tackle high agency costs, an ageing workforce and recruitment challenges. Leadership aimed to invest in younger talent, including those from communities facing barriers to employment, and create meaningful care career pathways.

Strategic steps included trustee buy-in, a dedicated project team and personalised support. Risks – such as generational gaps, safeguarding and emotional needs – were mitigated through manager training, support and risk assessments. Infrastructure was adapted for learning time and recruitment logistics.

This section is split into the following topics:

- identifying the case for change
- setting objectives and benefits
- identifying and managing risks
- assessing infrastructure needs
- developing a realistic timeframe
- engaging the right people
- key decisions and key learning.

Identifying the case for change

> "We had an issue that was costing us money, draining energy and time out of the organisation, and impacting services to residents. Something had to break that cycle."
>
> **Anne Duff,** Trustee, St Monica Trust

- **Persistent recruitment challenges** – Like many adult social care providers, the Trust struggled to recruit and retain staff – especially younger workers – due to societal perceptions of care work as low-skilled and low-paid. Leadership aimed to reframe this narrative to highlight the complexity and value of care roles.
- **Unsustainable agency costs** – Agency staffing costs peaked at around £400,000 per month, creating significant financial strain. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened this issue, driving staff departures and increasing reliance on agency workers, which impacted continuity and care quality.
- **Visa regulation changes** – In 2025, tighter international visa rules severely restricted overseas recruitment, removing a key source of workforce supply and intensifying staffing pressures.
- **Demographic imbalance** – Workforce age distribution was heavily skewed toward older employees, creating a 'ticking time bomb' for future sustainability. This prompted a proactive approach to succession planning and building a pipeline of younger talent.
- **Community impact and long-term vision** – Beyond operational needs, the Trust wanted to make a positive social impact by offering career pathways for individuals facing employment barriers, aligning with its values and long-term strategic goals.
- **Charitable mission and community engagement** – The Trust's mission emphasised building inclusive communities. The leadership team recognised that a thriving society must create opportunities for younger people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Supporting vulnerable groups** – Target groups included individuals with poor educational experiences, limited qualifications, neurodiversity and care leavers. The aim was to offer not just jobs, but meaningful career pathways in social care.
- **Bridging education-to-employment gaps** – Many young people studying health and social care struggled to transition into work, often stuck retaking maths and English exams. The Trust found practical alternatives that valued strengths over rigid academic models.
- **Aligning ethics with practical needs** – This initiative addressed staff shortages while maintaining care standards. By supporting apprenticeships and providing tailored help, the Trust aimed to build loyalty, reduce turnover and improve service quality.
- **Inclusive, non-stigmatising approach** – The programme avoided segregation by personalising support for all apprentices. This fostered inclusive environments, mutual learning and relationship-building among participants.

The Trust's leadership, including CEO and Director of Care, demonstrated unwavering commitment to this vision. Their strategic foresight and willingness to challenge conventional approaches laid the foundation for a transformative workforce development programme.

> **"There aren't enough people in the workforce for the vacancies we have, so we needed to look at those in the population who are currently unemployed. We were seeing lots of evidence of younger people going into further education colleges... but these were not translating into health and social care."**
>
> **David Williams,** Chief Executive Officer, St Monica Trust

Setting objectives and benefits

- **Recruitment goals extended beyond filling vacancies** – The organisation aimed to address operational needs, uphold community values, and invest in long-term workforce development, rather than simply hiring staff.
- **Investing in apprenticeships and talent pipeline** – By creating structured entry routes, the organisation looked to reduce recruitment costs and improve care continuity through a stable, committed workforce.
- **Creating career pathways for disadvantaged young people** – The programme targeted individuals who faced barriers such as poor educational outcomes, lack of qualifications, limited family support, or neurodiversity needs, offering them a chance to build a career in social care.
- **Strengthening community connections** – As a charity serving all ages, the organisation viewed youth employment as a way to inject energy into care settings and tackle local social inequalities.
- **Improving staff morale during high vacancy periods** – Demonstrating commitment to new talent and structured support was intended to boost confidence and pride among existing staff who were under pressure.
- **Enhancing retention through early-stage support** – Recognising that younger staff often left within six months, the programme included pastoral care, coaching, and personalised learning to improve retention.
- **Developing leadership and mentoring opportunities for current staff** – Managers received training on how young people learn and work, enabling them to support apprentices effectively and grow as leaders.
- **Bringing energy and intergenerational relationships to care homes** – Younger staff were expected to create vibrant environments and foster meaningful connections between generations.
- **Improving continuity of care for residents** – Reducing reliance on agency staff and increasing permanent hires aimed to strengthen relationships between carers and residents.

> "When you have agency staff usage running at the rate it was, it is more difficult to maintain the continuity of care. Most of our residents form very good relationships with their carers, and the more you can keep that kind of family united though regular carers, the better for quality and consistency of care."
>
> **Anne Duff,** Trustee, St Monica Trust

Identifying and managing risks

- **Risk of mismatch between organisational expectations and apprentice readiness**
Many young recruits had faced educational challenges or complex personal circumstances, creating a risk of disengagement.
Mitigation: A flexible onboarding process focused on practical, hands-on learning and personalised support, avoiding traditional educational models.

- **Risk of generational tensions among staff**
Introducing younger workers with different communication styles and expectations – such as valuing wellbeing and career flexibility – could create cultural friction.
Mitigation: Training for managers on youth development, learning styles and empathy to foster inclusive team cultures and improve retention.

- **Safeguarding risks for vulnerable apprentices**
Some apprentices were under 18 or had additional vulnerabilities, requiring robust safeguarding measures.
Mitigation: Safeguarding training for senior staff involved in recruitment and supervision, plus a personalised risk assessment for each apprentice.

- **Financial risk and cost concerns**
Trustees were cautious about the costs of staff time, equipment and support structures.
Mitigation: Confidence grew as agency costs fell and retention improved; financial oversight continued throughout the programme.

- **Reputational risk linked to external partnerships**
Poor outcomes from education providers could damage the Trust's reputation.
Mitigation: Maintaining strong relationships with providers and switching partners when standards were not met.

- **Supporting apprentices with complex personal lives**
Challenges such as mental health issues, unstable housing or family difficulties added emotional pressure and required a coordinated response.
Mitigation: The Trust developed integrated systems combining pastoral care with operational support. Apprentices were given access to peer networks, emotional guidance and practical assistance to help them stay engaged and resilient.

By embedding empathy, flexibility and proactive planning into its risk management strategy, St Monica Trust created a foundation where apprentices could thrive – and where staff felt equipped to support them. This approach ensured the programme was not only operationally viable, but also socially impactful.

Assessing infrastructure needs

- **Physical and digital environment** – Apprentices needed immediate access to IT equipment and training to use learning platforms confidently. Learning spaces were redesigned to feel welcoming and practical, avoiding institutional settings that could trigger negative school associations.
- **Managing off-the-job training** – Meeting the 10% off-the-job training requirement posed operational challenges. The Trust treated this time as a strategic investment, arranging additional staffing so managers weren't burdened and service delivery remained unaffected.
- **Staff training and support** – Managers and team leads received safeguarding training and attended a two-day course on how young people learn and work. This built empathy, mentoring skills and improved team cohesion – key factors for retention.

Developing a realistic timeframe

- **Recognising the need for change** – The process spanned 12-18 months, shaped by urgency, strategic reflection and iterative learning.
- **Early planning and pilot phase** – Initial steps included securing trustee and HR buy-in and forming a project group. When the first cohort was recruited, the Trust had high ambition but limited practical insight into supporting young people in care roles.
- **Refining the approach** – After the pilot, contracts were formalised for realistic durations (12-24 months plus a three-month buffer, allowing more time if apprentices needed it). Managers received targeted training, and pastoral care structures were co-designed to meet apprentices' needs.

This reflective and adaptive process ensured that by the time the first apprentices were fully embedded, the organisation had developed a more robust, personalised and sustainable model – one that continues to evolve with each intake.
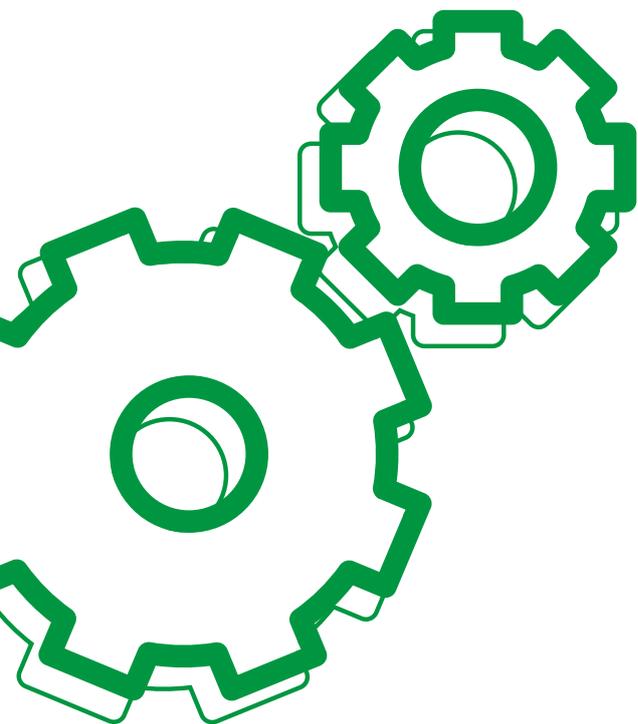
Engaging the right people

One of the most important parts of the apprenticeship programme's success was making sure the right people were involved at every stage – from planning and recruitment to delivery and support.

Key roles and what they did:

- **Chief Executive Officer (CEO)** – Initiated the strategic direction for the programme, instructing the HR team to develop a new approach to recruitment focused on younger individuals.
- **Director of Care** – Led operational implementation, shaped the apprenticeship model, and ensured the programme was integrated with care delivery. Oversaw adjustments based on learning from early cohorts and championed personalisation and pastoral support.
- **Trustees** – Provided governance oversight. While positive about the concept, they were initially cautious about costs. They became strong advocates once the value and impact were demonstrated, particularly through reduced agency spend and improved retention.
- **HR team** – Developed the recruitment framework, coordinated safeguarding training and supported the onboarding process. Played a central role in shaping contracts and timelines for apprenticeships.
- **Apprentice and Work Placement Lead** – A dedicated role created to lead outreach to schools and colleges, manage recruitment logistics and provide support continuity throughout the apprenticeship journey. This role also provided a wealth of apprenticeship knowledge to support the programme's refinement.
- **House leads (care home floor managers)** – Received training on how young people learn and work, enabling them to better support apprentices and foster inclusive environments. The project team looked to engage with them from the outset, listened to their feedback and involved them in recruitment panels to ensure they felt ownership of the process.
- **Pastoral care and chaplaincy teams** – Co-designed support structures to address the personal and emotional needs of apprentices, helping them navigate challenges beyond the workplace.
- **Learning and development team** – Delivered tailored induction and training, adapted classroom settings to suit diverse learning needs and supported progression through the apprenticeship pathway.

Strategic infrastructure and planning:

- **Project team** – Formed to deliver the CEO's vision, this cross-functional group managed planning, execution and iterative improvement of the programme.
- **Operational review cycle** – After each intake, the project team, HR team and learning leads conducted reviews to refine the approach, ensuring continuous improvement.
- **Financial strategy** – Reallocated funds from agency staffing to support apprenticeships, demonstrating that investment in people could be cost-neutral or even cost-saving.
- **Governance support** – Trustees were kept informed through data on recruitment, retention and agency spend, and were engaged through direct presentations from apprentices.

By engaging people across all levels – leadership, managers, support teams, trustees, education partners and apprentices – the organisation planned a programme that would be well-rounded and responsive. Everyone had a role to play, and their involvement helped ensure the programme could grow and improve over time.

Key decisions

Here is a summary of the key decisions that made a difference during the planning stage:

- Leadership recognised unsustainable agency costs, an ageing workforce and limited youth engagement in care roles. This prompted a strategic shift toward recruiting younger people through apprenticeships.
- The programme was designed not just to fill vacancies, but to create inclusive career pathways, improve retention, reduce costs and strengthen community engagement. Objectives were shaped by both operational needs and social impact.
- Risks such as generational gaps, safeguarding and emotional complexity were proactively addressed through staff training, flexible onboarding and integrated support.
- Physical, digital and emotional infrastructure was adapted to support apprentices. This included redesigned learning spaces and co-designed support systems involving frontline staff and managers. Off-the-job training requirements were built into staffing plans to avoid service disruption.
- A cross-functional project team was formed, including leadership, HR, care managers, and chaplaincy and learning teams. A dedicated Apprentice and Work Placement Lead ensured continuity and accountability throughout the journey.

Key learning

Effective planning was fundamental to the programme's success, combining strategic clarity with empathy and adaptability.

- **Start with a strong case for change** – Link workforce challenges to strategic, financial and social imperatives to secure organisational buy-in.
- **Engage leadership early** – Trustee involvement and senior commitment ensured alignment across governance and operations.
- **Build a cross-functional team** – Roles evolved as the programme matured, enabling flexibility and shared ownership.
- **Anticipate risks** – Address challenges through staggered onboarding, safeguarding protocols and manager training tailored to youth development.
- **Plan beyond logistics** – Include emotional support systems and inclusive learning environments to meet diverse needs.
- **Embed reflection and programme adaptation** – Iterative review cycles allowed the programme to evolve and remain responsive.
- **Ground planning in values** – Empathy, realism and collaboration created a foundation for sustainable workforce transformation.

Recommendations

Access a checklist of practical recommendations inspired by St Monica Trust's approach via Skills for Care's website.