



Expert Opinion - Edition 7

Learning the lessons from “Kickstart”

In our Manifesto for Skills across a lifetime of "Earning & Learning" we outlined a range of areas which we felt were important to deliver the right conditions for skills growth. This growth is fundamental to addressing the inequality in our society and critical to “levelling-up” in terms of shared prosperity and addressing our national critical skills shortfalls. We applauded the creation of the Kickstart Scheme as an area of positive government action that could help in creating equality of workplace access, and support our desired goal of genuinely inclusive skills growth.

The Kickstart Scheme was launched in 2020 and promised to invest £2 Billion to help employers create hundreds of thousands of high quality 6-month work placements for young people aged 16-24. The scheme started in September 2020, and ran for just over year, closing to new applications on 17 December 2021, with the last work placement starts running until the end of March 2022. In an answer to parliamentary questions in September 2021, it was clear that 200,000 roles had been created with a total of 300,000 roles approved for funding; but take-up was just over 25% at just over 75,000 starts.

The 5% Club Silver Member Thames Water has been an enthusiastic supporter of the Kickstart Scheme. Karima Khandker, Head of Resourcing, Skills and Emerging Talent at Thames Water shares her perspectives on this scheme and what could come next.

Q. Why are skills and talent so important to Thames Water?

We want to be a force for good and believe we can do this several ways, including through our skills strategy.

Ensuring we are building a talent pipeline from our local communities, focusing on driving social mobility, so everyone, regardless of their background has equal opportunity to access quality employment.

This is one of several principles within our new skills strategy, it is vital that business plays a leading role in engaging with our local communities, education sector, providers, and supply chains to look at how we work in a collaborative way when it comes to skills and create an even, level playing field.

The reality is, businesses and industry face several skills challenges, when you overlay the pandemic, Brexit, and the education system this is only going to worsen over the coming years. We have an opportunity and responsibility to take a proactive leadership role on the skills we require now and, in the future, including understanding future trends and impact, such as digital and changing nature of the environment around us.



We at Thames Water have taken a proactive approach, setting out a 10–15-year skills strategy that gives us clear direction and framework to work from. Establishing alongside this a dedicated team to embed this into a sustainable skills approach within our business.

Q. How did Kickstart contribute to your Skills Strategy?

Amongst several initiatives, we have been rolling out and embedding over the last year we have taken an active role in engaging with the government's Kickstart Scheme. We saw this as a great initiative to bring young talent into our multi-generational workforce especially where we have a lower percentage of young people. Early in 2021 we became a member of The 5% Club and signed up to the Care Leavers Covenant, as well as making commitments to support socio economic diversity, we believe the Kickstart Scheme helps us deliver some of our wider aspirations on this agenda too.

We took an approach to Kickstart that would not only build a young, diverse talent pipeline into business but also create opportunities for existing colleagues in the business to build their leadership skills, mentor our future workforce and give something back.

With this approach in mind, we started with a small commitment of fifty which we doubled to one hundred. Our approach was gaining momentum. Each vacancy had its own hiring mentor and was a unique role that had a number of interventions to support the Kickstarter and deliver success. We also built a robust infrastructure around the programme that includes career conversations to lead to follow-on apprenticeship or employment opportunities. We used the *Skills Builder Framework* throughout, from our vacancy creation, interview, offer and placement conversation as a measurement of skills learnt and development over time.

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In sum, we had built Kickstart into our strategy and it was becoming a key element in our overall skills ecosystem.

Q. What were the benefits of your Kickstart Schemes for Young People and your existing employees?

Our bespoke approach has allowed each Kickstarter to gain a personalised experience to the world of work

and allowed them to demonstrate the value they add. It supports our own colleagues to develop their leadership skills and was filling many of our apprenticeship and employment opportunities. From our first cohort

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that started earlier last year, 76 % have secured employment with us already.

Q. Were there any downsides and lessons to be learned?

While the external employment landscape begins to change, we predict some Kickstarters may leave their placement early due to securing employment offers externally, we are still committed to ensuring all our Kickstart colleagues gain skills and experience that enables them to be successful in the workplace.

We continue to have career conversations and look to transition not off board into our business, so they become part of our workforce.

Q. What are your broader perspectives and thinking on action for increased, accessible and inclusive skills development?

Being a responsible employer and demonstrating 'good work' is important to us, from a skills lens we have introduced a number of initiatives that will impact on wider economic and societal changes, including committing to the apprentices' wage pledge and living wage, as part of this, all our Kickstart colleagues are paid the real living wage.

We have demonstrated our commitment in bridging the skills gap, Kickstart is one notable example of how we are doing this. It ensures we create a diverse workforce reflective of the communities we serve by building a pipeline of skills into our business. We do not underestimate the commitment, leadership, culture shift and resources required to make this, and other initiatives to be successful. If done and invested in correctly, with full leadership support and colleagues actively being involved in the development, we know we will see benefits such as creating an engaged, diverse, and inclusive workforce, positive impact on social mobility, successfully bridge our skills gap and create a pipeline of skills into our workforce to fill vacancies now and in the future.

This is just the beginning of our journey. We will contin-



ue, to promote excellence in work, remove in workplace poverty and underemployment to ensure our existing and new colleagues are able to have a career not just a job.

Q. What aspects of the Kickstart Scheme should be used for future work policies and what can they learn from the Kickstart Scheme?

The Kickstart Scheme was an important measure to stimulate and create opportunity during the worst of the pandemic when prospects for employment and work experience were significantly suppressed – especially for young people. As the economy has opened, there has been a huge upturn in that opportunity with over 1.2 million vacancies being reported on regular basis, so I understand fully why the approach should be changed. As we shift the focus, though, I do hope we can sustain an emphasis for those young people who still struggle with the transition-to-work, and who were clearly the focus for the Kickstart Scheme.

The shift from Kickstart (young people) to *Way to Work* (all on Universal Credit, and not age-defined) changes the entry level and it is essential that the momentum being gained through kickstart continues as changes are made. *Way to Work* is another ambitious initiative with a target to get 500,000 jobseekers into work by the end of June this year.

The crucial trick for any programme is to ensure a match with the potential worker to actual opportunities/roles that ensure a sustainable placement resulting in a career not just a job. Employers play a critical role in any programmes success to remove barriers and create an inclusive culture. This approach, coupled with interventions to upskill and train people will ensure the best possible outcome and positive impact.

Comment from The 5% Club

As with all initiatives, Business will take time to respond. Organisations need to understand policy direction and implementation guidance, develop action plans, and then launch own their response and activities.

The example of Thames Water - brought to life through discussion with Karima - demonstrates just what needs to happen in a business to successfully implement such schemes. It should also be recognised that the Kickstart Scheme started at a time when organisations were busy responding to the pandemic and working hard to sustain Early Career Schemes, against a backdrop of workplace challenge and constraint. This inevitably delayed and even muted the response. As with Thames Water, many were not ready to deliver Kickstart until early 2021, with positive momentum being gained and increasing right up until the scheme started to close at the end of last year.

Considering this, The 5% Club continues to recommend that:

As we move to the new “way to work” partnership, the potential gains made through the Kickstart Scheme should be protected.

Effective “transition-to-work” is a critical part of the overall skills ecosystem, especially given its importance in transitioning young people into meaningful work. We should not be seduced by a high rate of job vacancies and a belief that the challenge has gone away. Kickstart was an important skills “supply-side” initiative that was just starting to work, and the momentum gained should be protected in the shift to the *Way to Work* partnership.

“False starts” in the skills ecosystem must be avoided,

as this risks wasting resources in scheme start-ups and can drive employer scepticism and reduce participation. As with Thames Water, starting and driving momentum in a scheme takes time and resource, and these schemes permeate all aspects early career business. Stopping programmes just as they start to gain momentum, is worse than not starting in the first place.

The schemes to improve the Skill Ecosystem must be coherent, and we re-iterate our call for:

- A cross-Whitehall Skills Taskforce to coordinate policy development and activity.
- Create a centralised Employment and Skills Hub for employers to access all schemes.
- Work with the devolved administrations to simplify and harmonise policy where possible.

Thank you so much to Karima for sharing her thoughts and experiences on this topic.

For further editions of Expert Opinion please visit our website: www.5percentclub.org.uk



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