

How to choose an AI apprenticeship provider.

A practical buyer's guide for UK employers.

10 markers of quality. 12 questions to ask. 6 red flags. 2026 funding context.

Why this guide exists

Buying an AI apprenticeship in 2026 is harder than it looks.

The market has exploded. Dozens of providers now advertise "AI apprenticeships" with varying levels of rigour. Some are excellent. Some are rebadged short courses. Most employers we speak to ask three questions: "Is it any good?", "Does it need coding?", and "Will it still be funded next year?"

This guide answers all three — honestly. We've written it to be useful even if you don't end up choosing TESS. You'll find what a quality provider looks like, the twelve questions that cut through sales pitches, the red flags to walk away from, and a simple framework for comparing providers fairly.

We've been training apprentices since 2009. We've seen employers get this right and get it expensively wrong. This is what we wish every buyer knew before they signed a contract.

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The 2026 context

What every UK employer buying an apprenticeship should know before they choose.

ST1512 is live and growing fast.

The AI & Automation Practitioner Level 4 apprenticeship launched in 2024 and has become the fastest-growing apprenticeship standard in the UK. £18,000 funding band, 15 months, no coding required. If an "AI apprenticeship" isn't ST1512, ask what it is — because the alternatives are usually short courses or rebadged digital standards.

16 standards are being defunded from September 2026.

Team Leader L3, Operations Manager L5, Coaching Professional L5, and 13 others lose funding. Anyone already enrolled usually continues. New cohorts on defunded standards from September 2026 are not eligible for levy funding. Don't buy into a programme that won't exist in 18 months.

The Growth & Skills Levy is replacing the Apprenticeship Levy.

More flexibility to fund short courses and non-apprenticeship training. Exact rules are being finalised. Expect the 2026/27 financial year to bring more choice and a shift in how levy is spent. Providers who offer both short courses and apprenticeships will be better positioned for the transition.

SME co-investment drops to 0% for under-25s from April 2026.

If your apprentice is under 25 and you're an SME, the programme is now fully funded. For an SME this removes the last financial barrier to AI apprenticeships. Employers over the levy threshold have always had 100% funding.

Ofsted and accreditation still matter more than marketing.

Only providers on the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers (RoATP) can deliver levy-funded apprenticeships. Ofsted-graded providers must be inspected. Accredited partnerships (CMI, CIPD, ILM, BCS, Microsoft) signal rigour. "AI-native" startups that lack these are not automatically better.

10 markers of a quality provider

Tick the ones your shortlisted provider demonstrably meets. Aim for 8+ out of 10.

- 01. Ofsted Good or Outstanding**
Anything else is a risk. Ask to see the most recent report.
- 02. On the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers (RoATP)**
If they're not, they can't deliver levy-funded apprenticeships. Full stop.
- 03. Industry-practitioner trainers, not just teachers**
Your coach should have actually done the job your apprentice is training for.
- 04. Accredited co-qualifications included (CMI, CIPD, BCS, Microsoft)**
TESS bundles up to 5 per programme. Most providers include 1. More qualifications = more employable apprentice.
- 05. Named EPA organisation with published pass rates**
The End-Point Assessment determines the grade. You should know who's running it.
- 06. Verified reviews (Trustpilot, Google) with 4.5+ average**
At volume. 50 reviews at 4.9 beats 5 reviews at 5.0.
- 07. Live case studies with named employers and measurable outcomes**
"Hours saved", "projects shipped", "promotions earned" — not just quotes.
- 08. Sector-specific delivery or at least sector-aware content**
A finance team and a retail team need different AI use-cases. Generic decks are a red flag.
- 09. Clear off-the-job tracking tools**
OTJ is a funding rule. Your provider should make evidencing it effortless for your line managers.
- 10. Transparent pricing and transparent roadmap**
Funding band on the cover. Qualification list upfront. No "contact us for pricing".

12 questions to ask any provider

Print this page. Take it to every sales call. A good provider will welcome the questions.

- 1 Which apprenticeship standard do you deliver, and what's the funding band?
- 2 How many accredited co-qualifications are included in the programme?
- 3 Who accredits the EPA, and what's your pass rate for the last 12 months?
- 4 What's your most recent Ofsted grade, and when was the inspection?
- 5 Which sectors have you delivered this programme to before? Any case studies?
- 6 What does a typical week look like for an apprentice — hours, format, tools?
- 7 Who will be my apprentice's coach, and what's their industry background?
- 8 How do you track and evidence off-the-job learning for my line managers?
- 9 What happens if an apprentice struggles — how early do I find out, and what's the intervention?
- 10 Can apprentices progress from L4 to L5/L6/L7 with you, or do they start again elsewhere?
- 11 What proportion of apprentices complete on time, and what's your typical distinction rate?
- 12 If I enrol 10, what specific, measurable business outcomes should I expect at month 6, 12, 15?

What to listen for in the answers

The signal behind the answer matters more than the answer itself.

- Q1 — The standard** Great: "ST1512, £18,000 band." Bad: "Our own AI framework." If it's not a recognised standard, it's not levy-funded.
- Q2 — Co-qualifications** No standard. 2-3 is good. 4-5 is rare — TESS is the only provider we know of offering 5 on ST1512.
- Q3 — EPA pass rate** Under 80% is a warning. Over 90% is strong. Distinction rate of 50%+ means the programme stretches.
- Q4 — Ofsted grade** Good or Outstanding only. "Requires Improvement" means current learners are at risk.
- Q5 — Case studies** Named employer + named outcome. "Saved 12 hours a week in finance" beats "transformative".
- Q6 — A typical week** 40 hours off-the-job. Mix of live sessions, coaching, self-directed. Apprentice builds something every month.
- Q7 — Coach background** At least 5 years in the industry they're coaching. LinkedIn profile you can check.
- Q8 — OTJ tracking** A tool, not a spreadsheet. Line manager gets automatic reports. Compliance is provider's problem, not yours.
- Q9 — Struggling apprentices** Weekly check-ins, not monthly. Line manager looped in at week 2, not month 3. Written intervention plans.
- Q10 — Progression** L4 to L5 to L6 to L7 within one provider. Portable qualifications (CMI/CIPD) across providers if needed.
- Q11 — Completion rate** National average is ~55%. TESS runs at 89%+. Anything under 70% suggests weak support or poor fit.
- Q12 — Business outcomes** Any provider will commit to specific outcomes by month 6. Vague answers here = they don't measure.

6 red flags: walk away

Any one of these should pause the conversation. Two should end it.

x

Can't name the standard.

If they can't tell you the ST number, the funding band, and the EPA organisation in the first 30 seconds, it's not a real apprenticeship. Short courses wearing apprenticeship clothing.

x

Vague "AI-powered" delivery with no specifics.

If the demo consists of buzzwords — "generative AI", "automation-first", "transformation" — and zero screenshots of what apprentices actually do, the programme is marketing, not content.

x

No named trainers or coaches.

"Our team of experts" is a sales script. A good provider names their coaches, shows their LinkedIn, and lets you meet them before signing.

x

Refuses to share EPA pass rates or completion rates.

These numbers are public via gov.uk for every provider. Refusing to share them means they're below average.

x

Pressure to enrol before the next intake.

Apprenticeships start monthly at any reputable provider. "Sign this week or you miss the cohort" is a sales tactic, not a timetable.

x

Promises that sound like outcomes but aren't measurable.

"Transform your team into AI leaders" is not an outcome. "Your apprentices will ship an automation that saves 10+ hours/week by month 6" is.

A fair comparison framework

Score each shortlisted provider out of 10. The one with the best total — not the loudest pitch — is your pick.

Criterion (weight)	Prov. A	Prov. B	Prov. C	Your notes
Standard + funding band matches your need (x1)				
Number of accredited co-qualifications (x2)				
Ofsted grade + RoATP status (x1)				
Coach / trainer industry depth (x2)				
Sector-relevant case studies with named outcomes (x2)				
Completion + EPA pass rate (x1.5)				
Off-the-job tracking tools (x1)				
Progression pathway L4 to L7 (x1)				
Support model when apprentices struggle (x1.5)				
Transparency (no sales pressure, clear pricing) (x1)				
TOTAL (out of 140)				

Score each criterion 0-10 based on the provider's answers to the questions on pages 5-6. Multiply by the weight in brackets. Add totals. Interpretation: 110+ = strong choice. 90-109 = good with caveats. Under 90 = keep looking.

Glossary

ST1512	Standard reference for the AI & Automation Practitioner Level 4 apprenticeship.
EPA	End-Point Assessment. The independent final assessment.
OTJ	Off-the-job learning. The 6 hours per week the apprentice spends learning in paid working time.
Funding band	Max levy that can be spent on one apprenticeship. ST1512 sits at £18,000.
RoATP	Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers. Required for levy funding.
ESFA	Education and Skills Funding Agency. Regulates apprenticeship funding.
Ofsted	Independent inspectorate. Grades providers Outstanding / Good / Requires Improvement / Inadequate.
Co-qualification	An accredited qualification (CMI, CIPD, BCS, Microsoft) bundled with an apprenticeship.
Growth & Skills Levy	The 2026 successor to the Apprenticeship Levy. More flexible use of funds.
Distinction rate	Proportion of apprentices who achieve the top grade at EPA. Signals programme rigour.
Cohort	A group of apprentices starting the same programme together. Typical size: 8-15.
24-month expiry	Levy funds expire 24 months after they enter the digital account.

NEXT STEPS

Now you can buy with confidence.

You now have everything you need to shortlist providers, interrogate them fairly, and pick the one that will actually deliver results for your business.

If you'd like to see how TESS Group scores against your own criteria, we're happy to be measured. Book a 30-minute Discovery Call and we'll answer every one of the 12 questions on page 5 — live, without a slide deck, with named coaches and live case studies.

If you decide to buy from someone else after that call, we still send you the Levy Readiness Checklist. This guide is free because we believe a better-informed buyer is better for the whole sector.

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Bring this guide. We'll answer every question on page 5, live.

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