

Attendees:

Lord Aberdare (Chair)

Lord Hampton

Pam Cox MP

Alex Brewer MP

Euan Stainbank MP

Richard Quigley MP

Gideon Amos MP

Lauren Edwards MP

**Lord Aberdare** opened the session by introducing himself and offered apologies on behalf of Andrew Pakes MP and Toby Perkins, the APPG's Co-Chairs who were unable to attend the session, and also on behalf of the DfE officials who had been due to attend to answer questions on the Bill.

As the Bill was introduced in the Lords, Lord Aberdare was able to reflect on its progress through the Lords, and highlight the concerns raised by colleagues during legislative passage through the Lords. He noted that when members attempted to introduce the wording of 'Skills England' as an amendment, it was ruled as "out of scope", which he said was a peculiar decision, given that the main purpose of the Bill is to prepare the ground for establishing Skills England.

He stated that the Bill represents a significant restructuring of the skills system as it will dissolve IfATE as an independent non-departmental public body and transfer its functions to a new executive agency within the Department for Education.

He questioned the logic of abolishing IfATE, which is functioning well, as the first step in creating a new body with such significant powers as Skills England. He observed that most of the Bill focuses on amending the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

A significant issue raised in the Lords related to the role of Skills England. He outlined its dual function: a strategic role in shaping skills policy across departments and regions, and a practical function in preparing apprenticeship standards and assessment plans, previously handled by IfATE. He raised concerns about how these two functions would be effectively integrated. The government's response in the Lords was that establishing Skills England as an independent agency would take too long.

Lord Aberdare highlighted concerns about accountability and transparency, noting that the Secretary of State is the only named individual in the Bill and is solely responsible for reporting.

He also emphasised concerns about the role of employers, as while they currently play a major role in IfATE, it is unclear whether and how this will continue under the new structure, particularly regarding industry involvement in setting new standards.

He noted how the Minister has published a draft framework document for Skills England, but Lord Aberdare described it as largely boilerplate lacking detail of great utility.

Despite all the concerns raised during the debates, only one amendment was made. This amendment merely extends the timeline before IfATE is abolished – a stay of execution as it were.

Lord Aberdare concluded his opening remarks by noting that the key difference between the Lords and Commons receiving the Bill, is that the leadership of Skills England has now been appointed and are credible and well experienced individuals.

Lord Aberdare then asked parliamentarians for their initial observations/queries on the Bill and its scope.

**Pam Cox MP** noted that she was sponsoring the room. As a former academic at the University of Essex before becoming an MP, she expressed interest in Level 6 and 7 qualifications and asked what the Bill says about them. Lord Aberdare and Lord Hampton confirmed that there is no explicit mention of Level 6 and 7 in the Bill, which primarily discusses preparing standards but with no specific mentions.

**Lord Hampton** remarked that MPs in the Commons would receive the Bill in a better state than before, as it now at least acknowledges Skills England, though its main focus remains on transferring powers. Lord Aberdare suggested it would be beneficial for MPs to propose further amendments as a greater acknowledgement of Skills England would facilitate greater detail in the Bill

**Richard Quigley MP** asked Lord Aberdare to outline his concerns for better clarity and understanding. By highlighting the enormous number of standards and awarding bodies, Lord Aberdare questioned how Skills England would deliver on its objectives and highlighted the complexities of working with devolved nations, regional and local skills improvement plans, and emerging areas such as green and digital skills. He asked who would be responsible for tying all these elements together as the Bill does not say anything about this.

Lord Aberdare expressed doubt that the government would change its approach, noting that while industry prefers an independent authority, the Government in response to all amendments has remained committed to Skills England as an executive agency. He acknowledged and praised Baroness Smith's genuine commitment to the revival of the skills system but pointed out that ministers frequently change, which could impact long-term stability and success. He also noted that the transition from IfATE to Skills England would not be seamless, as it won't just happen on one day, and especially as different industries operate in varied ways, so there are inevitably going to be hurdles in the transfer of powers.

Lord Hampton noted that a positive outcome had been improvements in accountability and reporting. However, he criticised the government's focus on speed, stating that its response to most amendments had been, "No, this will slow us down." Richard Quigley MP asked if Lord Hampton was satisfied with the Bill's direction. Lord Hampton responded that, as an optimist, he was "60% happy."

Lord Aberdare suggested that Skills England should focus on high-level strategic issues rather than daily operational matters such as setting apprenticeship standards. He questioned why IfATE, which already handles these tasks, needed to be abolished instead of allowing Skills England to address broader challenges. **Alex Brewer MP** asked why the government believed abolishing IfATE was necessary. Lord Aberdare echoed this question, as the government has not given an answer to questions asking why they saw IfATE as an obstacle.

**Gideon Amos MP** mentioned a new gigafactory just outside his constituency and raised concerns about how local further education institutions would be impacted by the green transition. Lord Aberdare acknowledged this, and said that analysing current skills needs is straightforward, but the real question is who will drive action in response, and institutions like the one in Gideon's constituency need clarity.

Pam Cox MP drew a comparison between the Skills England transition and the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill, where one body was abolished to transfer responsibilities to another. Lord Aberdare expressed confidence in the transfer of powers, though he acknowledged it would not be seamless. He reiterated that the difference here is the challenge of shifting from operational tasks, such as setting standards, to broader planning, using the gigafactory as an example.

Lord Aberdare then welcomed views from the sponsors of the APPG who are drawn from industry and training providers.

**Ellie Daniels** from Multiverse stated that while they are optimistic about Skills England, they are concerned about the role of employers and asked how their role could be strengthened to prevent them from being bypassed. Lord Aberdare agreed that employer engagement varies widely across sectors and warned that the Bill must avoid excessive rigidity, allowing flexibility in how employers are involved. He emphasised that there is significant potential in Skills England, which is why he remains both excited and cautious about its development.

Lord Hampton similarly criticised the Bill for focusing solely on power transfer without discussing long-term strategic planning.

Despite little detail in the Bill, Lord Aberdare acknowledged a positive aspect leading him to be optimistic which has been the recent appointments to Skills England's leadership. He praised Phil Smith CBE as Chair of Skills England, with Sir David Bell serving as Vice Chair. Former DfE officials Tessa Griffiths and Sarah Maclean will job-share as joint CEOs.

**Mike Worley** from HIT Training raised concerns about ensuring the retention of expertise in setting apprenticeship standards. Lord Aberdare emphasised the need for external organisations, such as HIT Training to engage with and educate MPs about what is required of Skills England to ensure effective skills policies.

Gideon Amos MP asked for further clarity and for sponsors to elaborate on their concerns about employers being left out of the loop.

**Alison Faiers** from the Coach Core Foundation shared her organisation's experience working with employers ranging from small businesses to major football club foundations. In response to Gideon, she questioned how the Bill ensures all voices are heard, noting that she accepts employers do not always know best, but it is essential that the right stakeholders must be involved. She expressed uncertainty about Skills England, stating, "It's not that we assume it will fail, we just don't know enough."

She also mentioned that Richard Pennycook said at the last Apprenticeships APPG session that he would take their feedback back to colleagues for the second report, but as we are yet to receive this, their questions and concerns remain.

Lord Hampton emphasised the need to engage directly with Skills England rather than rely on amendments, which are unlikely to be accepted. He encouraged conversations with Skills England personnel to ensure concerns and advice are heard.

Pam Cox MP also stressed the importance and opportunity of working with the Education Select Committee. Lord Aberdare agreed, saying this should be a high priority.

**Euan Stainbank MP** acknowledged as a Scottish MP with education a devolved matter, his constituents are not as affected by this, but with Grangemouth refinery on his doorstep, he raised concerns about the transition period, asking where colleges and employers should turn for guidance. Lord Aberdare stressed that to be successful, a skills strategy must be national and questioned how an executive agency would effectively operate across the UK and different sectors. He suggested this issue should be raised in the second reading of the Bill. Euan Stainbank MP asked for confirmation that the amendment tabled by Baroness Barran is “just a stay of execution” regarding IfATE.

Gideon Amos MP asked about the government’s stance on amendments. Lord Hampton stated that the government appeared to have red lines they were unwilling to cross.

**James Gordon** from Engineering UK noted that the Education Committee is conducting an inquiry into higher education skills and suggested engaging with it. He also raised concerns about the removal of the requirement to review standards every three years. Lord Hampton said it was unclear who was responsible for reviewing standards, as there are numerous awarding bodies but no defined accountability. He questioned whether this responsibility falls to the Secretary of State. Lord Aberdare confirmed that there was no clear explanation for why the three-year review requirement was removed.

Pam Cox MP concluded by highlighting that while skills and apprenticeships work well for some and there undoubtedly are positives, they remain challenging for many.

Lord Aberdare thanked attendees for their contributions and closed the meeting.