

# Simpler apprenticeship process promised

THE GOVERNMENT HOPES to make it easier for employers to recruit large numbers of apprentices.

John Hayes, skills minister, pledged to sweep away "red tape and bureaucracy" where it deters businesses from hiring raw recruits. He announced a three-pronged plan to accomplish his goal in an address to the Confederation of British Industry. His approach promises to:

- Simplify payments
- Streamline contracts
- Eliminate some of the data

returns and audit requirements.

Hayes says that companies that contract directly with the government to train apprentices will also receive improved guidance to help them manage the recruitment, training and assessment of such people more efficiently and cost-effectively. Employers would also be provided with a toolkit that explains the apprenticeship process from inception to end, as well as a more streamlined certification process.

"Apprenticeships are proving an increasingly



effective training route for young people and companies. They are a proven way to fill skills gaps in our economy," says Hayes. "That is why we are boosting the number of apprenticeships and putting them at the heart of our Skills for Growth strategy."

Hayes also says too many businesses have been put off by overly complex procedures and unnecessary layers of paperwork. He is determined that more employers and learners than ever should have the chance to benefit from what he describes as an "unprecedented" investment in apprenticeships.

However, the Forum of Private Business does not believe the steps the government has promised to take will do enough to help small firms. It believes that serious policies should be introduced to simplify employment and reduce barriers to hiring apprentices.

Find out more about apprenticeships at [www.apprenticeships.org.uk](http://www.apprenticeships.org.uk). — Andrew Don

# SMEs speak out on banking

STRUGGLING TO GET financing from your bank? You're not alone. Research carried out by Shawbrook Bank revealed that 89 per cent of small- and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) believe banks fail to use common sense when they make decisions about business loan applications.

Shawbrook Bank ([www.shawbrook.co.uk](http://www.shawbrook.co.uk)), whose chairman is former Royal Bank of Scotland chief executive Sir George Mathewson, commissioned a survey of more than 800 SMEs to gauge their thoughts on access to loans and other banking matters. The research found that a significant number of SMEs feel banks are failing to make it easy for them to borrow, despite continued calls for banks to lend more freely to small businesses to help them grow.

The survey also found widespread frustration

among SMEs with the way they are dealt with by banks, despite their desire to borrow. Almost half (45 per cent) of SMEs feel banks are too bureaucratic when dealing with small businesses, and only 6 per cent of SMEs feel confident that banks are clear and transparent in their dealings with small-business customers.

"Having access to the right finance at the right time is vital for an expanding small business—and so is having a straightforward and efficient lending process," says Owen Woodley, CEO of Shawbrook Bank. "It's all very well for a bank to say the money for SMEs is there to lend, but if the process is bureaucratic and inflexible it means

nothing but lost opportunities and slowed growth."

Shawbrook Bank's leaders say it's critical for credit-worthy businesses to be able to borrow money to grow. For its part, the bank promises to loan £250 million to SMEs in 2012. ☞



# New food industry labels coming

THE DEPARTMENT for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has launched new guidance for the food industry to try to eliminate the estimated 5.3 million tonnes of UK household food and drink that's wasted every year.

The guidance tells retailers and manufacturers that food packaging should bear only a "use-by" or "best-before" date.

Defra has told retailers to remove "sell-by" and "display-until" labels that are used for controlling stock in shops so that the public are not confused.

This is because a "sell-by" or "display-until" label does not necessarily mean a product is unsafe to eat. But the confusion created leads to every household with children throwing away the equivalent of £680 worth of safe food annually, Defra says.

"Use-by" dates will apply to foods that can make people sick after a given date, such as seafood, soft cheeses and oven-ready meals.

Products such as biscuits, jams, crisps, pickles and tinned foods will have "best-before" dates. For these food-stuffs, the quality might be impaired past a certain date but they are still safe to eat.

Caroline Spelman, environment secretary, said: "We want to end the food labelling confusion and make it clear once and for all when food is good and safe to eat. This simpler and safer date-labelling guide will help households cut down on the £12 billion worth of good food that ends up in the bin."

Defra produced the guidance in consultation with producers, supermarkets, trade and consumer groups, food law enforcement bodies and the Waste and Resources Action Programme.

To access the new Guidance on the Application of Date Labels to Food, go to [www.defra.gov.uk/food-farm/food/labelling](http://www.defra.gov.uk/food-farm/food/labelling). — AD