

Audio transcription

Apprenticeship Podcast: Episode 4 - Is a Craft Apprenticeship right for you?

Host

Hi, this is Skills for Life, a podcast series where we hear from current and past apprentices at Scottish Power to find out why an apprenticeship is such a great career choice. In this episode, I'm joined by Keira McConnell, who's a craft apprentice at Scottish Power Energy Networks, and Alistair St Clair, who's now trainee engineer at Scottish Power Energy Networks. Thanks so much for coming in and spending some time talking to me today.

We'll start with you, Keira: can you tell us a bit about your role at the moment? So you're a craft apprentice at Scottish Power Energy Networks—what does that mean?

Keira McConnell

It means that I'm on a course; I'm training to become a craft person within Scottish Power Energy Networks and to eventually just work on the network to complete my apprenticeship. That's it—I think that's the role: just complete my apprenticeship to then become a craft person.

Host

How long is it? How long is this apprenticeship that you're on?

Keira McConnell

So I'm three years, but I think now they're doing it over, like, four years to give folk a longer time to then—just to pick up everything, because there's a lot to pick up on.

Host

I bet—yeah, I can imagine. And did you come straight from school?

Keira McConnell

Yeah, I did. I went straight from school into the pre-apprenticeship course at college, and then from the college course I got a phone call just saying that I was offered the apprenticeship and “it's there if I want it”, and I said “yeah” and I took it.

Host

Oh, brilliant.

Keira McConnell

Yeah, it's just sort of rolled on.



Host

And when you were at school, did you have a career at Scottish Power or in the energy industry in mind, or were you unsure of where you were gonna go?

Keira McConnell

I wasn't sure where I was going to go. I think it was—I was in sixth year, and it was the January before, like, the last week of college submissions, and it was actually my career advisor that said, “Oh, like, there's a course on at college sponsored by Scottish Power if you want to give that a shot.” I was wanting to be an electrician, but I never—I never got an apprenticeship as an electrician, so I was like, “yeah, I'll just put my name in”, and I got an interview for it, and that was it.

Host

Oh, brilliant—and what was the process like?

Keira McConnell

It was really good; it was quite quick. I think it was just as COVID was hitting—this was 2020—it was just as COVID hit, so everything sort of went into lockdown, but we still managed to go into college for two days a week to do the practical stuff. There was an interview, and then, I think after that was done, an email to say if you've got into the course or not. But, yeah—after that, it was a year at college, and now it's a three-year apprenticeship.

Host

Okay, so you did the pre-apprenticeship programme and now you're on your apprenticeship.

Keira McConnell

Yeah.

Host

Brilliant—because you've got a similar route into Scottish Power, Alistair, haven't you? You did the pre-apprenticeship programme as well, right?

Alistair Sinclair

Yeah—pre-apprenticeship programme from Edinburgh Dalkeith, and then I did a three-year apprenticeship, but in overhead lines, so based out of Cambuslang for that. So it was quite handy that way. So I progressed from there.

Host

And then you've progressed from there to a technical craftsperson?

Alistair Sinclair

That's right—yeah: technical craftsperson. Mainly, for us to work as linesmen, we need isolation and paperwork to say that it's safe to work on, so I went in to move into the headroom—you can do that. So, yeah, I went into that sort of thing, which is a technical craftsperson. I worked there for four years doing that role, and now I'm a trainee engineer.



So I'm only four months into the training of that—that's an 18-month training programme—so we'll see how that goes.

Host

Great—so you've been here within these programmes, I feel like, for almost a decade?

Alistair Sinclair

Yeah, yeah—about nine and a half years now, so I'm looking forward to not being a trainee quite soon—that'll be quite good.

Host

And what kind of... what are you involved in at the moment in your role?

Alistair Sinclair

So we carry out isolations. I moved across to transmission; the opportunity was there. You kind of put your hand up to say where you would like to go in the company after you get out your apprenticeship, and people will kind of steer you and help you to do that. So that's what I did in January, probably a year ago now—I just said I'd like to go to this area of the company. Now I work for transmission, and we transmit voltages around the country, and I help with that by doing isolations and switching—so you go into substations and turn things off, just at a higher voltage than I used to.

Host

Now, when we spoke before we sat down, you said that you always fancied being an engineer because your grandpa was an engineer?

Alistair Sinclair

That's right—yeah, yeah. A few people do that, and, like, Keira was saying about the electrician: there's a couple of family members who were doing electrical things in the electrical industry, so I knew that it was a kind of future as well and it would be a good industry to move into. So that's where I kind of thought about that.

Host

So you had that in mind about being an engineer, but you didn't want to go to uni, is that right? So you found alternative pathways to achieve it?

Alistair Sinclair

Yeah—that's right. I knew we had a big company like Scottish Power; the headroom would be there. I left school with five Highers, so I was kind of in the middle: "do I go to university or do I try and get an apprenticeship?" which is what I enjoy doing. Seeing an apprenticeship with a big company, I thought that would suit me—and instead I really enjoy working outside; it seems like a good hybrid mix.

Host

And Keira, I suppose you're at the beginning of a journey like Alistair's described. You're into



your craft apprenticeship at the moment—what kind of things are you doing? For people who haven't got any idea what's involved in the electricity network or with electricity, how would you describe it? What are you doing on a day-to-day basis?

Keira McConnell

So on a day-to-day basis I'm driving about quite a lot because I cover—I'm based in Edinburgh, so I'm driving all over, like, to Berwick, maybe down to Newcastle—and covering a wide range of areas, but just going to substations: maybe inspecting them and maintaining the plant and apparatus that's in the substation, and going around repairing faults if a fault pops up, and just making sure that everything runs smoothly so folk don't go off—

Host

Off supply?

Keira McConnell

Off supply, yeah.

Host

So it's a huge—these roles are hugely important to the day-to-day running of the country, aren't they? It must be amazing to be involved in something that's not only so critical in terms of how we all live day to day, but also with a view to the future, when we talk about the electrification of everything so that we can decarbonise and get to net zero—because you're also facilitating that, right? The grid and the network has to grow to accommodate renewables as well. It's a huge undertaking and a big thing to be involved in.

Alistair Sinclair

Yeah, there's definitely lots of room for growth in that industry, with people getting, you know, EV car chargers and stuff like that. You see it maybe in everyday life—you don't really think about how it would affect us—but as a company it will going forward.

Host

So, Keira, you said at the beginning that you had an idea about being an electrician—did you have to think about that when you were at school, in terms of the subject choices you made? Did you choose specific subjects?

Keira McConnell

I think I didn't know in S4 and S5 what I wanted to do, so I just picked the subjects I thought I'd enjoy. It wasn't until sixth year when I thought, “right, I need to actually choose a career now,” and I did National 5 Woodwork, which I really, really enjoyed—the practical side of it. I was speaking, like, with my dad, and he said, “get into a trade, because if you've got something like this, it's something you can do for the rest of your life, and if you want to go off when you're 30 or something to do something else, you've always got this behind you that you can fall back on.” So I did the subjects I enjoyed, and I just... I don't know, I like... yeah.



Host

I love the way you said that—“once you're 30, you can fall back on it”—as if 30 is ancient. But that's the thing: at a relatively young age, obviously you're under 30.

Keira McConnell

Yes, I was definitely under 30, but I was thinking—because at 16, 17, choosing a career is a really big thing—so daunting at that age, isn't it?

Host

That's come up a few times; you get to that point when you're about to leave school or choosing subjects and it's like, “I don't know what I want to do.”

Alistair Sinclair

Yeah, it does feel very permanent—whatever decision you make, you're going to have to go down that route for the next 40 years. That's what's quite good with Scottish Power: you feel as though if you get your foot in the door, everything else is quite a lot of headroom after that. Like I said—with the five Highers, I had that behind me, and then could start the kind of fun stuff: working up electricity poles and pylons—it's good, your day flies in—and after a few years of that I thought, “I'll ask to go to night school,” and Scottish Power put me through my night school so I could pursue engineering. So two years at night school whilst you're still working—or you can do a day release—and then work your hours back. Good options—you've got options.

Host

One of the key things that keeps coming through is that idea of options and paths: choices after school—uni or not—are not so permanent; there are many routes into Scottish Power and beyond. Alistair, you're a great example: you came through the programme, and I saw you speaking to Natalie from Scottish Power—she's known you for almost a decade, and she said she knew Alistair coming from school and now as a trainee engineer.

Alistair Sinclair

Natalie interviewed me for my pre-apprenticeship, and she's been giving me good news over the years—like, “you got through the apprenticeship”—and looked after us a few times with issues and stuff. It's good to always have that contact—for ten years I've maybe spoken to her every year just for advice and stuff. So that's good.

Host

It sounds like a great thing—having that constant and length of time. These days, job-for-life is less common, but it sounds like a similar, secure, supportive environment here.

Alistair Sinclair

Yeah—I'd say definitely if you're working on the tools you get in a squad with people you genuinely get on with, and you spend time outside work with them too, because you just get on well and you're all working together during the day. It's a good place to work.



Keira McConnell

Yeah—they say that, like, in my first week of the apprenticeship they said, “this is a job for life and you’ve got so many ways you can progress within the company—it’s really secure.”

Host

That’s good to hear, especially in these tumultuous times—it feels like people feel respected, valued, and truly invested in, because they see the opportunities available to them. Keira, what would you say is one of the best things about your role or what you’ve learned so far in your apprenticeship?

Keira McConnell

One of the best things I would say is working with the team—it’s such a great atmosphere to work in—but also working with my hands. I really enjoy that, and there’s loads of different things every day—it keeps things fresh; it’s just something different every day.

Host

When you were saying about going out to substations, repairing and maintaining assets—how does the training work to prepare you? How do you know what to do?

Keira McConnell

Well, you’re learning off the people watching you—the guys who are supervising you at all times. They’re constantly there, available to intervene and show you what you need to know; if you’re confused or have a question, they’ll answer it. They help you through it, and if you’re stuck, they’ll come help you out and then leave you to it—they’ll stand back and watch you do the rest. It’s very much: you’re leading your training—ask questions, be curious, and show that you’re keen—and they’ll help you.

Host

What’s the team like in terms of gender? Traditionally, the energy industry and craft roles are male-dominated—have you found that?

Keira McConnell

Yeah, definitely—yeah, definitely.

Host

And how does that feel? How do you work with that—is it okay?

Keira McConnell

It’s fine. I think it’s worse when you’re in a classroom. One of the lecturers once said, “Oh, you’re a woman—sorry, I should have done this for you first.” I’m like, “No, I don’t want that.” I think nowadays it’s fine; I’ve not had any problem. The guys are accepting—they know maybe there’s something I’m not strong enough to do on site, but they’re fine with that because I can do other things as well. The gender split is still there, but there are more women now coming into the industry—it’s good to see. It might not be for everyone, and I understand if people don’t want manky hands, manky face—but I enjoy it. It all comes down to preference.



Host

Absolutely. What do you think is the most beneficial part of the apprenticeship—what are the benefits?

Keira McConnell

Definitely getting paid while you learn—that's one of the best bits. Also, making friends for life: during the pre-apprenticeship group, you're together for about a year before you go out on site. You're sharing a hotel room if you need accommodation for training. During that year: classroom-based stuff, health and safety courses at Forth Valley College in Falkirk, then Dillon College in Cumbernauld, where you learn the basics of your trade. You also get a short appreciation of other trades, which is really good.

Host

So you do all that for a year before they let you loose on live cables?

Keira McConnell

Yes—yeah.

Host

That's reassuring. There must be a huge sense of camaraderie—it's like a shared experience that forms lasting friendships.

Keira McConnell

We were in a hotel—some people prefer to drive if they can, but most of the time you're staying in a hotel. They room people together; when mine was COVID, we had individual rooms, but normally they room you together so you can have a laugh.

Alistair Sinclair

We still meet up for a pint—I wanted to say that, yeah, we still meet up for a drink with our year group. Some year groups even go away on holiday still. So, I don't know how they're getting away with that—but they still do!

Host

That's brilliant—that camaraderie, shared experience, living together, friendships, plus the work.

Alistair Sinclair

Just that you're learning and someone else is driving you forward too—though you need to put your hand up and say, "I'd like to do that area." As soon as you say it, there's usually a plan in place, and you don't feel you're trying to do it all on your own. They help you in this way or that way. It seems like there's a plan behind it rather than you just going solo.

Host

How easy have you found expressing your goals to the company, and how do they respond?



Keira McConnell

I don't want to say it's easy, but every three months you get a review with your line manager and your contact from Skills Development Scotland (since it's through them you get the apprenticeship). You've got certain goals to meet by the end, such as completing your QCFs, which are on-site job assessments. Every review you have milestones and goals to reach before the next one—it all cascades into qualifying at the end.

Host

Would you say the same?

Alistair Sinclair

Yeah. I didn't think about progression in the first four or five years—I just wanted to be good at the trade and a linesman first. Then after a while I thought, "there's that opportunity" and I was approached for the TCP (Technical Craftsperson) role—first time I didn't have to ask anyone—they noticed I was a good fit. People notice when you work hard or get your head down—you get rewarded.

Host

Another benefit: the programme monitors and rewards hard work. In terms of future roles or goals, do you have a dream job?

Alistair Sinclair

I'd like to be an engineer—that'd be good after I finish this training. After that, no plan—I'll just see how it goes. That's the feeling you get—you need to be in the company to know what roles are available too.

Host

We've talked about size of company and varied business areas—possibilities are huge.

Alistair Sinclair

Yeah... I just see where we end up—no pressure.

Host

How do you feel about work-life balance? Are you still studying?

Keira McConnell

Yeah, towards the end of the apprenticeship you get interviews for roles giving more responsibility, which means reading up on safety rules and company policies. I've been doing that. I'm nearing the end—I'm finishing QCF, so I don't need worry about written stuff anymore. It's now about compiling a folder of all the evidence collected during my apprenticeship—that leads to my final authorisation to become a tradesperson.

Host

And what's next when you complete the apprenticeship?



Keira McConnell

Next, I think would be to just be a craftsperson for the foreseeable future. I'd like to get an HNC, but I'm not too sure about that. From there, no exact plan—I'm quite happy staying a craftsperson for a while.

Host

Back in school, if you could see yourself now—what do you think you'd have thought?

Keira McConnell

I have no idea... probably thinking, "this is a pretty cool job, being outside most of the time." I wanted to be outside, not stuck in an office—so I'm quite happy.

Host

Great—and would you recommend it? Thinking about application process and being in these programmes—would you recommend it to others?

Keira McConnell

Yeah—definitely. Best moment? I don't have one—I just keep my head down. Every moment's amazing. It's just been a really good apprenticeship—overall a positive experience. Yeah, really positive.

Host

What about you, Alistair?

Alistair Sinclair

Probably passing my trade test at the end of three years. You do an on-site assessment and an assessment at Dean House in front of experts and your teachers. They give examples you have to do—you don't know what they'll pick. Passing that was great—I remember driving home thinking, "I've done it—three years and you're a tradesman now." It was a good achievement.

Host

Absolutely—and now that you're on the trainee-engineer programme, with your goal of being an engineer—that's within touching distance now, isn't it? That must feel pretty good.

Alistair Sinclair

It's good—yeah. I remember on the first day Natalie sat us down and on a PowerPoint showed us the plan: one year pre-apprenticeship, three-year apprenticeship, two years college, then training engineering. At that point I thought, "that's eight years"—and now I'm here. It's strange, but totally by accident—it wasn't a set plan; it's just how time and progression happens. It's felt natural, not like I had to push too hard.

Host

It sounds like all the structures were in place to help you get there without too much trouble.



Alistair Sinclair

Yeah—hard work does apply, but especially at the start, thinking “you’re going to be an engineer” might be too much. But with time, experience and knowledge, you pick it all up. So that’s good.

Keira McConnell

I asked Keira if she would recommend the apprenticeship programme to someone considering it.

Alistair Sinclair

Yeah—definitely. But it needs to be your decision. If you're stuck between university or a trade, like I was, a trade is good—then you’ve got it. I think there's no harm in doing it, especially with a big company like this.

Host

Thank you so much for sharing your insights—it's been fascinating learning how you're both progressing through the company. I wish you all the best with these programmes and apprenticeships. That’s been Keira McConnell, craft apprentice at Scottish Power Energy Networks, and Alistair Sinclair, trainee engineer at SP Energy Networks. Thanks so much, and I wish you all the best for your future endeavours.

Thank you—a big thank you to all our apprentices who took the time to talk to us. It's been an amazing insight into life on an apprenticeship programme at Scottish Power. If you'd like to find out more about any of the programmes, just visit our website: scottishpower.com/careers.

