

Acorn Training Consultants Ltd

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 50082

Name of lead inspector: Maxine Mayer HMI

Last day of inspection: 27 July 2012

Type of provider: Independent learning provider

Address: First Floor
Knightsbridge Place
3-5 Nottingham Road
Ripley
Derbyshire
DE5 3DJ

Telephone number: 01773 747377

Information about the provider

1. Acorn Training Consultants Ltd (Acorn) was established in 1996 in Ripley, Derbyshire. In June 2012 it was acquired by and now operates as a wholly owned subsidiary of TBG Learning Ltd. It was last inspected in August 2007. Since 2011 the company has undergone significant change. It no longer offers a directly funded apprenticeship programme and now operates as a subcontractor. Acorn is also a subcontractor working on a European Social Fund pre-entry programme. Changes to Entry to Employment (E2E) contracts required the E2E offer to be changed to Foundation Learning. Most of the work of Acorn is government funded.
2. Only the Foundation Learning programme directly funded by the Education Funding Agency was in scope for this inspection. Foundation Learning programmes are offered throughout the year on a rolling start-date basis. At the time of inspection 53 learners were on programme. Most learners have low prior educational qualifications, and many have significant physical or social disadvantages.
3. Ripley is in the Amber Valley, East Midlands. It is predominantly a white British community. The unemployment rate and the percentage of the population who have below level two qualifications are around the East Midlands and national averages.
4. Acorn provides training on behalf of the following providers:
 - Chesterfield College of Further Education (business, administration and law and preparation for life and work)
 - The Derbyshire Network (business, administration and law and preparation for life and work)
 - Care Training East Midlands (preparation for life and work)

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2011/12
Foundation Learning	146 full-time learners

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision		Grade 2
Capacity to improve		Grade 2
		Grade
Outcomes for learners		2
Quality of provision		2
Leadership and management		2
Safeguarding		2
Equality and diversity		2
Subject Areas		Grade
Preparation for life and work		2

Overall effectiveness

5. This is a good provider with some outstanding features. Most learners achieve their qualification aims. Although success rates of English, mathematics or information technology functional skills are high at entry level, approximately only half of the small minority of learners who undertake foundation and intermediate level qualifications achieve them. Acorn has identified this and has plans at an advanced stage of implementation to rectify matters. Progression to further education, training or employment is consistently good overall. However, the progression rate for the most vulnerable groups is low.
6. The quality of teaching and learning is good. Learners enjoy their time at Acorn and for most learners this time is a positive experience. Tutors are well qualified and manage classes very well in order that any disruptive behaviour by learners is minimised. The training centre is very well resourced and of excellent quality. Learning materials to support functional skills teaching need improving. Not all classroom exercises and assessment methods are sufficiently differentiated to meet the needs of all learners.
7. Acorn has excellent partnership arrangements with schools, employers and other agencies, which are used well to increase the opportunities for learners. Support for learners overall is good particularly for those who are disabled. The frequency of the review process meets the differing needs of learners but

action plans are not linked closely enough to further learning and they are not monitored closely enough to ensure completion.

8. The Foundation Learning programme at Acorn is well managed. Managers set and generally meet high standards. Arrangements to collect the views of learners and partners are good and these are used well to inform self-assessment and improvement. Learners feel very safe and Acorn successfully encourages those who are most disadvantaged by their circumstances to engage in learning.

Main findings

- Qualification success rates overall are excellent. However, while success rates in functional skills at entry levels are very high, rates at foundation and intermediate levels are low. Progression rates to further education, training and employment are good and around three-quarters of learners progress each year. However, progression rates for some of the most vulnerable groups of learners are significantly lower than this.
- The development of knowledge and skills is good, increasing the prospect of employment. Learners have the opportunity to gain further work-related qualifications through enrichment opportunities such as basic food hygiene courses. Learners feel safe and enjoy learning.
- Teaching and learning are good. Staff are well qualified and experienced and manage their sessions well, but there are insufficient differentiated tasks to meet the needs of all learners. Physical resources are excellent; however, functional skills learning resources require updating, and linking more closely to the vocational pathways of the Foundation Learning programme.
- Assessment overall is satisfactory. Learners are motivated to complete the programme and most make satisfactory progress towards their target completion dates. However, the planning of assessment fails to take sufficient account of the needs of each learner and feedback following assessment does not provide sufficient developmental feedback.
- The programme meets the needs and interests of learners well. A wide range of vocational pathways is available and the opportunity for 'taster' programmes helps ensure learners make the right choices. Qualifications are offered at different levels enabling learners to undertake these at a level most suited to their prior achievement.
- Partnership working with schools, employers and other agencies is outstanding. Communication with partners is excellent and supported by regular meetings. The partnerships offer learners the opportunity to extend their learning by practical and vocational experience through planned enrichment opportunities.
- Support for learners is good with excellent initial information guidance and advice. Progress reviews are held regularly and their frequency differentiated to meet the needs of each learner. However, the implementation of the review system requires development. Target setting is weak and not linked closely

enough to further learning. The actions identified in reviews are not monitored sufficiently to ensure they are implemented.

- Leaders and managers set ambitious standards and have maintained high outcomes for learners since the last inspection though progression rates have not improved significantly since 2009. Acorn has undergone significant change in the last twelve months and this has been very well managed.
- The arrangements to safeguard all learners are good. All staff have undertaken training relevant to their job role and this is refreshed and up-dated. The provider has satisfactorily met the legislative requirements for criminal record bureau checking of staff. Work-place risk assessments are undertaken but are not recorded well enough. The provider has accurately identified its most vulnerable learners
- Acorn's approach to equality and diversity is good. Acorn is very proactive in ensuring that relationships with its main partners ensure that the most vulnerable young people are engaged in learning. It has been particularly successful in engaging care leavers and the homeless. However, the most vulnerable groups of learners do not progress as well as other groups.
- Self-assessment and development planning are good. Sound learner engagement strategies enable Acorn to improve its provision for the benefit of learners. Staff and partners satisfactorily contribute to the self-assessment process. Development plans are thorough and their implementation frequently reviewed.
- Value for money is good. Acorn has improved its accommodation and facilities considerably since the last inspection and they provide an excellent learning environment. The availability of learning materials to support learning is good. Acorn uses its resources in a sustainable way.

What does Acorn Training Consultants need to do to improve further?

- Improve outcomes for learners by implementing the plans to improve foundation and intermediate functional skills success rates and increasing the percentage of learners who progress to further education, training or work by ensuring all groups of learners progress well.
- Improve teaching and learning by providing more differentiated learning activities and updating functional skills learning resources so that they are more closely linked to the vocational areas.
- Improve assessment processes by providing more developmental feedback to learners and linking action plans following learner reviews more closely to future learning and ensuring that the implementation of these plans is monitored.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- the preparation for the next stage in their lives
- the enjoyable external visits
- the friendly and supportive staff
- the opportunity to 'taste' the programmes offered by Acorn whilst still at school
- the opportunity to gain work-related qualifications
- the adult approach to their programmes
- that the programmes help develop their social skills and boost their confidence.

What learners would like to see improved:

- none reported.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- that Acorn communicates well
- that Acorn is well organised.

What employers would like to see improved:

- none reported.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

9. Acorn's capacity to improve is good. It has successfully made the transition from the previous entry to employment programme to Foundation Learning. It has achieved this during a period of significant organisational change. Acorn has set ambitious targets and it has maintained its outstanding record of high qualification success rates and good progression rates for most learners.
10. Since the last inspection, Acorn has re-located to larger premises and the new resources are of high quality. It has developed classrooms which are specific to different vocational qualifications, contexts and enterprise activities. The provider has an excellent learner engagement strategy coupled with other good quality improvements processes which are constantly informing programme improvements. Acorn is committed to use its resources in a sustainable way and has a strong ethos of re-cycling consumables wherever possible.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 2

11. Outcomes for learners are good. Acorn has an excellent record in achieving high qualification success rates in the majority of its courses. While the success rate for functional skills at entry level is very high, the rates at foundation and intermediate levels, although improving, are low with only about half of learners succeeding. Acorn has identified actions to improve these rates and plans are at an advanced stage of implementation. Progression rates are good. Since 2009/10 around three-quarters of learners have progressed each year into further education, employment and training and early indicators are that rates will be maintained for 2011/12. The rates have not shown significant improvement in the last three years and not all groups of learners progress as well as each other.
12. Attendance is good and learners enjoy their training and participate well. Learners develop personal and social skills and knowledge which increase their ability to integrate socially and their employment prospects. Many learners take advantage of opportunities to gain further work-related qualifications through enrichment programmes such as basic food hygiene courses. Learners feel safe. Acorn offers a safe and welcoming environment for vulnerable learners. Learners understand the importance of keeping safe and receive good, clear information on cyber bullying and safe internet usage. Acorn promotes safe working practices and learners demonstrate a good understanding of health and safety.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

13. Teaching and learning are good. Tutors are well qualified and experienced, maintain a brisk pace in lessons and minimise well any potential for disruption and inappropriate learner behaviour. Learners enjoy the breadth and choice of learning. Physical classroom resources are excellent but functional skills learning resources require updating and linking more closely to the vocational pathways. Not all learners are challenged to achieve their full potential, for example in the teaching of functional skills, where activities are not sufficiently differentiated to meet all needs.
14. Assessment overall is satisfactory. Learners are motivated well to complete their assignments and most make satisfactory progress towards target completion dates. However, assessment planning is not sufficiently individualised and feedback to learners on the quality of their work is not sufficiently useful to help them improve.
15. The provision meets the needs and interests of its users well. It is located in an easily accessible location offering a wide range and choice of pathways at different levels. Learners have the opportunity to taste several learning options and/or levels prior to making their final choices.
16. Acorn has a wide range of excellent partnerships, in many cases long standing, which enhances the opportunities and support available to learners. Communication between partners is excellent, through, for example, regular meetings. Partnerships with employers, voluntary sector charitable organisations and community groups are mutually beneficial, providing, for example, well supported and relevant work tasters and enrichment opportunities which enhance learners vocational experience and enable learners to apply and develop their skills and increase their confidence.
17. Support for learners is good. Information, advice and guidance for prospective learners are excellent and identify clear learning pathways. Taster and induction periods effectively identify individual needs, interests and vocational profiles. All learners carry out work tasters in supportive realistic work environments either on-site or through enterprise activities. Acorn provides good extended support for transition into apprenticeships and further education.
18. The progress review process is satisfactory. Reviews are carried out regularly with learners and their frequency is determined by each learner's progress, attendance, attitude and need. A review worker is dedicated to working across all learning areas to ensure reviews are timely. Reviews track qualification completion in order to monitor on going progress. However, whilst elements of the process are well-conceived, its implementation is under-developed. Target setting is weak and the links made to further learning are not strong enough. Tutors receive insufficient feedback on the outcomes of reviews and it is unclear if identified actions are implemented.

Leadership and management

Grade 2

19. Leadership and management are good. The provider makes good use of management information systems and sets ambitious targets for the programme and generally these are met. However, insufficient attention is given to the key measure of learner progression when setting targets. Acorns' ambition for its foundation programme is strong and well understood by staff. The provider has an excellent understanding of national and local priorities and how its programme offer can meet the needs of young people who are not in education or employment. It has positioned its programmes to be complementary to other provision in the Amber Valley and to meet the needs of the local labour market. It has undergone significant organisational change recently and has managed this well.
20. The provider has good safeguarding arrangements. Acorn has appointed a designated safeguarding officer who has received high level training and all other staff have had recent refresher and other training. All staff receive checks from the Criminal Records Bureau and the records of these are kept satisfactorily. Acorn identifies well who its most vulnerable learners are and this informs support arrangements. The provider has satisfactory systems for referral to other agencies. It promotes safeguarding to learners particularly well and work-place risk assessments are satisfactory but not always recorded well. On commencement of a course learners are briefed on safeguarding and issued with details of who to contact should they have any concerns or other issues. Acorn has recently started to pay strong attention to e-safety, which it covers well during the early stages of training. Links with charities who have a clear focus on the protection of young people are well established but the sharing of information between other agencies for the benefit and safety of learners is at an early stage of development.
21. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Acorn has successfully targeted groups of learners who are traditionally hard to reach including disabled learners, care leavers, homeless learners and those who have long distances to travel to attend the centre. While a high percentage of disabled learners progress well only a small minority of other hard to reach learners progress satisfactorily to a positive destination. Promotion of equality and diversity to learners is good and they display strong respect for each other and to the staff of Acorn. Learners participate well in activities that are beneficial to the local community. Acorn has a comprehensive equality and diversity development plan and its implementation is helping to ensure that equality and diversity within its programmes continue to improve.
22. The provider has an excellent user engagement strategy. Learners' views are collected systematically through a variety of methods. Their views are sought frequently and acted upon when making decisions about programme improvements. The decisions are communicated well to learners. Close working

with its partners keeps Acorn informed of their views which are used well to help ensure programmes meet local circumstances and the needs of learners.

23. The self-assessment process is good. It is informed well by the views of staff and learners. The results from the annual quality cycle and a strong analysis of performance data inform self-assessment strongly. The current report is a broadly accurate account of the provision. However, inspectors awarded lower grades for many aspects of the provision. Development planning is particularly effective and is bringing about sound programme improvements. Plans have demanding targets and their implementation is closely monitored by senior staff. However, these plans have not yet brought about significant improvements in learner progression.
24. Value for money is good. The centre resources are very well managed to maximise their use and constantly improve their quality. Learners have excellent success in attaining their vocational learning goals and a large majority develop good skills and knowledge and progress to further education, training or work.

Information about the inspection

25. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and two additional inspectors, assisted by the provider's managing director, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, the previous inspection report and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
26. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails to gain the views of learners, employers and partners. They also looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed for the provider. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from the preparation for life and work programme that the provider offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Acorn Training Consultants Ltd

Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; **16-18 Learner responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation Learning tier, including Entry to Employment; **19+ responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses; **Employer responsive:** Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	16-18 Learner responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners		
Full-time learners	53	53
Part-time learners	0	0
Overall effectiveness	2	2
Capacity to improve	2	
Outcomes for learners	2	2
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	1	
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	1	
How well do learners progress?	2	
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2	
How safe do learners feel?	1	
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	n/a	
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	2	
Quality of provision	2	2
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2	
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	2	
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	1	
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2	
Leadership and management	2	2
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2	
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	n/a	
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2	
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	2	
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	1	
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	2	
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2	

*where applicable to the type of provision

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Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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W: www.ofsted.gov.uk