

GR and MM Blackledge

Employer

Inspection dates		16–19 July 2013
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good-2
	Previous inspection:	Good-2
Outcomes for learners		Outstanding-1
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Good-2
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Good-2

Summary of key findings for learners

This provider is good because:

- For many years nearly all of Blackledge's employees who started an apprenticeship have successfully completed their qualification, and have done so in the planned timescale.
- Apprentices develop their understanding of retail matters particularly well, and improve their skills in such things as dealing with complaints or stock control in a programme that is very relevant to their work in Blackledge's stores.
- Store managers have a strong commitment to, and understanding of, the apprenticeship programme. They go to great practical lengths to ensure their staff have the time and support they need and to succeed in their qualification.
- The team of assessors/trainers build a good rapport with learners at an early stage of the programme. They set high expectations and use good coaching skills to encourage learners to think about how the training is linked to their work.
- Good senior leadership has firmly embedded training as an important and integral part of the company's work, developing a strategy that meets the requirements of learners and the business.
- Routine management of training is good, with assessors taking personal responsibility for the effective delivery of their day-to-day work with a large number of apprentices.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- The programmes use a limited range of assessment methods and training materials.
- A few learners rely too heavily on their assessor to tell them how and when to complete parts of the apprenticeship and so do not fully develop their ability to work independently.
- Resources are insufficient to ensure that support for the new generation of directly-recruited apprentices and training for the relatively recent functional skills maintain previous standards.
- Quality assurance and improvement activities are insufficiently rigorous to help move the provision to even higher levels.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Extend the range of methods used to assess learners' performance and look for ways in which learners can be better involved in managing their own progress, reducing reliance on their assessors.
- Examine the way in which learners' functional skills needs are identified and support is delivered to ensure that future work can be properly resourced and offers learners a variety of effective ways of improving their performance.
- Review the range of possible quality improvement activities and determine which ones should be put into routine practice, in appropriate detail, to ensure that the quality of provision is improved even further.
- Ensure that the current support and care for all employees is extended to cover more specifically the safeguarding needs of young apprentices.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Outstanding
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- The proportion of learners who successfully achieve their apprenticeship qualification is outstanding. In recent years nearly all employees who started an apprenticeship programme achieved their qualification, and virtually all of them did so within their planned timescale. However, recent changes recruiting younger learners directly to apprenticeship posts rather than training existing staff will inevitably result in slightly lower success rates, given the numbers who have already left the programme.
- The apprenticeship programmes include a substantial amount of very useful learning and are conducted over an appropriate timescale. They meet the requirements of the qualification but in addition help learners develop skills which are extremely useful in their own workplace, such as advanced apprentices increasing their understanding of the importance of whole-shop presentation to the public.
- A training programme that allowed employees to take a vocational qualification in the workplace also had outstanding results in 2010/11. All learners, who were mostly managers, succeeded in successfully completing the course, and almost all did so before their expected end date.
- Blackledge's managers ensure that a rigorous selection process enables all applicants for an apprentice programme to have an equal chance of starting the programme. There are no variations in the performance of the main groups of learners in the subsequent training.
- Skill development is good. Programmes are very closely linked with routine work in company shops and complement Blackledge's own initial training programme. Learners develop a wide range of retail skills ranging from dealing with complaints and implementing actions to reduce shoplifting through to stock control. Learners also benefit from personal development; for instance, with practice verbal presentations on their training course leading to improved communication and confidence on the shop floor.
- Progression to further training or more senior positions is very good, although it is not yet clear how many of the recently directly recruited apprentices will continue into longer-term employment with Blackledge. Over half of Blackledge's store managers have successfully achieved qualifications, with many having used the training to help them progress to their current post.
- Progress is particularly good for a significant majority of learners, who work promptly through their vocational qualification with the close guidance and encouragement of their assessor and local managers.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- The quality of the teaching, learning and assessment is good and this is reflected in the outstanding outcomes. A significant contributor to this is the good training and high levels of continuing support received by learners from assessors and regional, area and store managers.
- Good training is provided for the retail programmes; learners work with learning resources that have been carefully adapted to reflect their employment with Blackledge. Learners enjoy the programmes and progress well as they can see that the training is highly relevant to their job role.
- Assessors establish a good and constructive relationship with their learners at an early stage of the programme. They set high expectations for their learners. Their good coaching skills enable learners to reflect on how their learning is improving their routine work. Learners engage in independent studies to support aspects of their programme in between assessor visits, such as reviewing health and safety legislation and employment law, and this contributes to their good progress.
- The apprenticeship programme is fully supported by store managers who ensure that their learners have every opportunity to successfully complete their course. Managers contribute to learners' progress reviews and routinely identify work-based training opportunities that support learners' programmes. They have a good understanding of the programme requirements and work closely with the assessor to provide good levels of motivational learning and high levels of personal support where needed.
- Learners undertake a range of training activities in the workplace, covering things such as stock rotation, security awareness and cashier and till training. Learners on intermediate programmes benefit from an innovative use of the store's electronic tills to provide an online portfolio and additional learning resources, enabling them to catch up on training in any quiet periods on a system with which they are comfortable.
- Learners use well-designed workbooks, which direct them methodically through learning activities for their programme and form the basis of assessment sessions. Assessors use question and answer techniques well to test and confirm individual learners' knowledge. However, they do not make regular use of other assessment methods or training materials to enable learners to demonstrate their learning in a wide range of contexts. On occasions, aspects of sessions are too tutor-led. However, learners generally enjoy the sessions and participate enthusiastically. Learners' work is mostly of a good standard.
- Too many targets set for learners by assessors are insufficiently detailed, often relating to the completion of whole units or questions in the programme workbook and they do not provide sufficient focus on aspects of knowledge or skills for the learner to develop. While learners have a clear understanding of when they have to complete their full qualification they have a limited understanding of when they might complete the various elements, particularly the functional skills, with a few learners lacking a sense of urgency on completing elements other than the vocational workbook until they are prompted by their assessor.
- Initial assessment is effective. A practical skills assessment is used well to establish applicants' suitability for retail employment as part of their interview. Assessors then use a skills audit well to ensure programmes match learners' work roles. However, prior retail experience is not taken into account when planning subsequent learning; all apprentices complete the same programme at the same rate which leads to a small number of intermediate apprentices feeling that the course is useful, but not overly challenging.
- The initial assessment of English and mathematics skills that learners complete at the start of their intermediate apprenticeship is appropriate but assessors do not make good use of the results to plan further development or support. When learners progress onto advanced apprenticeships they do not complete a further diagnostic assessment, which means their learning is based on potentially out-of-date information.
- Teaching and learning to fully develop learners' English and mathematics skills requires improvement. The current approach of just using worksheets and practice papers appears to be

working for learners who have a reasonable previous level of English and mathematics. However, there is insufficient capacity, too narrow a range of resources and a lack of staff with qualifications in teaching English and mathematics to ensure that learners who struggle with those subjects can always be given a good level of support. While assessors check learners' written work in the retail diploma to ensure the answers to questions are correct, they do not routinely correct spelling or grammar.

- Learners receive satisfactory information, advice and guidance about apprenticeships prior to starting their programmes, although too much information focuses on the retail diploma and not on the wider framework elements such as functional skills.
- Induction ensures that learners have a good introduction to equality and diversity and health and safety. They know who to contact both inside and out of the organisation if they feel they are being treated unfairly. Aspects such as discrimination are adequately discussed as they occur during learners' programmes. Assessors do not check or reinforce apprentices' awareness of personal safety; for instance, on what precautions to take when leaving a store late at night.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Blackledge has embedded the apprenticeship programme into its organisation particularly; this is to the benefit of learners and significantly helps the business. The aims of the training programme are respected at all levels in the company, with the many shop managers being particularly supportive of the development of their staff. The strong ambition for learners to succeed and to become the next generation of managers and leaders is a strong feature of the company's aims and is reflected in the very positive views of learners.
- The company's general approach to apprentices has recently been revised to recruit a greater proportion of younger people directly into apprentice posts; this was considered appropriately at the higher levels and fully supports national priorities. However, insufficient attention has been given as to whether additional resources will be required to help this new cohort of learners with further vocational training, personal assistance or more support to complete functional skills qualifications. With only two assessors, covering a large number of learners across the country, insufficient capacity currently exists for additional support to be provided.
- The assessors, who also provide coaching and support and manage the apprenticeship activities, are very experienced and ensure that training runs extremely well on a day-to-day basis. They have good back-up from an administrator and a manager. Outstanding outcomes and good provision have been maintained for many years. Communication between all levels of the company on apprenticeship matters is excellent; this is particularly effective given the dispersed nature of the provision. The company provides sufficient time and resources so that apprentices can complete the majority of their programme in the workplace.
- The training programme is over-reliant on informal communication and personal initiatives to monitor and improve the provision. Self-assessment and improvement planning are not yet fully developed. Formal observations of all aspects of training are not currently implemented and the use of performance data to measure the impact of improvement initiatives is not yet established. A more effective approach to the performance management of staff and a planned programme of personal development for staff is gradually being implemented.
- Blackledge ensures that all of its staff are protected from bullying and harassment. Employees understand the need for tolerance and respect of colleagues and customers, and this is reinforced during induction and in relevant learning for apprentices. Recruitment to the apprenticeship programme generally reflects the makeup of the workforce and this is monitored satisfactorily by managers. Managers effectively review, at appropriate intervals, the success of various groups of learners to ensure that there is no significant difference between their performance.
- Blackledge meets its statutory requirements for safeguarding learners. All employees benefit from personal support and care but changes have not yet been made to ensure safeguarding

arrangements are more rigorous as younger, directly-recruited apprentices increase in numbers. Planned changes include relevant training for staff and advice to learners on how they might report safeguarding concerns as well as clear procedures for staff who are reporting and dealing with concerns.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

GR & MM Blackledge		
Inspection grades are based on a provider's performance: 1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate	Overall	Apprenticeships
Overall effectiveness	2	2
Outcomes for learners	1	1
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	2	2
The effectiveness of leadership and management	2	2

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
Retailing and wholesaling	2

Additional socio-economic information

GR and MM Blackledge provides a range of toiletries, health and beauty products and fragrances through a network of over 130 stores, branded Bodycare or Grahams, located across England, Wales and Scotland. On average each store has around 10 employees and around 90% of the workforce is female. The family run business has many staff that stay with them for substantial periods. The original apprentice and workplace learning programmes were used to encourage employees to improve their retail skills and obtain a qualification. Of the current 140 learners, around a third have relatively recently been recruited to apprentice positions, with the intention that a proportion develop into senior staff and managers in the future.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Andy Harris HMI

One of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two additional inspectors, assisted by Blackledge's training and human resources manager as nominee, carried out the inspection with short notice. Inspectors took account of Blackledge's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors also used data on learners' achievements over the last three years to help them make judgements. Inspectors used group and individual interviews and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected throughout the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all of the provision at the provider. Inspectors looked at the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across all of the provision and graded the sector subject area listed in the report above.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement
Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Requires improvement
Grade 4	Inadequate

Detailed grade characteristics can be viewed in the *Handbook for the inspection of further education and skills 2012*, Part 2:

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/handbook-for-inspection-of-further-education-and-skills-september-2012>

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