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Mr L Head
Training Manager
SSE Services PLC
Training & Development
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Dear Mr Head

Short inspection of SSE Services PLC

Following the short inspection on 12 and 13 November 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The inspection was the first short inspection carried out since the provider was judged to be good in September 2012.

This provider continues to be good.

Leaders have maintained the good-quality training and assessment for apprentices since the previous inspection. You have eradicated inconsistencies in assessment practice and apprentices benefit from being taught and assessed by experienced and well-qualified staff. You have made a significant contribution to helping develop and pilot the new apprenticeship standards for the utility sector and are continually refining your own training and assessment to meet these standards. As a result, your apprenticeship programme continues to provide apprentices with the skills, knowledge and qualifications they need for a successful career at SSE Services PLC (SSE) and in the utility sector.

The large majority of apprentices successfully complete their apprenticeship and an increasing number do so within the planned time. All apprentices enter full-time employment with the company on completion of their apprenticeship. Apprentices demonstrate high levels of technical and personal skills. They quickly develop the skills and attitudes to make a significant contribution to the company's business and are a credit to the organisation. Their skills in repairing live electrical supply cables and gas pipework systems, and their ability to communicate with customers and the wider public are exemplary. Apprentices enjoy their training and value the opportunities and benefits they gain from working for SSE.

The large majority of apprentices join the programme with GCSEs in English and mathematics at grade C or above. You have taken effective action to support the few apprentices who do not quickly achieve the qualifications in English and mathematics which they need to complete their apprenticeship. The written work of the majority of apprentices is good. However, there remains inconsistency in the way mentors and assessors correct grammar and spelling in apprentices' work, resulting in a minority of apprentices not improving their written English as well as they could.

You have significantly reduced the number of organisations you subcontract with and removed most of the underperformance noted at the previous inspection. Communications between your staff and subcontractors are effective and ensure that any concerns with the behaviour or progress of your apprentices are reported and acted on quickly and effectively.

At the previous inspection, inspectors commended you for the improvements made to the programme and the support for the programme from senior managers within SSE. Inspectors also identified, however, the need for more formal processes to set individual targets for apprentices and to monitor the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

Managers have access to a wide range of information on the progress apprentices make and have continued to make improvements to the quality of training and assessment. However, managers have been slow to implement formal arrangements to monitor the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and as a result are not able to identify with enough precision how to improve it further.

Mentors and supervisors have high expectations of their apprentices and set them increasingly complex tasks that challenge them to improve their skills. However, the formal review process for apprentices does not result in sufficiently challenging targets to help them to progress as quickly as they are able to.

Safeguarding is effective.

Managers have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and they take appropriate action to safeguard learners. SSE places the safety of all staff at the heart of everything it does, and in particular the safety of young people. A culture of staying safe and well-being is evident throughout the organisation. Apprentices are acutely aware of the importance of safe working and understand how to be safe both at work and outside the work environment. Arrangements to help them to stay safe online, when travelling to and from work, and in hotels during training periods, are effective. Managers have made satisfactory progress in implementing the requirements of the Prevent duty.

Inspection findings

- Managers have maintained the good quality of teaching, learning and assessment for apprentices. Ongoing development for trainers and assessors and the excellent facilities in the majority of training centres ensure that apprentices learn well and are accurately assessed. The reduction in the number of subcontractors has largely removed the underperformance reported at the previous inspection. Managers, however, do not monitor the quality of teaching, learning and assessment closely enough to enable them to make the improvements needed for teaching, learning and assessment to be outstanding.
- Managers ensure that the apprenticeship programme continues to meet the changing needs of the business through their involvement in developing and piloting the new apprenticeship standards for the utility sector. This ensures that apprentices have the technical and personal skills necessary to gain meaningful employment and have successful careers.
- Managers communicate effectively with subcontractors to ensure that concerns and underperformance are quickly identified. They support them well to resolve issues.
- Trainers monitor the progress of apprentices well during formal training periods and ensure that those who need more time to master the skills required receive additional training. Supervisors and mentors in the workplace have high expectations of their apprentices and set them challenging and often complex tasks to help them to improve their skills. Apprentices have a thorough understanding of what they need to do to complete their apprenticeship. However, targets agreed with apprentices during formal progress reviews do not reflect these high expectations and do not ensure that all apprentices progress as quickly as they are able.
- Outcomes for apprentices are good. The large majority of apprentices successfully achieve their apprenticeship and progress to full employment with SSE. They gain very good technical and employability skills and are able to apply these well at work. We observed apprentices applying their skills in a range of demanding work settings with confidence and with very high regard for their own safety and that of others. Supervisors and managers are rightly proud of their apprentices and their achievements.
- Apprentices work well in teams and communicate clearly and effectively with their colleagues and customers. They develop the English and mathematics skills they need to undertake their jobs, and those without appropriate qualifications gain these by the end of their apprenticeship. However, mentors and assessors do not always correct spelling and grammar in apprentices' work or provide the support apprentices need to improve these skills further.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the quality of training and assessment, internally and at subcontractors' premises, is systematically monitored so that they can take action to bring about further improvements
- targets agreed at progress reviews are challenging enough to ensure that all apprentices, and in particular the most able, progress at a pace to reflect their capability
- that assessors and trainers correct spelling and grammar in apprentices' work and help them to develop the professional and technical language skills they need for their next career step.

I am copying this letter to the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Phil Romain
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, you assisted us as nominee. We met with you, your programme managers, and a sample of apprentices, assessors, trainers, subcontractors, and apprentices' mentors and supervisors. We observed apprentices in the training centre and at work, and looked at their assessed work. We reviewed key policies and documents, including those relating to self-assessment, performance and safeguarding. We also considered the views of apprentices.