

Acorn Training Consultants Ltd

Independent Training Provider

**Inspection dates**

19–21 January 2016

Overall effectiveness**Good**

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for learners	Good
16 to 19 study programmes	Good
Traineeships	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings

This is a good provider

- Effective leadership and management have resulted in the company maintaining the high standards found at the previous inspection. Curriculum management of the study programme and the traineeship is good.
- Quality assurance and improvement arrangements are good and have contributed to high standards of teaching and learning. Performance management of staff is good.
- Outcomes for learners on study programmes improved significantly in 2014/15 and are good. The majority of study programme learners progress to apprenticeships, employment or further education. Current learners make good progress.
- Initial assessment is thorough and tutors make good use of the results to plan individualised learning.
- Information, advice and guidance are particularly good. Learners have a good understanding of the requirements of their course and of the career pathways that are available to them.
- Learners gain good skills which help them improve their confidence and work readiness.
- Learners benefit from a wide range of good-quality work placements that improve their vocational and employability skills.

It is not yet an outstanding provider because

- Attendance and punctuality on the study programme are not yet good enough.
- Outcomes for learners taking functional skills level 2 tests require improvement.
- It is too soon to assess the full impact of recent management improvement actions.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Acorn Training Consultants is part of the international charity Rehab Group. They have a training centre in Ripley where they deliver study programmes and traineeships for young people aged 16–19. Acorn has 42 employees across six centres throughout Derbyshire. The provision focuses on supporting people of all ages within local communities into work. A team of 10 work directly on study programmes and traineeships. Almost all learners on study programmes have learning difficulties and disabilities or challenging behaviour.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Identify the reasons for study programme learners' poor punctuality and attendance and take corrective action.
- Identify the reasons for the poor performance of learners on functional skills tests at level 2 and take appropriate improvement action.
- Monitor and evaluate the impact of recent management actions to improve the provision.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- Good strategic leadership and effective curriculum management have resulted in the company successfully tackling many of the areas identified at the last inspection as requiring improvement. As a consequence, most aspects of the provision remain good.
- Leaders and managers have a clear focus on the quality of provision and they have high expectations of all learners irrespective of their personal and educational background. The good outcomes for learners on the study programme reflect these high expectations.
- The culture and ethos of the company has changed significantly since its takeover by Rehab, a national charity that works with disabled people and those experiencing disadvantage. The company now has a very clear focus on improving the life chances and employability of some of the most marginalised young people in Derbyshire.
- Managers apply robust quality assurance and quality improvement arrangements that have resulted in consistently good teaching and in a workforce that values and promotes the highest standards. The company has carried out a major restructuring of the organisation to ensure that it meets learners' needs effectively. Performance management arrangements were strengthened in late 2015. Early indications suggest that the impact of these robust arrangements is positive, though it is too soon to assess the full impact.
- Self-assessment is a rigorous and inclusive process. Most of the judgements in the draft self-assessment report and position statement prepared for the inspection are accurate. The involvement of trustees and senior officers in the scrutiny and validation of the draft self-assessment report is good.
- Arrangements for gaining feedback from learners are extensive. Managers inform learners promptly of the actions they have taken in response to concerns and issues raised. They made significant changes to the structure of the study programme in 2015/16 in response to learners' concerns about course timetabling and the delivery of the functional skills component of the programme. Improved in-year retention and positive learner feedback suggest that these changes have been positive.
- Managers provide good professional support and advice for tutors to help them improve. They provide constructive feedback on observed lessons and tutors complete detailed self-evaluation forms to help them record strengths and weaknesses in their practice.
- Leaders and managers have responded well to the relatively poor performance of learners on functional skills tests in English and mathematics. A new English and mathematics strategy has tightened arrangements for the initial assessment of functional skills and for allocating learners to a level that matches their prior attainment. Early indications of this approach are positive, though it is too soon to access the full impact.
- Staff at all levels have a better understanding of management information and how to use data for monitoring performance. As a result, tutors identify areas for improvement promptly and put effective interventions into place.
- The company concentrates its efforts well on the small proportion of the county's young people who are not in education, training or employment. As a consequence, most learners achieve, despite significant barriers to learning, such as a history of offending behaviour, poor attainment at school or an unstable home environment.
- Partnership working is highly effective, with local schools and county council officers referring disadvantaged young people to the provider's study programme or its traineeship provision.
- Managers ensure that curriculum planning meets the priorities identified by the local enterprise partnership and in Rehab's five-year strategic plan. The provider takes account of regional, educational, demographic and employment patterns and offers vocational pathways that meet local needs well.
- Acorn staff provide good-quality impartial careers advice and guidance which prepares learners well for their next steps. Former learners who are now in employment or on an apprenticeship visit the company to discuss their experiences with current learners. Acorn staff have also invited local employers to talk to learners. For those about to reach the end of their programme, the company runs a job club where Acorn staff provide support and good educational and careers guidance.
- Acorn's tutors actively promote equality and diversity in the classroom through the use of good learning materials and resources, and by the use of inclusive language. Posters and displays in classrooms and corridors tackle a range of sensitive subjects such as the dangers of extremism and bullying. Despite occasionally boisterous behaviour, most learners are respectful of each other and of staff.

■ The governance of the provider

- Trustees and senior Rehab staff very effectively support and challenge Acorn's head of operations to maintain the focus on quality and to drive rapid improvements.
- They have a very clear strategic view of the provision and are particularly strong advocates of training and employment for the most marginalised young people in the county.

■ The arrangements for safeguarding are effective

- Acorn promotes safeguarding well. It ensures that all staff receive appropriate recruitment checks and maintains up-to-date detailed records of all employees.
- Tutors promote safe work practices very well, particularly in construction sessions. Company staff carry out comprehensive assessments of health and safety in learners' placements. Learners' understanding of health and safety is good.
- Managers have completed a comprehensive action plan and risk assessment to meet the company's responsibilities to prevent extremism and radicalisation.
- All staff and directors are appropriately trained in the prevention of extremism and equality and diversity and have a clear understanding of what to do if they have a concern.
- The impact of Acorn's work on safeguarding and prevent is positive. Learners feel safe, behave well and understand concepts such as the values that underpin British society.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Learners make good progress in their skills development, achievement of vocational qualifications and preparation for employment.
- Tutors have good vocational knowledge and experience that they use well to provide good coaching and support in learning sessions. They plan sessions well to ensure that learners have individual targets based on their ability and knowledge. Classroom behaviour is mostly very good and tutors challenge any misbehaviour effectively.
- Learners work very well in teaching sessions, completing activities and tasks that meet their individual needs. Learning is reinforced effectively during group discussions when learners describe their individual work placement experiences such as the skills learnt when working with young children.
- Learners complete a variety of assignments to a high standard and monitor their own progress towards a qualification or personal development plan well. Tutors provide good verbal and written feedback that helps learners to improve. Portfolios are of a high standard and have clear annotations identifying where improvements are required.
- Staff have high expectations of learners and continually challenge poor punctuality or inappropriate language, emphasising the importance of these skills to employers and customers in the workplace. However, attendance and learner punctuality for those on study programmes remains a concern, as too many arrive late and this sometimes delays learning.
- Employer engagement officers work very effectively with employers to organise work experience placements for learners on study programmes and traineeships. Employers plan work activities well to ensure that learners undertake relevant work and gain a broad range of skills. Learners enjoy their placements and make good progress in developing employability and vocational skills.
- Initial assessment for all learners is very thorough. A comprehensive English and mathematics diagnostic assessment provides accurate information of learners' skills levels and support needs. Learners contribute to their own initial assessment well by clearly identifying personal goals. A recently introduced personal and social skills initial assessment tool provides good information on learners' strengths and on those aspects that they could further improve.
- Initial information, advice and guidance are very effective in giving learners a good understanding of their course and future progression opportunities. Learners receive a thorough exit interview to review their achievements and plan their next steps. Learners become much more optimistic about the future and take responsibility for planning their career.
- Reviews of learners' progress are very effective. Mentors use feedback from subject tutors as well as from the work placement to monitor progress closely at each four-weekly review. They set targets that are specific, relevant and time-bound. Study programme learners contribute well, routinely recording their own progress in portfolios. Employability skills such as self-confidence, attendance and punctuality are also carefully monitored. Learners have a good understanding of the actions that are set, and what they need to do to progress further.

- Tutors and mentors provide good personal support for all learners. This particularly helps study programme learners to re-engage in learning, often after previous negative experiences at school. Information such as sexual health is readily available.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Learners receive a good range of information at induction, including on topics such as harassment. Staff check learners' understanding regularly during reviews. Tutors also introduce equality topics, such as gender equality, during learning sessions. These help raise learners' awareness.
- Learners improve their English and mathematics skills well through group teaching and independent learning. In mathematics, learners work on tasks that reflect the support needs identified at initial assessment. Acorn provides good-quality learning resources for aspects such as fractions and decimals. In English, learners mostly make good progress and become more confident in their communication skills. Tutors correct most spelling errors but they do not sufficiently encourage learners to correct these errors themselves.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare are good

- The vast majority of learners improve their self-confidence significantly and become more assured and competent when interacting with tutors, work colleagues and service users. Learners respond well to their tutors' high expectations throughout their programme.
- Work placements are of very good quality and all learners develop a range of useful work skills including reception duties, customer service and working with young children. All learners receive highly effective support. As a result, they develop appropriate skills and behaviours and achieve a relevant vocational qualification. Learners on traineeships have a particularly good appreciation of their aims and career paths and develop good work-related skills and behaviours.
- Learners have a good understanding of their next steps and what they need to do to succeed. All staff set high expectations of their learners and ensure that they know how to stay safe, have a good understanding of health and safety in the workplace and how to use relevant personal protective equipment.
- Attendance and punctuality on the traineeship programme is good. However, attendance on study programmes is low and Acorn's attendance targets are unambitious. Punctuality on study programmes is often poor.
- All learners develop good underpinning knowledge which prepares them well for their work placement through their vocational training sessions. They learn how to work effectively with each other and independently. For example, learners on the construction study programme learn how to construct a brick wall to specific dimensions and ensure that their shovels and trowels do not constitute a hazard to themselves and others. The standard of learners' practical work is high and they produce good-quality work in their portfolios.
- All learn in an atmosphere of mutual respect and have a good awareness of the diverse society in which they live. They feel safe and are aware of how to raise concerns if they experience harassment or bullying. Generally, learners develop a good understanding of the values that underpin British society and are aware of the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism. Impressive learner-designed displays in public areas warn of the dangers of radicalisation and extremism, bullying and harassment.

Outcomes for learners are good

- Learners on study programmes and traineeships make good progress. The study programme is flexible and meets the diverse needs and abilities of learners well. Study options provide learners with a good range of pathways and qualifications. As a result, the vast majority of learners make good progress from their starting points.
- Progression from the study programme into apprenticeships, employment and further education is good. Overall qualification success rates on the study programme have improved significantly since 2013/14 and are now good. Functional skills qualifications in English and mathematics at level 1 have also improved and are good. However, success rates for learners who study English and mathematics at level 2 remain low.
- Current learners on traineeships make good progress and develop useful vocational skills. Very few have completed their studies, as the programme started in September 2015.

- Retention on both study and the traineeship programmes is good. Most learners who complete their chosen pathway and programme of study achieve their qualification aims. Learners are prepared well for the next stage of their study. No significant gaps in performance exist between different groups of learners.

Types of provision

16 to 19 study programmes

are good

- Thirty-six learners study at level 1 in business and administration, childcare, construction, hair and beauty, and health and social care. Leaders, tutors and mentors have high achievement expectations and set challenging targets for learners. As a consequence, learners make good progress and gain confidence, becoming much more positive about their future career prospects.
- Employer engagement officers work effectively with employers resulting in a very good range of work placements that meet learners' needs very well. Employers provide a positive learning experience, enabling learners to develop a wide range of personal and vocational skills.
- Staff and employers plan work activities very well to ensure that learners undertake relevant work and gain a broad range of vocational skills. For example, an administration learner works in a variety of sections in the workplace to broaden understanding and develop skills in customer service, reception work, filing, scanning and taking bookings. At another placement, a hair and beauty learner enhances their practical skills in nails, washing and drying hair and customer service. However, tutors do not always record action to be taken or measure progress sufficiently well while learners are on placement. As a result, learners and employers are not always sufficiently clear what they should do to develop skills further.
- Initial assessment is very thorough, accurately identifying learners' starting points and their workplace and individual learning goals. Diagnostic assessment for English and mathematics is very effective in identifying specific weak areas and learners make good use of relevant learning resources to improve skills such as fractions and decimals.
- Teaching for qualification aims is effective and tutors set challenging and realistic targets for learners to achieve. Learners work towards both a vocational qualification and qualifications in customer service and employability skills. Tutors take care to plan learning sessions which meet the needs of learners of different abilities and prior attainment.
- Learners receive good-quality information, advice and guidance at the start of their study programme. They develop a good understanding of their course and how it will help prepare them for further learning and employment. Learners have a good understanding of their next steps, and produce a long-term plan that includes stepping stones, such as traineeships and apprenticeships, that will help them achieve their career objectives.
- Overall attendance requires improvement. Managers do not set sufficiently challenging attendance targets. Punctuality at off-the-job learning sessions also requires improvement. Too many learners are late too often, which delays learning for all.
- Learners feel very safe at the learning centre and on placement and have a good understanding of what they need to do to report any concerns. Information on housing, welfare and other support agencies is easily accessible at the learning centre.

Traineeships

are good

- Acorn's traineeship programme began in September 2015 with a small cohort that has now expanded to 15 learners. They learn important employability skills that prepare them well for their chosen work placement or career pathway.
- Tutors set learners challenging targets which help trainees progress and achieve. They gain confidence and become much more aware of the range of opportunities available to them. Employer engagement officers work effectively with employers to identify a range of good-quality work placements that meet trainees' needs well. Employers are very positive about the traineeship initiative and offer good-quality support and guidance that trainees value.
- Trainees receive a thorough initial assessment that accurately identifies their attainment in English and mathematics and any additional support needs. Tutors make good use of the results of these initial assessments to devise appropriate learning and support resources.

- Teaching on the traineeship programme is good. Tutors plan sessions well to make learning interesting and engaging. For example, during employability sessions trainees produced good-quality CVs and were engaged well in lively discussion about self-employment opportunities and local industry. Evaluations by trainees of the quality of these sessions are very positive.
- Trainees receive good-quality information, advice and guidance at the start of the programme. They develop a good understanding of their course and how it may lead to an apprenticeship or other course of study. Trainees have a good understanding of their next steps and have clear plans as to how they will achieve their learning and work goals. They make good progress in their English and mathematics and understand the importance of these skills in the workplace. Acorn staff provide a wide range of information and guidance to help learners with housing, travel, finance and welfare.
- Trainees are respectful and courteous to each other. They behave well in class and treat their peers and their tutors well. Tutors positively encourage trainees to develop an understanding of diversity and difference.

Provider details

Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	16–18
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	77
Principal/CEO	Katherine Stephens
Website address	http://www.acorn-training.com/

Provider information at the time of the inspection

Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 and above	
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
	36							
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
Number of traineeships								
	16–19		19+		Total			
Number of learners aged 14–16	15							
Funding received from	Education Funding Agency (EFA)							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	None							

Information about this inspection

Inspection team

Bob Hamp, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Jai Sharda, assistant lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Gary Adkins	Ofsted Inspector

The above team was assisted by the quality improvement manager, as nominee, and carried out the inspection at short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of students and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

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