

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 013 13376
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mrs H Baxter
Managing Director
Starting Off (Northampton) Ltd
3–5 Wood Hill
Northampton
NN1 2DA

Dear Mrs Baxter

Short inspection of Starting Off (Northampton) Ltd

Following the short inspection on 23 and 24 March 2016, 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 October 2010.

This provider continues to be good.

- The senior management team continues to provide a safe learning environment that supports very effectively apprentices' achievement. The training outcomes for the majority of apprentices are good with very high success rates on most apprenticeship courses.
- You have responded well to the needs of local employers. The range of training programmes you offer is closely linked to the needs of local businesses and supports the career aspirations of apprentices well. A high proportion of apprentices progress to further and higher levels of training as well as taking on more responsibilities in their workplace.
- Since the previous inspection, leaders and managers have maintained a clear focus on monitoring all aspects of training and driving improvements. Quality improvement arrangements have maintained the high quality of teaching and learning and successfully meet the needs of apprentices and employers.
- Staff at all levels have a sound understanding of your organisation and the needs of apprentices and employers, which allows you to identify and plan appropriate actions to address areas for improvement.

Safeguarding is effective.

- Leaders and managers have maintained and further improved the effective safeguarding arrangements noted at the previous inspection. Senior managers have ensured a supportive culture and all staff fully understand their responsibilities.

- An appropriate range of relevant policies and procedures effectively promotes the protection and safety of apprentices. All staff have completed online safeguarding update training. Staff, and work- and training places are subject to thorough vetting which contributes to apprentices feeling safe. Managers closely monitor the attendance of apprentices aged 16 to 19 and follow up any unexpected absence immediately.
- You have maintained good links with the Local Safeguarding Children Board, police service and a youth work agency to provide help to apprentices on the rare occasions when they raise concerns. Apprentices demonstrate a good understanding of how safeguarding applies to them at work and in training centres. They are confident that training staff will listen to them, take their concerns seriously and deal with these quickly.
- You provide very effective support for young people who are leaving the care of a local authority to make a safe transition to independent living.
- Leaders and managers give an appropriate priority to ensuring that training staff and apprentices have a working understanding of the risks posed by radicalisation. Apprentices have an adequate understanding of British values and how these are relevant to their working lives. For example, accountancy apprentices develop a good awareness of business ethics and are able to discuss its relevance to their life outside work. However, the impact of recent training in the Prevent duty on the practice of training staff has not yet been evaluated.

Inspection findings

- You have managed the transition of ownership particularly well. Arrangements for the previous owner to provide detailed, expert information about the provision, staff and partners to the new managing director are highly effective. As a result, leaders and managers have maintained the good quality of teaching, learning and assessment since the previous inspection.
- Performance management arrangements are effective. Managers make good use of relevant key indicators to manage staff performance and to plan an extensive range of training and development. Overall, and timely, success rates for apprentices are improving.
- The regular, direct observation of teaching, learning and assessment correctly identifies key areas for improvement. However, records of completed observations do not consistently focus on the learning taking place and the progress made by learners. This was an area for improvement at the previous inspection.
- Managers have continued their careful design of apprenticeship programmes to ensure that they fit the requirements of employers and learners. Almost all apprentices attend weekly off-the-job training sessions in one of the company's centres. This approach has resulted in sustained improvement in functional skills achievement and high retention rates.
- You have responded well to meet the needs of small- to medium-sized employers. For example, business administration apprentices demonstrate improved report-writing skills and telephone techniques that employers value very highly.

- Managers have recently introduced a new progress review procedure, supported by the introduction of a new e-portfolio system. The risks of apprentices leaving training early are now identified much earlier and work-related skill development is better recorded. However, more detailed contributions are still required from employers.
- Apprentices enjoy their learning. Many employers provide high levels of support for apprentices, which often includes a range of good-quality training, such as the use of bespoke accounting software and technical vocabulary necessary to support customers effectively.
- The majority make good progress with their learning. However, individual objective-setting in training sessions is not consistently effective to ensure that all apprentices make fast progress and extend their learning.
- The quality of apprentices' completed work and portfolios is of a good standard and apprentices develop a wide range of useful work-related skills. For example, a business administration apprentice is using their improved knowledge of spreadsheets to improve productivity in their workplace.
- Apprentices are developing their English and mathematics skills well. The success rates for English and mathematics qualifications have improved and apprentices use their new skills successfully in the workplace. For example, accounting apprentices use their improved ability to add and subtract decimals to generate accurate profit and loss reports. However, assessors do not consistently correct misspellings and grammatical mistakes, or provide suggestions as to how apprentices can improve.
- You have recently introduced strategies to improve learners' understanding of equality and diversity. These give apprentices who have attended the discrete training sessions a better appreciation of relevant topics and how they can use this learning in their workplace.
- Since the previous inspection, managers have maintained good success rates for the large majority of apprentices, particularly within accountancy programmes. However, success rates for the minority of learners on intermediate-level apprenticeships in business administration require improvement.
- The majority of apprentices are retained by their employers on completion of their training and many gain promotion and take on additional responsibilities in their workplace.
- The large majority of apprentices are enthusiastic and keen to progress in order to support their career aspirations. The proportion of apprentices who go on to higher levels of apprenticeships or higher education is high.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teaching, learning and assessment improve further by the accurate identification and sharing of good practice through robust observations of teaching, learning and assessment
- training staff improve the assessment of spelling, grammar and punctuation in apprentices' written work and provide good-quality feedback on how to improve further

- training staff improve the identification and agreement of challenging learning targets in off-the-job training sessions so that all apprentices make rapid progress and achieve within the planned timescale
- training staff improve the monitoring and recording of employment-related skill development and behaviours during progress reviews, including the views of all employers
- tutors and assessors draw upon relevant and carefully selected media reports to support discussions about the dangers of radicalisation and extremism so that all apprentices develop their understanding of these dangers and their ability to protect themselves and their colleagues.

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

Gerard McGrath
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the short inspection, the apprenticeship ambassador, as nominee, assisted inspectors. Inspectors met with senior leaders, managers, staff, employers and apprentices, using both face-to-face and telephone interviews. Key documents, including those related to self-assessment, performance and safeguarding, were reviewed. Inspectors visited training centres and workplaces to discuss with learners their experience of the training they receive, assess their progress and scrutinise the quality of their completed work. In addition, inspectors observed teaching, learning and assessment sessions.