

Softmist Limited (trading as Skillspoint)

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates

29 November–2 December 2016

| Overall effectiveness | | Requires improvement | |
|--|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Effectiveness of leadership and management | Requires improvement | Adult learning programmes | Good |
| Quality of teaching, learning and assessment | Requires improvement | Apprenticeships | Requires improvement |
| Personal development, behaviour and welfare | Requires improvement | | |
| Outcomes for learners | Inadequate | | |
| Overall effectiveness at previous inspection | | | Good |

Summary of key findings

This is a provider that requires improvement

- Outcomes for learners are inadequate. Achievement rates on apprenticeships fell significantly In 2015/16. Few apprentices achieve their qualifications within the planned duration of their programme.
- Trainer/assessors fail to set specific and demanding learning goals. As a result, apprentices do not make the progress of which they are capable.
- Managers do not systematically monitor the progress of all learners and apprentices.
- Senior leaders and managers, including those with a responsibility for governance, have been slow to address the areas of weakness identified at the previous inspection.
- Management actions have not yet led to consistently good-quality teaching, learning and assessment across all of the provision.
- The development and introduction of traineeship programmes have been ineffective.
- Many apprentices have a superficial understanding of the risks of radicalisation and extremism, and consequently do not know how to report concerns.

The provider has the following strengths

- Achievement rates for adult learners are high.
- Learners on adult learning programmes, many of whom have significant barriers to learning, develop good personal and employment-related skills.
- Managers have improved achievement rates in English and mathematics functional skills and these are now high.
- Most current apprentices make at least the progress expected of them.
- Workplace supervisors and trainer/assessors provide good coaching and support that help apprentices to develop good technical and personal skills.
- Senior leaders and managers work very well with employers and local enterprise partnerships to provide a range of programmes that meet their skills requirements.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Softmist Limited (Softmist), incorporated in September 2006, began trading as Skillspoint in January 2007. It operated as a privately owned business until it was acquired by the Staffline Group in July 2014. Softmist currently works with eight subcontractors who provide apprenticeships and workplace learning in a wide variety of locations, employment sectors and settings throughout England.
- The large majority of provision is delivered via subcontracting arrangements, with a small amount of directly delivered provision. Currently around 85% of the provision is apprenticeships in various sectors. Softmist also offers traineeships, workplace training and training for unemployed adults. At the time of the inspection, 576 learners were in training. Of these, 489 were apprentices, one learner was on a traineeship and 86 learners were attending a range of short adult learning programmes.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Raise achievement rates for apprentices by ensuring that weaknesses in poorer provision are tackled urgently, particularly in business administration and law programmes.
- Managers should use appropriate information about the progress of current apprentices to ensure that all apprentices make good progress with their learning.
- Leaders and managers must ensure that learners and apprentices benefit from high-quality teaching, learning and assessment. In particular, they must ensure that:
 - trainer/assessors set high expectations for all learners and apprentices
 - trainer/assessors plan and review learning to meet individual learners' and apprentices' needs
 - employers play a meaningful part in progress reviews and effectively link learning to workplace practices
 - trainer/assessors' feedback to learners and apprentices clearly indicates how they can improve their skills and knowledge
 - learners and apprentices make good progress in their learning as a result of specific and challenging learning targets.
- Ensure that the new governance arrangements provide the necessary scrutiny and challenge so that the quality of provision swiftly reaches consistently high standards.
- Develop trainer/assessors' skills and confidence to help learners and apprentices understand how to keep themselves safe from those people who advocate radical views and extremism.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Senior leaders and managers have been slow to take action to improve the quality of the provision. Too many aspects of teaching and assessment delivered by subcontractors are not consistently good. As a result, the proportion of apprentices who achieved all parts of their framework in 2015/16 fell significantly and a large majority of those who succeeded did not do so within the planned timescale of their programmes.
- The introduction of traineeship programmes was ineffective and outcomes for learners on these programmes in 2015/16 were very low. Senior managers have taken the decision to discontinue these programmes.
- Managers have not focused on the key areas that require most rapid improvement. For example, employers often do not take part in reviews and these meetings are not of a consistently high standard to support learning.
- Managers do not manage subcontracted provision robustly enough to ensure that all learners succeed in a timely way. A small number of subcontractors submit incomplete, or inaccurate, information about the progress of current apprentices.
- Managers set ineffective and identical performance targets for subcontractors. Where subcontractors are already performing well, targets are insufficiently challenging, and for underperforming subcontractors targets are unrealistic.
- Managers have had some recent success in improving the performance of underperforming subcontractors and most current apprentices now make the progress expected of them. Managers terminated the contracts of subcontractors who consistently failed to make the necessary improvements.
- Managers make insufficient use of feedback from apprentices and learners to evaluate the quality of learning. Observations of teaching, learning and assessment focus on the performance of the trainer/assessors rather than on the learning taking place and the development of new skills and knowledge by learners.
- Managers have implemented a successful strategy to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in English and mathematics. Achievement rates on functional skills English and mathematics qualifications are high for adult learners and improving for apprentices.
- Managers and leaders work very well with local enterprise partnerships and a range of employers to identify and develop courses in response to local skills shortages. For example, as a result of a relationship with a large employer, a significant number of adult learners improve their English skills, sustain their employment and a few progress to further training.
- The quality of provision for adult learners, many of whom have significant barriers to learning and employment, is good. Managers have sustained high achievement rates for adults over the last three years.

The governance of the provider

- The scrutiny and challenge provided by those who exercise governance are not well established and require further improvement. There has been little sharing of good practice to drive continuous improvement of the provision. As a result, the overall effectiveness of the provision has declined from the previous inspection.
- Staffline has recently strengthened governance arrangements and now includes stronger leadership from within the group. Board members receive information about the performance of subcontractors but, until very recently, did not receive enough information about the quality of the subcontracted provision to challenge managers and hold them to good account. The focus of the monthly skills account board meeting is now on using more detailed and relevant performance data to drive improvement.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- All managers with a responsibility for safeguarding have a good working knowledge and are suitably qualified.
- Managers ensure that subcontractors carry out appropriate checks on all staff and keep accurate records. Managers ensure that all staff complete relevant training to protect apprentices and learners from extremism and radicalisation. However, managers have not ensured that trainer/assessors are confident and skilful enough to extend apprentices' understanding of these topics.
- The manager responsible for safeguarding maintains suitable records and investigates appropriately the small number of safeguarding incidents.
- Managers ensure that employers have good health and safety procedures, and that apprentices and learners understand their rights and responsibilities in their workplaces.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment varies across the subcontracted provision and between the different programmes. As a result, the progress and achievement of adult learners are significantly higher than those of apprentices.
- Trainer/assessors do not have consistently high expectations of what apprentices can achieve and the speed at which they can progress.
- A significant proportion of apprentices do not receive the standard of teaching, learning and assessment required to help them achieve in agreed timescales, and consequently their progress is slow. In group learning sessions, trainer/assessors do not make good use of the information they have about apprentices to deliver learning and assessment that challenge or stimulate them. The focus of these sessions is programme delivery and not individual skills development and, as a result, apprentices do not make the progress of which they are capable.

- Assessment practice requires improvement. Knowledge and skills development are not the clear focus of assessment. For example, targets set by trainer/assessors often identify unit completion as an indicator of progress without reference to the skills or behavioural development that the apprentice is expected to make. Written feedback on submitted work does not clearly identify what apprentices need to do to improve. However, verbal feedback is more effective in probing and questioning apprentices' understanding, and providing more detailed and specific information.
- English and mathematics skills development of apprentices is improving through the recent introduction of specialist support.
- Reviews are flexible to meet apprentices' work demands but employers do not always attend the reviews and they are ineffective in accelerating apprentices' progress.
- In the better adult learning sessions, knowledge and skills development are clearly evident. Learning is enjoyable and activities are relevant to learners' employment and course content. Learners develop useful employability skills, such as their ability to communicate in group situations or by writing a curriculum vitae, that prepare them well for their next steps.
- Apprentices engage enthusiastically in meaningful work-based tasks that often add value to their employers' businesses – for example, apprentices on business improvement techniques programmes learn how to organise their workplace in the safest and most efficient manner.
- Trainer/assessors are well qualified with good, up-to-date sector experience and knowledge that they use well to coach and guide learners and apprentices. As a result, learners and apprentices enjoy their learning and feel well supported.
- Trainer/assessors and employers give the health and safety of learners and apprentices a high priority. Consequently, learners and apprentices feel safe and have a sound understanding of appropriate behaviours in the workplace. They develop a good understanding of equality and diversity and, as a result, demonstrate tolerance and respect for others.
- Learners and apprentices have a good awareness of what to do if they are harassed or bullied, but they do not yet have a clear understanding of the 'Prevent' duty and the dangers associated with radicalisation and extremism.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Requires improvement

- Trainer/assessors do not regularly set high enough expectations for apprentices. As a result, not all apprentices progress at the rate of which they are capable.
- Many apprentices do not have a sufficiently broad understanding of the risks associated with extremism and radicalisation. Trainer/assessors do not confidently reinforce this topic in progress reviews to deepen learners' and apprentices' understanding.
- Apprentices develop appropriate English and mathematics skills that they require for employment and promotion. Few apprentices develop their English and mathematics skills beyond the minimum requirement for their programme. Adult learners develop very useful English skills that support their employability.

- Apprentices and learners have good attitudes to work and are proud of what they achieve. Apprentices and learners are polite, courteous and demonstrate good behaviour when in work and learning sessions.
- The standard of apprentices' and learners' written work is good.
- Most apprentices develop employment-related skills that are valued by their employers, enabling most to secure permanent employment at the end of their training. Apprentices develop a broad range of practical skills – for example, excellent communication skills when dealing with exacting customers in a jewellery retail setting, and butchery apprentices gaining a high degree of proficiency in knife skills.
- Learners on adult learning programmes develop effective job search and communication skills which help them to gain, or maintain, sustained employment and enhance their self-esteem and confidence significantly.
- Careers information, advice and guidance for apprentices are effective. Learners receive useful advice and support in reviewing their career options and in deciding longer-term aspirations.
- Learners and apprentices report that they feel safe and know whom to contact if they have any concerns. Apprentices, particularly those working in potentially high-risk areas such as dental surgeries and very busy food preparation facilities, have a good working knowledge of health and safety principles and demonstrate safe working practices.

Outcomes for learners

Inadequate

- Outcomes for apprentices and learners rose in 2014/15. However, the achievement rates of apprentices fell significantly in 2015/16 and achievement rates on the newly introduced traineeship programme were very low. Senior managers continue to offer encouragement and support to the one remaining trainee, who is learning well, but have taken the decision to discontinue these programmes.
- Achievements for adult learners have remained consistently high over the three years since the previous inspection.
- The proportion of apprentices achieving in 2015/16 declined to below the national rate of similar providers. The achievement rates for those on intermediate apprenticeship programmes were low, particularly on business administration and law programmes where achievement rates had been persistently low for the previous three years. Too many apprentices in 2015/16 did not complete their programmes successfully within the planned timescale. However, current apprentices make at least the progress expected of them.
- The proportion of trainees achieving qualifications in 2015/16 was very low. A majority of these learners left having achieved none of their learning goals.
- Qualification achievement rates on adult learning programmes are consistently high. Many learners on employability skills courses gain employment.
- Apprentices and learners improve their English and mathematical skills well. Achievement rates of functional skills qualifications in English and mathematics are high.
- A high proportion of apprentices who achieve their intermediate-level qualifications progress to advanced-level programmes.

Types of provision

Adult learning programmes

Good

- At the time of the inspection, 86 learners attended a range of courses, including English, mathematics, employability and vocational subjects, with the large majority on short and part-time courses. Softmist also offers courses in response to employers' needs.
- Employed learners develop effective English skills which improve their performance at work. Achievement rates of entry level functional skills qualifications are high. Learners in a sector-based work academy develop useful knowledge and skills in food safety.
- Senior Softmist managers use labour market information well to ensure that training matches skills shortages and job opportunities in local areas. Managers and employers provide well-designed programmes that equip learners with the necessary skills for employment. Most learners are very motivated, value greatly what they learn, and improve their self-esteem and employability.
- Trainers have a good understanding of learners' starting points and their significant barriers to employment, some of which may inhibit learning. They use this information well to meet individual learners' support needs. Trainers make clear references between learning and relevant activities in the workplace to ensure that learners recognise the importance and usefulness of their learning. As a result, learners make good progress and almost all succeed.
- Trainers provide learners with good advice and guidance and pastoral support so that they can progress and sustain employment.
- Learners enjoy their learning, demonstrate good attitudes to work and attendance rates are high.
- Most learners improve their understanding of equality and diversity topics, including the widely differing needs of their employers' customers, and recognise how their behaviours affect the people whom they meet. As a result, they are well prepared for life and work in modern Britain. However, many learners have a superficial understanding of radicalisation and how to protect themselves from the risks of extremism.

Apprenticeships

Requires improvement

- At the time of the inspection, 489 apprentices were in training in a range of vocational subjects including customer service, supporting education and training, dental nursing and business improvement techniques. Around one third were on intermediate-level programmes. Just under two thirds were on advanced apprenticeships.
- Too few apprentices in 2015/16 successfully completed their qualification and did so within the planned timescale. Current apprentices are making at least the progress expected of them.

- Few employers are involved in progress reviews and are therefore not fully aware of the progress that apprentices make or need to make towards their qualifications. As a result, a few employers are not always able to support apprentices to complete their academic assignments. Employers speak highly of the skill development of apprentices and the positive contributions that they make in the workplace. A few apprentices have gained promotion or taken on additional responsibilities as a result of their learning.
- Feedback on work is often encouraging but does not identify the specific areas apprentices need to work on to improve the quality of their work. Questioning during training and assessment often confirms knowledge and understanding but does not pose sufficient challenge for apprentices' skills development.
- Targets set by trainer/assessors are often insufficiently demanding, detailed or specific, and do not identify the knowledge and skills development apprentices need to make. Consequently, a few current learners make slow progress and those who are most able do not progress quickly enough. Few apprentices have developed the necessary skills for independent research.
- Assessors use their good subject knowledge effectively to record on-the-job training. Most employers support apprentices well in the workplace and ensure that they undertake meaningful work to achieve their learning aims.
- Most apprentices are helped by closer integration and improved monitoring of English and mathematics skill development throughout their programme. Achievement rates of functional skills English and mathematics qualifications by apprentices have improved in the current year.
- Assessors promote the importance of oral English skills development well. Consequently, apprentices use professional terminology accurately when communicating with colleagues in the workplace. However, assessors do not consistently correct apprentices' spelling and grammar mistakes or provide them with support to identify and correct these errors themselves.
- Apprentices make a valuable contribution to their employers' businesses. Apprentices' behaviour is good, and meets professional standards. The vast majority of apprentices progress to sustained employment.
- The many effective collaborative links between employers, assessors and apprentices result in apprentices following bespoke pathways tailored to their future career aspirations and the needs of the business. For example, a national meat processing plant has developed a programme with one subcontractor to provide additional skills in butchery.
- Most apprentices make good progress in the development of technical skills through their workplace training. Assessors help apprentices to understand the theoretical basis of what underpins their practical work well. This helps them to develop more confidence and relate their knowledge and skills to industry standards.
- Apprentices feel safe in the workplace. A few apprentices work in high-risk areas and display maturity and care when operating machinery.

- Assessors make appropriate checks of apprentices' understanding of safeguarding, equality and diversity during assessments and reviews. They have begun to discuss the dangers of radicalisation and extremism with apprentices. A few have access to a range of useful resources to promote modern British values but this is not consistent across subcontractors.

Provider details

| | |
|---|--|
| Unique reference number | 58444 |
| Type of provider | Independent learning provider |
| Age range of learners | 16–18/19+ |
| Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year | 1,064 |
| Director | Duncan Roberts |
| Telephone number | 01455 271 000 |
| Website | www.skillspoint.co.uk |

Provider information at the time of the inspection

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|-----|----------|-----|---------|-----|------------------|-----|
| Main course or learning programme level | Level 1 or below | | Level 2 | | Level 3 | | Level 4 or above | |
| | 16–18 | 19+ | 16–18 | 19+ | 16–18 | 19+ | 16–18 | 19+ |
| | - | 78 | - | 8 | - | - | - | - |
| Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships) | Intermediate | | Advanced | | Higher | | | |
| | 16–18 | 19+ | 16–18 | 19+ | 16–18 | 19+ | | |
| | 27 | 140 | 30 | 264 | - | 28 | | |
| Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age | 16–19 | | 19+ | | Total | | | |
| | 1 | | - | | 1 | | | |
| Number of learners aged 14 to 16 | N/A | | | | | | | |
| Number of learners for which the provider receives high-needs funding | N/A | | | | | | | |
| Funding received from: | Skills Funding Agency | | | | | | | |
| At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Creative Learning Partners Ltd ■ Dent-Train LLP ■ Leap UK ■ Lynne Bailey & Associate ■ Peach Orator ■ Pier Technology Limited t/a Pier Training ■ Proactive in Partnership Training Ltd ■ Training Event Safety Solutions Ltd | | | | | | | |

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the performance and contracts manager, as nominee. 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, a webinar, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners 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.

Inspection team

| | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Gerard McGrath, lead inspector | Her Majesty's Inspector |
| Bob Hamp | Her Majesty's Inspector |
| Gillian Forrester | Her Majesty's Inspector |
| Julie Gibson | Ofsted Inspector |
| Ian Goodwin | Ofsted Inspector |
| Susan Keenan | Ofsted Inspector |
| Alison Loxton | Ofsted Inspector |

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