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31 January 2017

Mr Dean Lander
Head of Operations
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Dear Mr Lander

Short inspection of The Motor Insurance Repair Research Centre (Thatcham Academy)

Following the short inspection on 11 and 12 January 2017, 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 March 2013.

This provider continues to be good.

Advanced and intermediate apprentices continue to benefit from high-quality training in panel, paint or mechanical, electrical and trim at the Thatcham Automotive Academy (Thatcham), and in their employers' businesses. The Thatcham Academy continues to provide its partner-employers with advanced training for employees, including apprentices, based on the most advanced techniques and standards, significantly enriched by the research and development work undertaken in other parts of the Thatcham organisation.

As at the previous inspection, apprentices rapidly develop very high levels of skill in repairing and refinishing damaged motor vehicles, including prestige and high-value brands. Apprentices and other employees also gain a wide range of additional qualifications that are highly valued by their employers, and which increase their employability and the levels of service they offer to the public. With very good support from their trainers, assessors and employers, apprentices learn specialist techniques in refurbishing motor vehicle panels, paint techniques or repairing mechanical, electrical and trim parts. They work confidently on a wide range of internal combustion, electric and hybrid vehicles, including prestige and high-value brands.

The resources at Thatcham continue to be outstanding. Apprentices benefit from working in a very well maintained, industry-leading learning environment where they work on a wide range of modern motor vehicles. Trainers and assessors are experienced, knowledgeable and enthusiastic. Thatcham trainers benefit from very

high levels of continuing professional development (CPD) activity, with around 60 days of annual training, updating and industry engagement. With the recent introduction of electronic portfolios and evidence-gathering mechanisms, apprentices value being able to work more flexibly on the good-quality training materials available to them.

Training quality is good, both on and off the job, and you have improved the coherence of training elements since the previous inspection. Trainers and assessors conduct frequent assessments in the workplace, give learners clear feedback on how to improve, and keep employers well informed about the work that apprentices need to do to make progress in their qualifications.

Leaders, managers and staff at Thatcham continue to have high expectations of one another, and of all learners. You and your leadership team understand the strengths and areas for development of the provision, and you continue to use detailed research into the industry, as well as employers' and apprentices' perceptions of the programmes to improve training. Self-assessment processes, though improved since the previous inspection, still result in a report that does not identify all weaknesses and strengths so that you can more effectively target quality improvement and good practice-sharing activity.

Safeguarding is effective.

Senior leaders and staff ensure that safeguarding arrangements are effective and that they take appropriate actions to safeguard learners both at the Thatcham Academy and at their employers' premises.

Leaders and staff give safe working practices, health and well-being a very high priority, so that apprentices understand the potential hazards of working in the automotive repair industry. Apprentices have a good understanding of how to work safely with substances hazardous to health. They also learn how to work safely on electric vehicles and hybrid cars, with large and potentially dangerous machinery and with cutting tools.

Arrangements to secure apprentices' safety and well-being while on study blocks at the academy are highly effective. Learners receive very good guidance and support when they are staying away from home, including access to a 24-hour on-call manager should they have problems or concerns outside academy hours. The safeguarding coordinator and other staff continue to carefully select and vet hotels used for apprentices, and clear measures are in place for care of those under 18 years of age.

Inspection findings

- Timely and overall achievement rates for apprentices declined sharply during 2015/16. You and your leadership team quickly identified the causes in inappropriate recruitment of individuals who were not sure they wished to undertake an apprenticeship and career in the automotive repair industry. You

took immediate action to bring apprenticeship recruitment within the control of the academy, and to introduce a three-month period of acclimatisation and induction for new employees before they become apprentices. As a result, retention and achievement rates have risen sharply during the current year to their former high levels.

- In response to recommendations made at the previous inspection, you have undertaken a number of measures to improve the quality and timeliness of functional skills training. These include the recruitment of a functional skills tutor, and the provision of one-to-one and small-group support for those taking English, mathematics or information and communication technology (ICT) qualifications at an earlier stage of the apprenticeship. Apprentices also have more opportunities to take functional skills tests in all subjects and to practise their skills in test conditions. Such improvements have resulted in considerable numbers of apprentices achieving their qualifications in English, mathematics and ICT quicker and more successfully.
- Since the previous inspection, you and other leaders have improved the coherence and correspondence between the on- and off-the-job training for apprentices. Now, all apprentices leave study blocks at Thatcham with a clear action plan that informs their employer of the areas on which they need to improve and of the tasks which they should be set to ensure good progress through the apprenticeship. Employers are knowledgeable about the elements of the apprenticeship, and understand well that they need to ensure that all apprentices can fulfil the tasks required to meet assessment criteria. Communications between employers and Thatcham staff are very good.
- You have improved the level of analysis in your self-assessment report, and your recent acquisition of information analysis software has enhanced your ability to collect and sort evidence for self-assessment reporting. However, the current self-assessment report, though now not so descriptive, still lacks sufficiently precise focus on the strengths and weaknesses in provision.
- At the previous inspection, arrangements to assure the quality of teaching, learning and assessment through observation were underdeveloped, so managers did not have a reliable mechanism to improve the quality of provision and identify and share good practice. Since that time, you have begun to observe staff more formally, and have developed a clear and comprehensive plan for the regular observation of all training activity, including reviews. However, because of pressures to develop Trailblazer and other qualifications with sector partners during 2016, managers were unable to carry out all the planned formal observations, though a range of informal observations did occur. To ensure that you have a clear understanding of the quality of training and to purposefully direct staff CPD, you intend to carry out planned observations in the future.
- Apprentices, staff and managers have received good levels of training in 'Prevent' duty legislation, introduced as a requirement for providers since the previous inspection. Managers have frequent contact and communications with the regional Prevent coordinator, and apprentices received induction and refresher training directly from the coordinator. Almost all apprentices have a good understanding of ways to recognise and avoid the dangers of radicalisation and

extremism, online or face-to-face. Trainers, assessors and reviewers frequently reinforce messages given at initial training sessions and check apprentices' understandings of ways to keep safe. Staff also hold frequent discussions with apprentices about British values, and about the values that one should model in work and in the academy.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders should ensure that:

- the current high levels of timely success for apprentices are sustained, and that apprentices continue to make good progress against clear learning targets
- work to refine self-assessment continues, and that the resulting report provides a clear, comprehensive account of both strengths and weaknesses in provision that can fully inform improvement planning and the sharing of good practice
- the well-developed plans for a wide-ranging e-learning platform and electronic means to record apprentices' progress are brought to fruition as soon as possible, and that these are used to support apprentices' progress and the sharing of good practice in teaching, learning and assessment
- the comprehensive teaching, learning and assessment observation plans drawn up in 2016 are implemented fully in 2017.

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

Yours sincerely

Dr Richard Beynon
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

One of Her Majesty's Inspectors, plus two Ofsted Inspectors visited Thatcham for two days. The academy quality, compliance and funding manager, as nominee, assisted inspectors. We met with you, as the head of operations, with the academy operations manager, with the lead trainer and other trainers and staff. We also met with and talked to employers, apprentices and other learners. Inspectors observed teaching, learning and assessment, and reviewed learners' work. We reviewed key documents, including those relating to self-assessment, performance and safeguarding. We also considered the views of learners.