

Apprentice Team Limited

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

This monitoring visit was undertaken as part of a series of monitoring visits to a sample of new apprenticeship training providers that are funded through the apprenticeship levy. Ofsted's intention to carry out monitoring visits to these new providers was first announced by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector in November 2017. The focus of these visits is on the three themes set out below.

The company's managing director established Apprentice Team Limited (ATL) in September 2013 to provide apprenticeship and work-based training, initially for other providers through subcontracting arrangements.

In July 2017, the company gained a contract in its own right to train apprentices funded through the apprenticeship levy, swiftly recruiting learners in a relatively short space of time. It currently provides training for 176 apprentices from levels 2 to 4 in customer service, business administration and team leading on a mix of framework- and standards-based qualifications. The large majority of ATL's apprentices work for a chain of neighbourhood convenience stores based mainly in the north of England and the midlands. ATL has also very recently recruited five learners onto a traineeship programme and nine to a part-time functional skills English and mathematics programme.

Themes

How much progress have leaders made in ensuring that the provider is meeting all the requirements of successful apprenticeship provision?

Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have worked hard to provide a well-organised programme of training that meets the principles of an apprenticeship. The company has a well-qualified and experienced team of peripatetic assessors who visit apprentices in the workplace regularly and ensure that the very large majority are on track to complete within the planned period of study. Assessors are aware of the anticipated changes to assessment for apprentices on the new standards-based programmes and have adapted their practice to prepare learners for these changes.

Senior managers understand the requirements of apprenticeship training and have clear and realistic plans for the future growth of the company, including of its traineeship and adult programmes. The managing director has begun the process of establishing suitable governance arrangements to provide external scrutiny and challenge, and to direct the company's long-term strategy as an independent learning provider.

Links with employers are good. Leaders have established particularly effective links with a national chain of convenience stores that now employ the majority of the company's apprentices as customer service advisers, supervisors and store managers. Employers are committed to the apprenticeship programme and have supported many of their customer service and supervisory staff to work towards a relevant and useful apprenticeship qualification.

Learners and apprentices receive appropriate advice and guidance to ensure that they are on a programme that meets their needs and aspirations. Current apprentices receive clear guidance from ATL staff and from their employer about the commitment required to complete successfully an apprenticeship programme. Though employers were keen to recruit many of their staff to an apprenticeship programme, they did not compel anyone to do so. At the time of inspection, none of the apprentices recruited since last year had withdrawn early from the programme.

Employers are supportive of the apprenticeship requirement that apprentices should receive their entitlement to sufficient off-the-job training to enable them to develop and acquire new skills, as well as to complete their assignments within work time. However, this is not consistently applied across the apprenticeship programme. A few apprentices do almost all of their work in their own time or whenever they can find a time and place for private study during their shift. ATL's managers acknowledge this inconsistency and have implemented strategies to ensure that employers comply in full with the spirit of the apprenticeship requirements, but it is too soon to assess the full impact.

Quality assurance and quality improvement arrangements are fit for purpose. Managers regularly seek feedback from learners and apprentices about the quality of provision they receive and respond promptly to any concerns raised. Managers' self-assessment of their provision provides a clear account of the company's main strengths and areas for improvement. They make good use of performance data to support judgements in their self-assessment but they do not make sufficient use of feedback from assessors or from senior managers about how well the company is performing or how provision could improve further.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that apprentices benefit from high-quality training that leads to positive outcomes for apprentices? Reasonable progress

The very large majority of apprentices work in neighbourhood convenience stores and many have worked in this sector for over 20 years. ATL's assessors have helped to ensure that, despite the considerable experience that many of their apprentices have, they nevertheless learn and develop new skills and behaviours that will help them carry out their role more effectively. As a result, apprentices are able to describe and demonstrate how their approach to work has changed for the better. For example, store managers say that they now have a much better grasp of how to manage conflict in the workplace while those in junior roles talk about the increased professionalism and confidence that comes with their apprenticeship studies.

Assessors plan off-the-job learning sessions well, taking into account apprentices' job role and their prior educational attainment. They have produced a good range of online learning materials related to the retail sector, as well as resources to help learners develop their English and mathematical skills. Assessors use their experience well during off-the-job training to help learners develop new skills and behaviours to help them carry out their role more effectively or become better prepared for specific roles in the retail sector.

As a result of good-quality off-the-job training, most apprentices make at least good progress and achieve the milestones that their assessors have planned for them. The standard of apprentices' written and practical work is good. Apprentices are keen to learn and are able to articulate their newly acquired skills and knowledge well. For example, a level 3 supervisory apprentice was able to describe the leadership skills she had learned and was enthusiastic about the way in which she is now able to apply these skills to support and develop her team.

Most apprentices are well ahead with their studies and at the time of the monitoring visit only a few had fallen behind, mostly as a consequence of commercial pressures at work. Assessors are skilled at identifying these apprentices early and they take swift actions to help them recover lost ground.

Apprentices have a good awareness and understanding of what is required on their apprenticeship, traineeship or adult learning programme. They know how much progress they have made and can explain what they have achieved and what they still need to complete within the planned period. Apprentices benefit from frequent visits from their assessor, as well as constructive and detailed feedback on assessed work, which helps them to progress. Assessors use their experience in the retail sector to help apprentices develop the wide range of skills, behaviours and attitudes necessary to succeed in the industry.

Though employers are supportive of the apprenticeship programme, they do not always attend the three-month progress reviews that ATL's assessors carry out. Consequently, employers do not always have a clear understanding of what apprentices are learning or which units they are working on; this then compromises their ability to coordinate effectively on- and off-the-job training. ATL's managers acknowledge this area for improvement and have begun to work with employers to improve their engagement with the review process. It is too soon to assess the impact of this initiative.

ATL staff make good use of the results of initial assessment and diagnostic testing to identify apprentices' individual starting points. Apprentices study functional skills English and mathematics if they do not have an appropriate prior qualification in these subjects. Assessors are aware of the need to promote these valuable workplace skills at every opportunity and they generally do this well. Consequently, apprentices understand their importance and the need to develop them further.

How much progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that effective safeguarding arrangements are in place? Reasonable progress

Managers have well-established arrangements for safeguarding. Staff receive an induction that covers aspects of safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty. An appropriate risk assessment strategy is in place on the few occasions that the company employs a member of staff while still awaiting their security clearance.

Assessors know how to refer and deal with safeguarding concerns. They are able to articulate what they would do if they had to make a referral. Most learners say that they feel safe on provider premises and at their place of work. ATL's assessors are aware of the risks posed to apprentices working in retail outlets located in areas that have high crime rates. They work with apprentices to carry out risk assessments to help them develop strategies for staying safe at work and when travelling to and from their workplace.

All staff receive an appropriate security clearance check to ensure their suitability for their role. The company's operations director, who is also ATL's designated safeguarding officer, maintains a paper log of staff who have received security clearance, which he regularly updates. The company has an appropriate range of policies and procedures to assure learners' safety. The operations director maintains an incident log, which records all referrals and the actions taken to resolve concerns.

Apprentices receive clear guidance and training from assessors to help them learn how to keep safe from the dangers of extremism and radicalisation, and most have sufficient knowledge of these dangers. Assessors use a range of appropriate learning materials to promote apprentices' understanding of British values and most learners are able to articulate these values well and explain how they might apply in their place of work.

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