

# Inspection of Mercia Partnership (UK) Ltd

Inspection dates: 17–20 September 2019

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>Inadequate</b>
The quality of education	<b>Inadequate</b>
Behaviour and attitudes	<b>Inadequate</b>
Personal development	<b>Inadequate</b>
Leadership and management	<b>Inadequate</b>
Adult learning programmes	<b>Requires improvement</b>
Apprenticeships	<b>Inadequate</b>
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

## Information about this provider

Mercia Partnership (UK) Limited (Mercia) operates from two centres, one in Chorley, Lancashire, and one in Newhaven, East Sussex. Mercia delivers a range of apprenticeships and adult learning programmes, funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency. It provides training to 147 apprentices and 51 learners studying adult learning programmes, funded through the advanced learner loan programme. The majority of the apprenticeship delivery takes place in employers' businesses. Adult learning programmes take place in community venues across the country. Mercia works with two subcontractors to provide apprenticeship programmes in the north west and the south west of England, mainly in childcare. There were no learners in receipt of high needs funding.

As of 2017/18 Mercia provided training in 79 different local authorities, with over half of all provision being in health, public services and care. Around one in five apprentices study apprenticeships in information and communication technology disciplines.

## **What is it like to be a learner with this provider?**

Learners and apprentices do not experience a well-planned programme of study. They only have access to a narrow curriculum that does not prepare them sufficiently for their future careers.

Apprentices do not develop new knowledge, skills and behaviours quickly enough. Assessors focus on the assessment of what apprentices already knew and could do before they started their programme.

Apprentices receive a poor standard of training. Frequent changes of apprentices' assessors leave apprentices with significant gaps in their training programme. Apprentices are overly reliant on observing other colleagues in the workplace to help them develop confidence in crucial customer-facing skills. Apprentices studying on frameworks or standards are unhappy, unmotivated, and, in some cases, very angry about the quality of their training.

Apprentices are let down by poor careers guidance or advice to inform their next steps. Staff do not prepare apprentices to achieve in their work or career aspirations. As a result, many apprentices face redundancy or extensive periods of time on a lower wage.

While apprentices feel safe in their workplace, they do not have a full appreciation of the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism in their locality.

## **What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?**

Leaders are culpable for the poor standard of education and training. Across all programmes, they have failed to select, develop and implement a curriculum that addresses the specific gaps in learners' and apprentices' knowledge and skills. Therefore, learners and apprentices do not acquire the personal attributes or the knowledge that they need to succeed in their profession.

The apprenticeship curriculum is not fit for purpose. Leaders and managers have failed to ensure that apprenticeship programmes meet the principles and requirements of an apprenticeship. Apprentices rightly identify a lack of personal development in their programmes in areas such as equality and diversity and the understanding of fundamental British values. For example, leaders do not focus sufficiently on developing apprentices' appropriate attitudes at work or raising learners' awareness of aspects of living and working in a culturally diverse society.

Managers do not ensure that the curriculum is delivered in a logical order so that apprentices learn more and remember more. Apprentices waste their time in training in skills and knowledge that they have already mastered. For example, software development technician apprentices have not been taught any new topics and have only been assessed on topics such as writing code, even though they already knew how to do this before they started their programme.

Assessors' assessment of apprentices' knowledge at the start and throughout the programme is poor. Assessors do not understand what apprentices know or what they need to learn. Too often, assessment consists of superficial checks of apprentices' knowledge, which do not further explore their deeper understanding. For example, assessors use a simple tick box process to assess digital marketing apprentices' understanding of social media analytics.

Leaders and managers have failed to consult sufficiently with employers and industry organisations to support and develop appropriate curriculum content.

A small minority of assessors do not have the right vocational skills and qualifications to train and deliver their allocated apprenticeships. Leaders do not have oversight of staff expertise, and fail to provide appropriate training and development. High staff turnover has had a negative impact on apprentices' learning. Apprentices are rightly concerned about their prospects.

Leaders do not ensure that subcontractors are managed effectively. They focus on finance and enrolment targets at the expense of setting minimum standards for the quality of education. However, despite this cursory oversight of subcontractors, the quality of training at subcontractors is of a higher standard than that delivered by Mercia.

There is no supervisory body in place. Consequently, there is no challenge or scrutiny of leadership and no support for leaders. The decline in the standard of education and training since the previous inspection is significant. Just under half of apprentices complete their apprenticeship on time.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders and managers have ensured that appropriate policies and procedures are in place. These are yet to be tested as there have so far been no referrals.

All staff, including the designated safeguarding officer, have received appropriate training on safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty. Leaders and managers ensure that staff recruitment processes include appropriate checks on staff suitability.

Leaders have not nurtured enough links with local agencies to gather intelligence on the risks that apprentices may face in different geographical locations. Learners have received training on safeguarding and the risks associated with radicalisation. Too many apprentices could not confidently articulate the steps they could take to keep themselves safe from potential risks.

## **What does the provider need to do to improve?**

- Urgently carry out a systematic review of the curriculum so that it meets the needs of learners, apprentices and employers.
- Ensure that all staff have the appropriate skills and knowledge to deliver their apprenticeship programmes.
- Identify and provide support and training to develop staff expertise and improve the quality of education rapidly.
- Ensure that assessments are fit for purpose and that the results are used by staff to plan learning that develops apprentices' skills and knowledge.
- Improve the quality of information, advice and guidance so that learners and apprentices have the knowledge required to make their future choices.

## Provider details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	53305
<b>Address</b>	1 Ashfield Road Chorley PR7 1LH
<b>Contact number</b>	01257278131
<b>Website</b>	<a href="https://merciapartnership.com/">https://merciapartnership.com/</a>
<b>Managing Director</b>	Daniel Rigby
<b>Provider type</b>	Independent learning provider
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	3–6 November 2015
<b>Main subcontractors</b>	Training Works Ltd Parenta Ltd

## Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the managing director, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements including observing learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

### Inspection team

Paul Cocker, lead inspector

Susan Keenan

Gillian Forrester

Christina Christou

Her Majesty's Inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Ofsted Inspector

If you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/), write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

This publication is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)

© Crown copyright 2019