

The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (Solace Group) Ltd

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

From October 2018, Ofsted undertook to carry out monitoring visits to all newly directly funded providers of apprenticeship training provision which began to be funded from April 2017 or after by the Education and Skills Funding Agency and/or the apprenticeship levy. This monitoring visit was undertaken as part of those arrangements and as outlined in the 'Further education and skills inspection handbook', especially the sections entitled 'Monitoring visits' and 'Monitoring visits to providers that are newly directly publicly funded'. The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below.

The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (Solace Group) Ltd is a representative body for senior managers who work in local government organisations. The Solace Group started to deliver apprenticeships on behalf of levy-paying local authorities in May 2018. Currently, 71 apprentices are studying the operations/departmental manager standard at level 5. The provider delivers the programme to three cohorts of apprentices. Two of these are in London, where the programme first started, and the other is in Yorkshire. Local authorities in these areas employ almost all the apprentices.

Themes

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

Reasonable progress

Leaders have a clear strategy for the apprenticeship provision. Their strategy fits closely with the role of the provider as a membership body and its known area of expertise. Leaders' plans for growth reflect this strategy, identifying an increase in the number of local authorities that the provider will work with rather than the delivery of a wider range of programmes.

Leaders work successfully with employers to design and deliver a programme that is bespoke to the needs of each local authority. They tailor the content expertly to include political influences and alternative views on commercial awareness. Employers value the programme and identify apprentices who are now in more senior or complex roles as a result.

Leaders and managers monitor carefully apprentices' assignment submission and off-the-job training. They intervene quickly if apprentices fall behind to ensure that apprentices meet the requirements of the programme. For example, programme

managers work with employers to arrange for apprentices to receive additional off-the-job training if they miss a workshop.

Leaders and board members have a sound understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the programme. They take decisive action when problems arise. For example, too many apprentices from the initial cohort left their programme early. Neither they or their employers had sufficient information about the demands of an apprenticeship. Leaders now take rigorous action to address this during recruitment. As a result, the number of apprentices remaining on subsequent cohorts is very high.

Leaders have been too slow to make sufficient arrangements for apprentices to complete their end-point assessment (EPA). They identified an awarding organisation but did not implement the necessary action quickly enough. However, leaders now take appropriate steps to support apprentices to prepare for their EPA. The minority of apprentices who did not receive the information about their EPA early enough can now prepare with only a small delay.

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

Tutors work with employers very effectively to deliver workshops that are highly relevant to the individual cohorts. They use case studies from the participating local authorities and include employers as guest speakers. As a result, apprentices develop significant new knowledge, skills and behaviours which help them to become more effective managers.

Tutors and assessors have relevant industrial experience and are highly qualified. They skilfully plan and deliver a programme that apprentices benefit from and enjoy. Tutors provide good resources that follow a clear structure and help apprentices to complete their qualification. Apprentices value the coordinated support that they receive to improve their knowledge and skills in areas such as budgeting and project management.

Assessors use the information that they have about individual apprentices expertly to guide apprentices to improve their knowledge, skills and behaviours. Assessors assist apprentices to identify relevant training opportunities. For example, apprentices who are new to managing people have good support to carry out workplace shadowing of someone with more experience of line management.

Assessors provide apprentices with useful feedback in appropriately structured tutorials and reviews. Apprentices know what they do well and what they need to improve. As a result, they produce high-quality portfolios that include relevant

evidence of knowledge and skills development, and meaningful self-reflection. However, apprentices do not receive enough information about high-grade criteria.

Managers and tutors do not implement support rapidly enough to enable apprentices to achieve functional skills qualifications in English and mathematics. Delivery to the small minority of apprentices who need these qualifications is slow to start. A few apprentices are more than half way through their programme before they receive specific support to help them to complete the necessary functional skills qualifications. However, apprentices receive support to improve their knowledge and skills in English and mathematics through the completion of other assignments.

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

Leaders ensure that apprentices receive useful information on how to keep themselves and others safe. Apprentices benefit from additional resources that support them to build resilience and preserve their mental health. As local authority employees, apprentices receive further training in their workplace and have a sound knowledge of safeguarding.

Leaders implement an appropriate policy that covers suitable procedures for the safe recruitment of staff, compliance with the 'Prevent' duty and basic safeguarding information. Additional documents include information on recognising abuse, a risk register, and a risk assessment. The separate documents mean that some information is difficult to find. A few apprentices do not have a good enough understanding about the role of the designated safeguarding lead, but they do know how to report concerns.

All relevant provider staff, including the designated safeguarding lead, receive appropriate training on safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty. They pass this information on to apprentices effectively during induction.

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