

# Inspection of Aspens-Services Limited

Inspection dates:

9 to 11 February 2022

## Overall effectiveness

## Requires improvement

The quality of education

**Requires improvement**

Behaviour and attitudes

**Requires improvement**

Personal development

**Requires improvement**

Leadership and management

**Requires improvement**

Apprenticeships

**Requires improvement**

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Not previously inspected

## Information about this provider

Aspens-Services Limited is an employer provider based in Worcester. They provide catering services in 700 schools across the country. At the time of the visit, 23 apprentices were studying the following standards-based apprenticeships: five apprentices were on level 2 production chef; three were on level 3 senior production chef; 14 were on level 3 team leader; and one apprentice was on level 2 customer service.

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

Leaders now set clear expectations of apprentices to ensure that coaches provide them with effective one-to-one support to improve the quality of their work and to be prepared for their end-point assessments.

Until recently, apprentices attended too few teaching sessions because leaders failed to plan apprentices' off-the-job training effectively – limiting their opportunity to attend sessions.

Skills coaches do not plan apprentices' English and mathematics curriculums well enough. They do not challenge apprentices to develop these skills beyond level 2.

Apprentices now receive the appropriate guidance from coaches to ensure that they develop the appropriate skills and behaviours for their roles.

As a result of their work with various local groups, apprentices develop a better understanding of the needs of individuals and their wider community.

Leaders and coaches ensure that apprentices work in purposeful environments. Apprentices work well with their colleagues and know who to contact if concerned about bullying and harassment, and they know how to keep themselves safe.

Current apprentices – and the few who have successfully completed their course – develop the skills, knowledge and behaviours that make them effective managers and chefs in their workplace.

Apprentices do not explore thoroughly wider career options with their coaches or employers. Their discussions are limited to their current employment and do not always identify careers outside of the organisation.

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

Leaders have been too slow to implement effective actions to improve the quality of education for apprentices. After the previous monitoring visit, leaders acted immediately to resolve the significant weaknesses identified during the visit. However, they accept that their actions, including the use of a consultancy firm, did not improve the provision quickly enough, and too many apprentices continued to fall behind and disengage from their studies. Consequently, only a third of apprentices remain on their programmes.

Leaders' more recent interventions are improving apprentices' learning experience. In September 2021, they restructured their apprenticeship academy, recruiting an experienced and qualified teacher in December 2021 as head of the academy. In a little over two months, the academy head has worked swiftly to ensure that apprentices now receive the coaching and support to make progress in their studies. Leaders were able to demonstrate to inspectors that – although behind in their

studies – the remaining apprentices had made significant and rapid progress in the last two months.

Leaders have identified an appropriate curriculum that underpins the wider organisation's business needs. The curriculum focuses on the catering industry and includes chef training, customer services and team-leading. Leaders intend for apprentices to follow a 'classroom to boardroom' learning experience to generate the skills and attributes for future growth.

Coaches have recently updated apprentices' learning plans. These plans are now well organised and appropriately structured, but coaches have not had sufficient time to ensure that all apprentices benefit from these plans. They focus mainly on helping apprentices to catch up on missed learning and to submit outstanding assessments.

Until very recently, coaches did not use information about learners' starting points, including their prior learning and current skills and knowledge, consistently well to plan individual learning. Consequently, most apprentices did not know what specific knowledge and skills they needed to acquire or how to achieve the grades of which they are capable. As a result, this slowed their progress. Coaches now use 'skill scans' to assess apprentices' learning needs. Apprentices currently receive teaching and coaching sessions that focus on apprentices' specific knowledge and skills gaps helping them to regain confidence and motivation to learn and make the progress expected of them.

Coaches use questioning skilfully to help apprentices remember prior learning, apply theory to practical experience and link experiences to new knowledge. Apprentices benefit from newly introduced learning resources, for example workbooks, handouts and videos that are easy to find and are clear and informative. A minority of workplace supervisors are providing apprentices with useful on-the-job coaching to help them apply theory to their own work and to help them take on new tasks.

Apprentices do not receive sufficiently helpful feedback on their work to help them achieve their best. Coaches' feedback is limited to the completion of coursework tasks and does not explain the knowledge and skills that apprentices need to improve. More recently, apprentices receive confirmation of what they have achieved and some useful suggestions to improve areas such as their English and mathematics skills.

Leaders and coaches do not use well enough information from apprentices' progress reviews and feedback from workplace supervisors to coordinate off-the-job and on-the-job learning to ensure that apprentices access the time and support needed to complete their studies.

In the last two months, leaders have made rapid progress in improving the support for apprentices, which is having a beneficial impact on the quality of the apprentices' learning experience. Coaches now motivate and support most apprentices to complete their qualifications. Apprentices can contact their coach and receive an

immediate response, providing them with helpful support, useful guidance and feedback.

Coaches support apprentices to develop their understanding of their wider community and encourage them to get involved in local social action projects. For example, apprentices designed food boxes to a budget and specification, including options such as spicy or vegetarian food, to meet the requirements of their group. They also supported their local area during the pandemic, delivering food box hampers and sandwich bags to vulnerable people and key workers.

After the previous visit, leaders identified the need to strengthen governance. They set up an advisory board of individuals with suitable skills to hold leaders to account and to support improvements in the curriculum. Board members have intervened quickly, supporting leaders to ensure that employers provide the time for off-the-job training and the opportunity for apprentices to flourish in their respective workplaces. Although clear about their role to hold leaders to account, it is too soon to evaluate the impact of the board's current actions.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders have an appropriate commitment to the safety of their staff. They have the appropriate policies and processes in place to monitor the safeguarding of apprentices effectively. They have appointed a suitably experienced designated safeguarding lead (DSL) and ensured that they hold the requisite safeguarding qualifications.

Leaders monitor safeguarding referrals well. Staff use a central tracking sheet to check and record the progress of each case carefully. The DSL is currently establishing links with the local authorities and the police, as well as extending contact to the local authorities where apprentices are based nationally. Although these links are in the initial stages of their development, the DSL has established useful information to support apprentices and inform them of potential risks in the areas in which they live and work.

Leaders carry out the appropriate employment checks on staff. Managers follow safer recruitment practices. All training staff have proof of ability to work and enhanced disclosure checks.

Apprentices feel safe because leaders and coaches ensure that they learn about potential threats from extremist groups and risks when working online. They reinforce safeguarding themes by announcements on apprentices' electronic portfolios, with links to video clips and checks during one-to-one meetings. As a result, apprentices know where to get help if needed.

Apprentices follow strict health and safety practices at work, including hygiene control and safe handling of food, to ensure that they keep themselves and others safe.

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

- Leaders must ensure that they develop a curriculum that is challenging and ambitious for all apprentices to develop significant new knowledge and skills.
- Leaders must ensure that apprentices receive helpful careers information, advice and guidance for them to make informed decisions about their course and future ambitions.
- With employers, leaders must ensure that apprentices have sufficient on- and off-the-job training, so that they can complete their learning and assessments in the time allocated.
- Leaders must ensure that coaches consistently plan learning that enables apprentices to achieve their potential based on their respective starting points. Where appropriate, plans must include apprentices' development of wider skills such as English, mathematics and digital skills – beyond level 2.
- Leaders must ensure that coaches have the teaching skills to enable apprentices to understand and apply new knowledge and skills at work consistently well. They must also ensure apprentices are prepared thoroughly to achieve their best during final assessments.
- Leaders must ensure that apprentices receive consistently helpful feedback from coaches, mentors and employers about their work and their progress overall, so apprentices know clearly what they need to do to achieve their best.
- Leaders and governors must ensure that actions to improve the quality of the curriculum are sustainable and enable all apprentices to make good progress.

## Provider details

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<b>Principal/CEO</b>	John Roe
<b>Provider type</b>	Private training provider
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>Main subcontractors</b>	None

## Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the head of the apprenticeship academy, 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 visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

## Inspection team

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