

Softools Limited

Monitoring visit report

Unique reference number:	2654197
Name of lead inspector:	Carolyn Brownsea, Her Majesty's Inspector
Inspection dates:	14 and 15 June 2022
Type of provider:	Independent learning provider
Address:	Greenlands Hambleton Henley-on-Thames RG9 3AU

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.

Softools Limited is an independent learning provider based in Henley-on-Thames. It has held a contract to teach apprenticeships for levy-paying employers since 2019. At the time of the visit, there were 11 apprentices across two employers, all of whom were over the age of 19. Ten were following the operations or departmental manager standard at level 5 and one apprentice was following the team leader or supervisor standard at level 3.

Themes

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

Insufficient progress

Leaders have not ensured that apprentices develop substantial new skills and behaviours. They do not assess apprentices' starting points, and consequently apprentices with existing management skills repeat learning that they have already done.

Governance arrangements are not effective. Leaders do not have oversight of the quality of education for apprentices. Leaders meet monthly and discuss reports on enrolments and withdrawals. However, they do not receive information that provides clarity on the progress of apprentices. They do not know the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and are not able to make the rapid improvements that are required.

Leaders have an established history of delivering leadership and management training to large employers. They are ambitious for their apprentices to progress in their careers with their employers. They plan well for workplace projects with employers, based on business-critical activities and functions.

Off-the-job training is provided through self-directed learning and one-to-one coaching. The training materials are well planned, so that the requirements of

qualifications are met. However, leaders do not plan for training to meet wider learning objectives and activities other than independent learning.

Leaders do not ensure that trainer assessors have the qualifications and training they need to provide a high standard of education. Trainer assessors and coaches hold relevant professional qualifications, and have significant industry experience. Too few hold a formal teaching or assessor qualification. As a result, not all trainer assessors ensure that apprentices have the skills they need to research, analyse and synthesise information. As a result, apprentices who need to develop their study skills do not progress as well as their peers.

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

Insufficient progress

Trainer assessors do not gather information about apprentices' existing vocational skills or experience when planning programmes. Therefore, apprentices with previous leadership and management experience or qualifications complete the same programme as inexperienced apprentices. Consequently, these apprentices only refresh their existing knowledge and do not develop substantial new knowledge and skills.

Leaders do not ensure that employers are routinely involved in the review of their apprentices' progress. Trainer assessors do not ensure that employers know the sequence of learning for apprentices. They do not capture the new skills and behaviours that apprentices gain at work to support apprentices to make further progress. As a result, employers are unable to help apprentices to apply and deepen their learning in the workplace.

Trainer assessors' approach to assessment is too focused on the completion of unit workbooks. Apprentices who make good progress and complete their workbooks value the support and spoken feedback that their trainer assessors provide. Assessment is not used effectively to identify whether apprentices have gaps in their knowledge, skills and behaviours. Consequently, apprentices who make slower progress do not benefit from support, guidance or targets. As a result, these apprentices make slower progress.

Trainer assessors do not provide enough information or training on the requirements of apprentices' end-point assessments early enough in their programmes. Consequently, most apprentices do not know what they need to do in their final assessments, nor what grades they could achieve. Trainer assessors do not support apprentices to develop the skills they need for these assessments.

Employers report that apprentices' confidence has been boosted as a result of their training. They describe how apprentices demonstrate behaviours expected of a team

leader, such as using their own initiative to plan workloads and volunteering to take on new tasks and projects at work.

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

Leaders have not implemented the key procedures that are set out in the organisation's safeguarding policy. Staff have not completed training on how to identify the risks from radicalisation and extremism, despite the policy stating that these are in place.

Leaders have recently updated the safeguarding policy to include up-to-date references to key documents such as 'Keeping children safe in education 2021'.

Staff are not trained in safeguarding to the levels that the organisation's policy prescribes. Managers who should have achieved level 2 and level 3 qualifications in safeguarding have not done so.

Leaders do not keep records on the safe recruitment of the staff they recruit to coach apprentices.

Apprentices report that they feel safe, and that they know where to go if they need help. However, the provider's internal safeguarding processes are not sufficient to ensure that an apprentice seeking help would receive the support they might need.

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