

Inspection of Abellio East Midlands Limited

Inspection dates:

7 to 10 November 2022

Overall effectiveness**Good**

The quality of education

Good

Behaviour and attitudes

Outstanding

Personal development

Outstanding

Leadership and management

Good

Apprenticeships

Good

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Not previously inspected

Information about this provider

Abellio East Midlands Limited operates as East Midlands Railway (EMR) and is a rail passenger transport service company. EMR is the operator of the East Midlands franchise. There are currently 102 apprentices in training. Almost all are EMR employees and level 3 train driver apprentices. Apprentices study in small groups of up to 12 and move through their training stages in these cohorts. A small group of 5 apprentices study the level 2 passenger transport operative, all of whom are EMR employees. Leaders introduced the course as a pilot, and all these apprentices are now at the end of their course. Leaders do not plan to continue to recruit to it in the immediate future. All apprentices are aged over 21.

Leaders work with one subcontracted partner, Derby College, who provides the functional skills curriculum for apprentices.

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

Apprentices understandably feel very privileged to study with EMR. They are keen to meet demanding professional work standards. Attitudes to learning are exemplary, and apprentices study with great dedication. Apprentices enjoy their training immensely. They see only a bright future ahead of them with EMR.

Apprentices are very satisfied with their training. They learn in a safe, friendly and highly professional environment. Knowledgeable trainers provide apprentices with the teaching, care and support they need to be successful.

Use of high-tech train simulators prepares apprentices well to operate trains on the network. Apprentices develop a comprehensive understanding of their role as train drivers. Level 2 apprentices focus well on customer service that prepares them for their role as onboard or station team members.

Apprentices benefit from specialist talks about fire safety and railway history. Visits to local stations and to employees across the network during 'a day in the life of' activity builds their knowledge broadly. Involvement in external projects, such as mindfulness for drivers, improves apprentices' safety awareness.

Real-life training scenarios and driving alongside their mentors equips apprentices effectively to cope with the rigours of a role with long hours, nights and solitary working. Apprentices undertake conflict resolution training that gives them confidence to manage difficult situations.

Apprentices undertake extensive training in health and safety, including personal safety. They learn how to deal safely with hostile customers and how to recognise stress and fatigue. Apprentices benefit from training with the in-house crime and security team. They know how to keep themselves safe, how to safeguard colleagues and passengers, and how and when to report concerns.

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

In response to the Department for Transport's Infrastructure Skills Strategy, leaders work closely with industry groups to devise a well-thought-out curriculum. This enables them to attract and retain apprentices in order to meet growing demand and combat the ageing workforce.

Leaders and coaches plan and sequence the level 3 train driver curriculum effectively. This helps apprentices to move promptly through the different stages of their training. They study first at the academy, where they learn key safety concepts and the underpinning knowledge of being a driver, such as how to manage train faults and vehicle controls. Apprentices then apply this learning successfully in the mentoring phase of training, where they develop skills ready to drive in the dark and deal with disruptions.

The level 2 passenger transport operative is logically planned for the training of new senior guards and conductors across the rail networks. Apprentices learn first about core elements, such as rules, customer service and retail. They then apply this learning with a greater focus on dispatch and the type of train they will work on.

Trainers are highly skilled, with substantial industry knowledge and experience. Leaders further equip trainers with a wide range of appropriate staff development and extensive subject updating. For example, trainers undertake a three-week intensive training programme on the new 810 Aurora train, carry out monthly driving duties, and learn about how to support apprentices with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Leaders are passionate about their vision to contribute to social mobility and are rightly proud of the work they do to be an inclusive employer. The curriculum is accessible for apprentices with SEND. Apprentices can become train drivers, guards or conductors without holding academic qualifications. Leaders adjust selection tests at recruitment stage, and the few apprentices who need additional help benefit from valuable support. Apprentices have access to EMR's broad range of supportive employee networks, including neurodiversity, single parents, carers, and cultural inclusion.

Leaders and lead trainers work effectively together to improve training and apprentices' work standards. They conduct visits to training sessions and review the views of apprentices. They use the outcomes of these activities to make purposeful changes to training. For example, they now teach about mainline signalling earlier in the course. Lead trainers moderate work frequently and hold away days with the training team to develop their feedback skills. As a result, feedback now better identifies apprentices' areas for improvement.

Trainers on the level 3 course use a wide array of techniques to help apprentices remember key topics well. For example, apprentices recall complex processes for train evacuations through acronyms and undertake re-enactments on heritage railway lines, to help remember rules successfully. Apprentices also value their challenging formal assessments, helping them to build knowledge and retain what they have learned ahead of their long final assessments.

Trainers on the level 3 course take care to identify and rectify swiftly any topics apprentices do not yet understand well. For example, when apprentices incorrectly describe the decoupling process, tutors provide clear recap, then ask apprentices to repeat the process back step by step. When apprentices fail to master important learning, trainers make effective adjustments to the curriculum. For example, they alter how they teach emergency communication calls when apprentices do not perform them well enough in practice.

Trainers on the level 2 course regularly revisit taught content to help apprentices remember what they have learned. Frequent assessment points and observations test knowledge. Where there are gaps in learning, trainers provide support.

However, trainers are slow to assess progress. The small number of apprentices on this course are significantly past their planned end date.

Leaders and trainers set and demand high standards. Apprentices are highly motivated and professional. They find their training stimulating and varied. Apprentices attend all aspects of training well and are highly committed to their studies and future roles. Driver mentors report that apprentices always adhere fully to regulations and uphold the very high standards expected.

Apprentices benefit highly from the extensive range of health and well-being support. The occupational health team based in EMR's own well-being centre, ensures apprentices are fit to work. The team advises on important health matters, such as physiotherapy, hydration, the benefits of the flu vaccine and how to stop smoking. Apprentices use EMR's 'Hapi life' app, which offers tips about how to reduce stress, eat healthily and build exercise into busy lives.

There is rightly a strong focus on mental health support for train driver apprentices. Samaritans talk to apprentices at the start of their course about how to cope when they witness a fatality on the railway lines. Apprentices' families also receive guidance and support. Leaders implement EMR's well understood 'Chain of Care' procedure immediately, following any type of traumatic event. Mentors monitor apprentices' health carefully, especially on night shifts, and the company's fatigue policy is always fully enforced.

Leaders, trainers and coaches provide appropriate guidance to apprentices so that they are aware of the wide range of career pathways available within EMR. Managers share network rail employment opportunities frequently via newsletters. Train driver apprentices gain a European Train Drivers licence as part of their apprenticeship. They know that once they have this they can work for any company in Europe.

Trainers, coaches and line managers prepare apprentices carefully for the move on to their next phase of training, into depot, for example, or for when they start to drive on the mainline. The majority of level 3 train driver apprentices successfully pass their courses. Around half of apprentices who start in depot driver roles move quickly to the more challenging mainline driver roles.

Trainers develop apprentices' English and mathematics skills well for their job roles. For example, apprentices learn to read and retain information from weekly safety briefings and calculate accurately their number of driving hours.

Most level 3 apprentices who need to study functional English or ICT pass their examinations. However, pass rates for functional mathematics are poor and declining. Fewer than one third of apprentices pass their mathematics examinations, and this delays achievement of the full apprenticeship. Subcontracting arrangements hamper progress in this area.

Leaders recognise well the weaknesses in functional skills curriculum planning. They show an accurate understanding of the challenges and possible solutions. Leaders now hold the subcontractor to account more effectively. For example, they now ask for more detailed information about why apprentices fail so that apprentices can complete additional practice. This is a recent change, and it is too early to judge the impact.

Governance arrangements are effective in raising standards. The board meets frequently and has appropriate focus on important areas, including quality of training, apprentice views, results and safeguarding. The board contributes well to decision making that improves the quality of training, such as more time for trainers to prepare and mark and the appointment of apprenticeship coaches. Board members take effective oversight of the delays and challenges with functional skills pass rates, but this is a recent change.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Safeguarding officers ensure comprehensive arrangements and appropriate vigilance. There are suitable procedures for safer recruitment, with additional checks for those who work in front-line roles.

The safeguarding policy is thorough and links to other organisational policies such as bullying and harassment. The safeguarding committee has appropriate oversight and reviews trends and advises on training requirements. Leaders also work closely with regional 'Prevent' duty officers.

Leaders, staff and apprentices undertake frequent training, including training in unwanted sexual behaviours.

Apprentices have a detailed understanding of the risks and challenges they may encounter, such as terrorist activity, anti-social behaviour, county lines and vulnerable passengers.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Leaders should prioritise improvements to the functional skills curriculum provided by the subcontractor. They should ensure that the curriculum is appropriately planned and sequenced so that apprentices develop new skills and pass their qualifications in a timely manner.

Provider details

Unique reference number	2626886
Address	Locomotive House Locomotive Way Derby DE24 8PU
Contact number	07780502615
Website	www.eastmidlandsrailway.co.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Will Rodgers, Managing Director
Provider type	Independent Learning Provider
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Main subcontractors	Derby College

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the talent manager, 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 apprentices' work, seeking the views of apprentices, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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