

Aspens-Services Limited

Report following a monitoring visit to a 'requires improvement' provider

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Type of provider: Employer

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

Aspens-Services Limited was inspected in February 2022. At that time, inspectors judged the overall effectiveness of the provision to require improvement.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to evaluate the progress that leaders and managers have made in resolving the main areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

Aspens-Services Limited is an employer provider based in Worcester. It provides catering services in over 700 schools across the country. At the time of the visit, 43 apprentices were studying standards-based apprenticeships. Eleven apprentices were on the level 2 production chef and nine on the level 3 senior production chef apprenticeship. Ten apprentices were on level 3 team leader standard and 11 on level 5 operations and departmental manager apprenticeship. A further two apprentices were enrolled on level 2 customer service practitioner apprenticeship.

Themes

What steps have leaders and managers taken to ensure that apprentices benefit from a curriculum that is sufficiently challenging and ambitious for all apprentices to develop significant new knowledge, skills and behaviours? **Reasonable progress**

Since the previous inspection, leaders and coaches have revisited the content that they teach within each apprenticeship. Apprentices now undertake core modules to help develop their skills of understanding themselves and others at work. They also access additional content linked to community challenges and competitions. Apprentices receive a more challenging learning experience because of the changes to their apprenticeship.

Leaders have improved the processes to allow them to understand apprentices' starting points. Leaders and coaches explore more fully any previous training, qualifications or experiences that apprentices have related to the apprenticeship they are studying. Where apprentices have previously received any similar training or qualifications, leaders take steps to ensure that apprentices are sufficiently challenged to develop their skills beyond what they already know. However, in a few cases, apprentices' previous employment experience is not fully considered, to inform a sufficiently challenging curriculum.

Leaders and coaches have put in place clear learning plans for apprentices. These plans carefully consider the progress that apprentices have made on their apprenticeship. They consider additional opportunities to support apprentices to further develop new knowledge, skills and behaviours, such as completing specialist workshops on communication skills. As a result, leaders and coaches are better informed of the progress that apprentices are making. Therefore, they can plan learning more diligently to support apprentices to achieve their potential.

Leaders have improved their communication with apprentices' line managers in the workplace. This has resulted in apprentices completing a broader range of duties at work. Apprentices on the level 5 operations and departmental manager apprenticeship gain experience of attending more senior meetings to inform future personal development. Apprentices better understand the company's vision and purpose. This supports apprentices to develop new knowledge, skills and behaviours more rapidly.

How well do leaders, coaches and line managers coordinate on- and off-the-job training for apprentices so that apprentices benefit from a well-planned programme? Reasonable progress

Leaders, coaches and apprentices' line managers work effectively at the beginning of the apprenticeship to plan learning. Most line managers have a much greater awareness of the requirements for apprentices to receive sufficient high-quality off-the-job training. As a result, the vast majority of apprentices receive their off-the-job entitlement. In most cases, this training is well linked to apprentices' job roles. However, in a few cases, particularly those apprentices in relief chef manager roles, apprentices do not always receive sufficient high-quality off-the-job training.

Leaders and coaches now ensure that apprentices have clear learning plans in place for their training. For apprentices completing the level 2 customer service practitioner standard, core and specialist workshops are planned in 'understanding self' and 'understanding others'. Leaders and coaches frequently share apprentices' learning plans with line managers. Consequently, apprentices are better supported in the workplace to apply theory to practice. For example, when learning to deal with customer conflict, apprentices are quickly able to apply this new learning within their job role by being allocated complaints to respond to. This supports apprentices to develop their knowledge and skills more swiftly.

Leaders have taken appropriate steps to improve the quality of off-the-job training. Additional online workshops are now in place. In most cases, apprentices access this useful content to help them improve their confidence. Apprentices completing the level 5 operations and departmental manager apprenticeship improve their confidence in setting high aspirations for the staff that they line manage at work. However, in a few cases, apprentices have yet to take advantage of the additional workshops available to them to support their learning.

In most cases, line managers now attend apprentices' progress reviews. Coaches and line managers discuss gaps in apprentices' knowledge during these reviews. They have productive discussions on how apprentices can be supported to close any gaps in their knowledge. Apprentices on the level 5 operations and departmental manager apprenticeship benefit from interaction with nutritionists to improve their awareness of allergens in food and close gaps in their knowledge directly relevant to apprentices' job roles. On- and off-the-job training is now more closely linked.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that coaches are supported to develop the skills required to deliver high-quality teaching? Reasonable progress

Leaders now ensure that training and development for staff are accorded a much higher priority. They have supported new coaches to complete mandatory training on safeguarding and well-being swiftly. Coaches have a clear understanding of the range of resources available to apprentices to support their well-being, such as support to maintain and improve their mental health. Coaches actively promote these resources to apprentices to support their well-being and engagement with their studies.

Leaders have put in place a range of training and development activities to support coaches to improve their teaching practice. Coaches benefit from training on how to use breakout rooms more resourcefully when teaching online. Apprentices undertaking the level 2 customer service practitioner apprenticeship benefit from more frequent opportunities to interact with their peers. They benefit from sharing their experiences of dealing with customer conflict and complaints to improve their own practice.

Following the previous inspection, coaches quickly put in place personal action plans and training plans for coaches. Clear actions are in place that set out the training for coaches. Coaches now undertake more frequent training to improve their subject expertise. Coaches who teach management apprenticeships benefit from regular update training from The Institute of Leadership and Management. This supports coaches to deliver content to apprentices that is current and up to date. However, leaders recognise that coaches would further benefit from additional training to improve their craft of teaching.

To what extent do senior leaders and those in a governance role now use self-assessment and quality improvement processes to quickly identify and improve any weaknesses in provision? **Reasonable progress**

Following the previous inspection, leaders have swiftly put in place a post-inspection action plan. Leaders have put in place several actions to support improvements. These actions respond directly to the key areas for improvement from the previous inspection. Actions have been taken to improve the quality of the careers advice and guidance that apprentices receive. Leaders regularly review the progress they are making since the previous inspection. They make sure that actions are in place to support improvements in all areas.

Leaders have revisited the quality improvement processes that are in place to help them gain a more accurate view of the quality of teaching. A more robust process is now in place. This includes more regular progress reviews and discussions with apprentices about their work. However, in a few cases, discussions focus too narrowly on whether apprentices' work has met awarding body criteria. In these instances, leaders are not as clear as they could be on what apprentices now know and can do.

Those in a governance role now receive much more insightful information from leaders. Advisory board members receive regular and detailed updates on the progress against the actions detailed within the post-inspection action plan. They receive a useful 'apprenticeship operations report'. This updates the advisory board on the progress that apprentices are making. The advisory board now hold leaders to account more rigorously. They challenge leaders quickly where apprentices are not making at least the progress expected of them.

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