

Inspection of Skills Office Network Limited

Inspection dates: 9 to 11 August 2023

Overall effectiveness

Good

The quality of education

Good

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Good

Apprenticeships

Good

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Not previously inspected

Information about this provider

Skills Office Network Limited is an independent learning provider with its head office in Gateshead. It provides training to apprentices nationally. The provider first received funding to deliver apprenticeships in 2020. At the time of the inspection, there were 36 apprentices on standards-based programmes at level 3 in freight forwarding, team leader and youth support worker. The large majority are studying the freight forwarding standard. Most apprentices are over 18 years of age.

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

Apprentices work in a calm and purposeful learning environment. In the workplace, they benefit from peer support, work effectively alongside experienced staff and progress to become valued members of the team. In online lessons, tutors encourage all apprentices to participate fully by posing questions to named apprentices, who respond well.

Apprentices demonstrate high levels of attendance and punctuality, which contributes towards the progress they make on their programmes. Attendance is encouraged through regular reinforcement at review meetings and, as a result, apprentices understand the consequences of absence, including the impact on the workload of their peers.

Apprentices develop professional work ethics well, particularly when undertaking workplace activities. They are very respectful of their employer and know how to conduct themselves in a professional manner. Employers value their apprentices and appreciate their positive impact on the wider workforce.

Apprentices enjoy their experience with the provider and value the new knowledge and skills that they gain as part of their programme. They are motivated by the work they do and appreciate the opportunities they are given to make continued progress and improve their performance.

Tutors develop apprentices' understanding of fundamental British values. They share information at the start of the course and reinforce this throughout apprentices' time with the provider. Staff help apprentices to understand the importance of respect and tolerance and their role as a responsible citizen within their community.

Staff teaching the personal development curriculum cover important topics relevant to the wider community. For example, tutors teach apprentices about the need to promote and actively embrace equality and diversity. This prepares apprentices to be mindful and considerate of others, and it promotes a culture of inclusivity and respect. However, leaders rightly recognise that, as apprenticeship numbers increase, further work is needed to ensure that resources are adapted and developed to reflect the varying ages and backgrounds of the apprentices.

Apprentices feel safe in learning and at work. They are aware of how to keep both themselves and their peers safe and know to whom they should report any concerns.

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

Leaders and managers have a clear intent and purpose for the programmes that they offer. They have designed and provide a curriculum to meet local, regional and national skills needs. When leaders and managers introduce new provision, they

consider carefully the need for it and ensure that they have a sustainable curriculum offer based upon assurances that are well considered and right for the economy.

Leaders and managers engage with relevant stakeholders well. They have built positive relationships with the local authority, educational establishments and industry specialists, such as the British International Freight Association and the National Youth Agency. They use these relationships well to gather information and to review and update their curriculum. Consequently, apprentices are gaining the knowledge, skills and professional behaviours required by their respective industries.

Tutors sequence the curriculum logically. On the international freight forwarding programme, topics become increasingly complex to develop apprentices' knowledge. Apprentices develop a broad understanding of the industry before moving into specialist topics such as the range of freight routes available, including air, ocean and road. Employers are given the opportunity to restructure the delivery of the units to make the programme specific to their organisational needs.

Vocational tutors are well qualified in their subject areas and have high levels of industry experience. They use their knowledge and skills to inform the content of their teaching sessions. Teachers who are new to teaching are supported well to gain relevant qualifications and develop their teaching skills. Leaders and managers provide opportunities for staff to gain assessor qualifications and teaching qualifications.

Tutors assess what apprentices know and can do at the start of their apprenticeship effectively. They use information from these assessments to identify what additional support requirements are needed to enable apprentices to be successful. Tutors work alongside employers to ensure that apprentices are enrolled on the correct pathway and develop new knowledge, skills and behaviours relevant to their role.

Tutors plan and prepare for their lessons effectively and demonstrate that they know their apprentices well. Sessions are mainly delivered remotely to small groups from different companies, and apprentices are encouraged to share their experiences from within their organisations. Tutors provide ongoing support and praise, and they ensure that each apprentice is encouraged to participate. Sessions include break-out activities and quizzes to check comprehension of the topics.

Tutors support apprentices in the development of their English and mathematical skills throughout the programmes. They introduce apprentices to new terminology and abbreviations relevant to the industry, which apprentices use confidently and appropriately in their written and oral communication. Tutors identify spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors and advise apprentices on how to make improvements. However, a few tutors do not plan learning well enough to ensure that apprentices who need to gain their functional skills qualifications do so in a timely manner.

Tutors prepare apprentices well for their end-point assessment. Apprentices have a thorough understanding of what the process will entail and the knowledge they

need to be successful. Apprentices who stay to the end of their programme achieve well. However, as leaders rightly recognise, they need to work with employers to reduce the proportion of apprentices who leave before the end of their programme.

Leaders and managers support their staff well and are considerate of workload. They are aware of the pressures on their staff and work to create an enjoyable place to work. For example, staff caseloads are closely monitored to ensure that they remain at a manageable level, and all staff are offered hybrid working arrangements to provide flexibility. Staff feel well supported by their managers. They like working at the provider and appreciate the friendly, flexible environment.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders and managers have implemented effective safeguarding policies and procedures, which they use to keep apprentices safe. They have clear lines for reporting concerns, and when issues are raised, they are dealt with appropriately and swiftly. Leaders and managers recruit staff safely and ensure that all staff are suitable to work with apprentices, including those aged 16 to 18.

The designated safeguarding lead and safeguarding team are appropriately trained and experienced for their roles. They understand their responsibilities in safeguarding apprentices and support them with a wide range of issues. They liaise closely and effectively with regional 'Prevent' coordinators.

Leaders and managers understand the need to prepare apprentices for the specific risks they may face in the industry in which they work. The safeguarding team works effectively to develop apprentices' awareness and understanding of topics such as human trafficking and modern slavery. As a result, apprentices have a good understanding of the potential risks that they may face at work and in the community.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Develop the functional skills provision to support all apprentices in their achievements of functional skills qualifications by their planned end dates.
- Design and tailor the personal development curriculum to meet the individual needs of apprentices.
- Continue to work closely with employers to ensure that a high proportion of apprentices remain on their programme.

Provider details

Unique reference number	2654144
Address	7 and 8 Delta Bank Metro Riverside Business Park Gateshead NE11 9DJ
Contact number	01914 661615
Website	www.skillsofficenetwork.co.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	James Neilands
Provider type	Independent learning provider
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Main subcontractors	None

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the CEO, 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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His Majesty's Inspector

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His Majesty's Inspector

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