

Acorn Training Consultants

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made on www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of the inspection, inspectors take account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body. Where appropriate, inspectors also consider the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk), reports from the inspectorates' quality monitoring or annual assessment visits, and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.

In addition to reporting on overall effectiveness of the organisation, its capacity to improve further, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management, this inspection focused on specialist provision in:

- Business Administration.

Description of the provider

1. Acorn Training Consultants (Acorn) is a private training provider based in Ripley, in the Amber Valley in North East Derbyshire. It provides apprenticeship and advanced apprenticeship training, funded by Derbyshire LSC, in business administration, management and customer service. Acorn also provides ESF funded training programmes, schools programmes and entry to employment programmes. The LSC contract accounts for approximately 90% of its income.
2. Learners join apprenticeship programmes after nomination by their employers, after referral from Connexions or in response to adverts that Acorn places locally. Altogether 62 learners are currently involved in business administration apprenticeship programmes. Twenty-four learners are following apprenticeship programmes in administration, seven in customer service and seven in management. Twenty-one are following advanced apprenticeships in administration and three in customer service.
3. Acorn is owned and managed by a board of three directors, consisting of a chairman, managing director and finance director. The operation of the training programmes are managed by a senior management team including two of the directors and two managers responsible for curriculum areas. Staff directly employed by Acorn provide all training and assessment most of which takes place at work. Learners may also attend the training centre for induction, learning support, work on key skills, technical certificates, additional qualifications, training courses and workshops.
4. The Amber Valley in North East Derbyshire has an unemployment rate of 2%. Ninety-six per cent of the employers in the area employ less than 20 people. The area is made up of small market towns and rural areas. Minority ethnic groups make up less than 1% of the Amber Valley population against a national average of 6.2%.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Good: Grade 2
Achievement and standards	Good: Grade 2
Quality of provision	Good: Grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: Grade 2
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Good: Grade 2

Sector subject area

Business Administration	Good: Grade 2
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Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

5. The overall effectiveness of the provision is good. Achievement and standards, the quality of provision and leadership and management are all good. Provision in business administration, customer service and management are good. Equality of opportunity is good.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

6. Acorn has demonstrated that it has a good capacity to improve. Since it was last inspected, learners' success rates have improved significantly. Overall framework success rates at period nine in 2006/07 are at 85%, which is a 35% increase since 2004/05. Acorn has good quality assurance arrangements. Acorn uses feedback from stakeholders effectively and responds promptly to make improvements. Improvement planning and actions are thorough and closely aligned to the benefit of learners. Management actions such as the development of six monthly quality reports and the improvements in the use of data clearly focus on improving the service that Acorn provides to learners.
7. The self-assessment process is well established, thorough and inclusive. The views of stakeholders are brought together well and, along with good use of accurate data, this enables Acorn to carry out effective analysis and arrive at sound judgements in response to the common inspection framework. The self-assessment report is thorough and accurate. Inspectors agreed with the main strengths and areas for improvement identified by Acorn. Acorn produces very detailed and relevant quality improvement plans for which there is a well-established process that involves all staff. These plans and the actions that are taken are closely linked to the self-assessment.

Key strengths

- Good success rates for apprentices.
- Good acquisition of workplace skills.
- Particularly effective tutorial support.
- Good and productive relationships with employers.
- Particularly effective strategies to improve performance.
- Good use of management information.
- Good engagement with partners to widen participation.

Key areas for improvement

- The underdeveloped target-setting at ten-weekly reviews.
- The further development of quality improvement arrangements for teaching and learning.

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

8. Success rates for apprentices in business administration and customer service are good overall and are significantly above the national rate in 2005/06. The trend is an improving one and provisional data for 2006/07 to date indicates an overall success rate of 88% for apprentices. The proportion of apprentices who completed their programme within the planned period of training also shows an improving trend. The year to date timely success rate for 2006/07 is significantly above the national rate at 74% for administration and 86% for customer service. This strength was accurately noted in the self-assessment report.
9. Success rates for advanced apprentices are satisfactory overall. The most recent year to date success rates show improvement, slightly ahead of the national rate for advanced apprentices in administration and significantly ahead for customer service. The proportion of advanced apprentices in both administration and customer service who completed their programme within the planned period of training also shows an improving trend. Success rates for management learners are satisfactory overall and also show an improving trend.
10. Learners develop good workplace skills and apply them well in their job roles. Learners value the way their training programme has enabled them to develop and apply skills at work. This has helped them to improve their confidence in a range of situations at work, for example dealing with customers on the phone and communicating with colleagues. In some cases learners have taken on extra responsibility and introduced improvements at work which have contributed to business success. Employers recognise improvements in learners' performance since the start of their programmes, for example improved team work, better report writing, and good customer service.

Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

11. Quality of provision is good overall. Learners receive particularly effective tutorial support through regular and frequent visits by Acorn staff to the work place. Acorn training programmes are well planned and link well with workplace activity. Good advice, information and guidance is provided by tutors. The visits are well structured and involve individual coaching and key skills development as well as assessment and feedback on progress. Learners also contact tutors between visits by e-mail and phone. A good range of learning materials and resources are used by tutors effectively to promote learning appropriate to the individual's learning needs and in the context of the job. Online learning modules are used well by many learners to enhance learning opportunities for NVQ, technical certificate and key skills achievements. Learners receive prompt feedback on what they have achieved when working on these modules. Tutors use the online activity and reports to monitor learner progress between workplace visits. Progression by learners to higher level qualifications is at a good rate. Acorn provides learners with good pastoral support and practical help to overcome barriers to learning. Some learners benefit

from well planned additional training to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. This is provided by tutors and, if required, specialist support. This strength was identified in the self-assessment report.

12. Relationships with employers are particularly good and productive. Many employers have worked with Acorn for some time and contribute well to learners' programmes. There are good formal and informal communications between all parties, which means that tutors and employers can provide relevant training and also react quickly to learners' needs. The quality of employer work places is very good and learners benefit from working with up to date equipment and modern business systems. Some learners benefit from in-house and external training courses provided by employers. These together with workplace tasks are effectively matched to the NVQ and key skills standards. Employers are actively involved in their learners' programmes and provide good opportunities for learning and work based assessment. This strength was identified in the self-assessment report.
13. Target-setting at ten weekly progress reviews is underdeveloped. The current review records do not always formally measure learners' progress since the beginning of their programme although this information is available to Acorn staff and aspects are recorded on other documents, for example assessment reviews. The discussion of what is required to be achieved over the forthcoming period, usually ten weeks, is not informed by accurate records of progress covering all elements of the framework. Records of these reviews do not adequately record specific and measurable targets. Acorn Training has recognised this as an area for improvement and is currently piloting a different approach.

Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade: Good: Grade 2

14. Leadership and management are good. Acorn has particularly effective strategies to improve performance which are supported by comprehensive quality assurance and effective self-assessment. Provisional data for 2006/7 indicates that the overall success rate for all apprentices has improved by 35% since 2004/05. Since the previous inspection, senior managers have placed a clear strategic focus on the improvement of the quality of provision for learners. Acorn has made productive use of external support to benchmark its performance against other providers and to help improve the quality of its provision. An inclusive management approach towards communication with staff and the careful monitoring of individual performance has effectively engaged staff in the quality improvement processes, and has led to much improved success rates for many learners. In addition, Acorn has given strong support to the continuing professional development of its staff. It has invested in additional resources which particularly benefit work based learners, for example the development of online resources. It has effectively modified its organisational structures to reflect changes in its provision and to increase its links with and support for local employers, especially small businesses.
15. Acorn makes good use of management information. Since the previous inspection, it has made significant improvements in the quality of its management information systems, which effectively support the continuing improvement of provision for the benefit of

learners. Through the detailed and careful analysis of data, which relates to all key business processes, organisational planning and quality reviews are well informed. Acorn has maintained a clear focus on the evaluation of its progress against agreed targets for equality of opportunity. Strong financial management systems monitor income and expenditure closely in each period and ensure value for money. Acorn is continuing to work to further develop and refine its systems as part of its quality improvement processes.

16. Acorn engages well with an extensive range of collaborative partners across the region to carefully identify and meet the local and regional needs of disadvantaged individuals and groups, and to widen opportunities for participation. It has worked pro-actively and effectively with the local networks, schools, community groups and funding bodies to design and deliver training programmes which clearly address identified barriers to progress for a range of learners, such as women in management, disengaged young people, and those from minority ethnic groups. Through these programmes, many disadvantaged learners have achieved their personal goals, have gained additional confidence and have progressed successfully in their employment or education.
17. Acorn routinely updates its equality and diversity policies to reflect changes in legislation. Through induction and consolidation activities at formal reviews, learners develop a satisfactory awareness and understanding of the personal and wider issues relating to equality of opportunity and diversity in the workplace.
18. Quality assurance arrangements are comprehensive. The self-assessment report adequately described the strengths and area for improvement for leadership and management. Effective arrangements are in place for internal verification with regular standardisation meetings. Learners' work is sampled effectively according to a detailed plan which prioritises learners at risk and key aspects of provision. Assessors receive appropriate feedback on their assessment activities and good practice is routinely shared.
19. Acorn recognises in its self-assessment report and quality improvement plans that further development is needed in its quality improvement arrangements for teaching and learning. As part of its wider quality systems, it has introduced the regular observation of tutors. However, Acorn recognises that its approach to observations and grading is not yet sufficiently consistent and that the quality of evaluative feedback given to tutors varies too much. For example, some observation feedback is too descriptive and does not comment sufficiently on the challenge to learners. Although Acorn has clear plans in place to further develop the skills of its staff in delivering and supporting key skills, too few observations give clear feedback and guidance to tutors on planning for the development of key skills in learners.

What learners like:

- 'They are fantastic.'
- 'My tutor helped me discover what I want to do.'
- 'The regular visits at work, always on time'
- 'The good advice.'
- 'They have high standards.'
- 'Acorn helped me to develop my confidence.'
- 'Introduced me to better ways of working.'
- 'Enjoy learning and earning money at same time.'
- 'Staff are friendly and helpful.'

What learners think could improve:

- No suggestions were put forward.

Annex

Learners' achievements

Success rates on **work-based learning 'apprenticeship' programmes** managed by Acorn
2004 year to 2006 year

Programme	End Year	Success rate	No. of learners*	Provider NVQ rate**	National NVQ rate**	Provider framework rate**	National framework rate**
Advanced Apprenticeships	03-04	overall	21	67	46	33	28
		timely	19	47	30	26	18
	04-05	overall	12	50	47	50	32
		timely	13	46	34	46	23
	05-06	overall	30	57		47	
		timely	29	45		38	
Apprenticeships	03-04	overall	26	81	51	69	38
		timely	24	17	25	17	18
	04-05	overall	34	53	56	50	46
		timely	35	46	35	43	29
	05-06	overall	43	72		72	
		timely	45	56		56	

* Learners who leave later than originally planned are counted in the year they actually leave. This group of learners are then added to the learners who planned to complete in a given year and did so or left earlier than planned

** National qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the 'Individual Learning Record'