

Thomas Cook UK Limited

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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' monitoring 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:

- Travel and tourism

Description of the provider

1. Thomas Cook UK Limited (Thomas Cook) was formed in June 2007 through the merger of Thomas Cook and MyTravel Group creating one of the world's largest leisure travel groups. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, Thomas Cook has a retail network of 800 travel shops and employs approximately 13,750 people. Thomas Cook has 119 apprentices and 70 advanced apprentices. All but two of these are taking travel and tourism qualifications. Learners work in Thomas Cook's retail travel shops or in the telephone and internet sales centre. They are allocated a mentor in the workplace to support their on-the-job learning. Off-the-job training takes place regionally, in training rooms above some of the retail travel shops or at the Peterborough head office. Two learners based at the call centre in Bradford are taking business administration qualifications. There were too few business administration learners to include in this inspection.
2. The programme is managed by the funding and contracts manager, who works at Thomas Cook's head office. The organisation has held a contract with the National Employer Service (NES) of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) since April 2007. Before then, Thomas Cook's learning programmes were delivered by Intraining, an external training provider. Thomas Cook subcontracts its assessment, most of the off-the-job training, progress reviews and internal verification and certification to Training for Travel (TfT), a privately owned training provider. Within the travel industry, two-thirds of the workforce are women. Only 7% of the workforce are from minority ethnic groups.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Good: Grade 2
Achievement and standards	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Quality of provision	Good: Grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: Grade 2
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

Sector subject area

Travel and tourism	Good: Grade 2
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Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

3. Overall effectiveness is good. Achievement and standards are satisfactory. Learners develop good skills and confidence at work. Overall success rates are satisfactory. Timely success rates are low.
4. The quality of provision is good. Teaching and learning are good. The quality of on-and off-the-job training are good. Learners' knowledge is developed well through the use of very relevant learning activities and resources. Assessment, short-term action planning and progress reviews are effective. Assessors are not sufficiently using Thomas Cook's training towards the NVQ and key skills. Thomas Cook's response to meeting the needs of learners is good. The programme has been well devised around the working environment and needs of the business. Advice, guidance and support for learners are good. Managers and mentors provide very good support. Level 2 learners receive a very comprehensive induction. Initial advice and guidance are very realistic.
5. Leadership and management are good. Managers and members of the board value the apprenticeship programme, which is linked well to business improvement. Staff are trained particularly well to support learners. Communication at all levels is very effective, particularly with TfT. Quality management systems are developing well and arrangements for assuring the quality of teaching and learning are good. The funding and contracts manager makes good use of data to evaluate the quality of the provision and drive improvement. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory. Thomas Cook appropriately promotes equality of opportunity, particularly during learners' induction. However, the recruitment and success of minority groups is not yet being sufficiently analysed.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

6. Thomas Cook's capacity to improve is good. Since gaining its own contract, improvements are already having a positive impact on the provision. Overall success rates in the current year are showing significant improvement. However, little improvement has been made to the timely success of apprentices. This is associated with the residue of learners from the previous training provider. Thomas Cook has effective quality assurance systems, including a good scheme for monitoring the quality of training and learning. Appropriate use is made of staff and learner feedback to drive change. The company makes very good use of management information to reach judgements about the programme's effectiveness and to monitor learners' progress.

7. Thomas Cook's self-assessment process is good. It is reflective and accurately identifies strengths and areas for improvement. The funding and contracts manager has developed an appropriate quality improvement plan and is making significant improvements to procedures and processes, which are already having a positive impact on the quality of provision.

Key strengths

- Good development of learners' skills and confidence in the workplace
- Good training for learners
- Very good support for learners
- Very comprehensive induction at level 2
- Strong strategic direction by management at all levels, linked to business improvement
- Good use of management information to monitor progress and improve performance
- Good training and development of staff to support learners

Key areas for improvement

- Low timely success rates
- Insufficient use of Thomas Cook's training by assessors towards the NVQ and key skills
- Insufficient analysis of the recruitment and success of different groups of learners

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Satisfactory: Grade 3

8. Achievement and standards are satisfactory, which matches the self-assessment report grade. Learners develop good skills and confidence in the workplace. They are confident in dealing with a wide range of customers and bookings. Learners at level 2 consistently demonstrate skills at a higher level and are competent in booking cruise, ski and tailor-made holidays. Learners at level 3 show maturity in solving customers' problems, delivering a high level of customer service. Many learners exceed their sales targets and are valuable members of their team. Many are achieving Thomas Cook's highest performance rating in their first year with the company. A very high proportion of level 2 learners in 2008/09 achieved distinction grades in their technical certificates. Learners enjoy their learning. Attendance at training sessions is good.
9. Learners generally make satisfactory progress towards achievement of their qualifications. This has improved in the current year, with some learners completing their programme early. A small number of learners are making slow progress. These learners have typically experienced changes in their allocated assessor and/or staff within their branch, losing continuity in the training and support.
10. Overall success rates are satisfactory in 2007/08. Advanced apprenticeship overall success rates are slightly above, and apprenticeship rates match, a low national rate. Timely success rates are low. This is recognised in the self-assessment report. In particular, male advanced apprentices have very low timely success rates, at 18%, compared with 42% for all learners.

Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

11. The quality of the provision is good, which is recognised in the self-assessment report. Teaching and learning are good. Learners' knowledge is developed very effectively through on- and off-the-job training and good quality workbooks. Learners' confidence at the start of their career is developed particularly well through the selling skills and customer service sessions. Learners at level 2 attend well planned and very effective off-the-job training. Learners complete good and very relevant research activities, particularly for key skills application of number. On-the-job training is very good and supported by weekly "what's in store" training. Learners have an hour a day study time, which is well managed and monitored by their mentors. Some learners have been on high profile overseas educational visits to extend their knowledge of the destination and as a reward for their work. The company recognises that advanced apprentices had

insufficient group induction and off-the-job training this year, and have increased this for the 2009/10 programme.

12. Learners' progress reviews are effective and motivational. Managers and mentors have appropriate involvement in the process. Learners have comprehensive and very useful short-term action plans, although targets are often set for the same completion date and are not sufficiently prioritised. Some assessors discuss Every Child Matters (ECM) issues with learners, and these learners have a good understanding of aspects such as healthy lifestyles and staying safe.
13. All learners complete a thorough initial assessment. The quality of literacy, numeracy and language support at key skills workshops is good for many learners. Key skills are scheduled too late in the learners' programme, and many learners have still to pass their key skills test.
14. Assessment practice is satisfactory. Assessors use a good range of assessment methods. They carry out comprehensive observations of learners' work and professional discussions. Learners, particularly advanced apprentices, take insufficient initiative in identifying assessment opportunities and referencing their evidence to the appropriate units. Thomas Cook recognises in the self-assessment report that some of the mapping of their training into the NVO units is incomplete. Assessors are not making sufficient use of Thomas Cook's training towards assessment. Many learners have too much written work in their portfolios, some of which duplicates activities they have already completed during Thomas Cook's training. A small minority of assessors are not marking the Employer Rights and Responsibilities workbook, with some inaccurate answers not being challenged.
15. Thomas Cook's programmes are good in meeting the needs and interests of learners. Training and assessment are well planned around business priorities and peak booking times. Managers' and learners' feedback is used productively to develop the provision.
16. Advice, guidance and support for learners are good. Initial advice and guidance, much of which is accessed through the website, is good. The website has exceptionally realistic guidance about what the job will entail, advice on interview and selection techniques and frequently asked questions. Learners at level 2 have a very comprehensive induction that prepares them well for their work and apprenticeship. They have a good understanding of Thomas Cook's values, expectations and procedures. Learners enjoy induction and form a good network of peers.
17. Learners receive very good personal, pastoral and welfare support from their managers, mentors, colleagues and assessors. All involved in the programme have a good awareness of learners' progress and how they can support them in achieving their qualification. The learner handbook is particularly useful in providing external specialist contacts.

Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade: satisfactory: Grade 3

18. Leadership and management are good, which is recognised in the self-assessment report. The board is fully supportive of the learning and development strategy, which it views as being key to attracting and growing talent and developing future managers. The board is very supportive of decisions made by the contracts and funding team, including gaining their own apprenticeship contract, changing the training sub-contractor and reviewing the resource level of the team in the light of programme growth. Board members are kept fully informed of the success and business productivity of the learners. In the short time that the company has managed its own programme, senior managers have set a clear strategic direction for improvement, which is understood equally by their own staff and the new sub-contractor.
19. Managers and Tft use data well to monitor learners' progress and to support improvements. Effective use of a detailed quality improvement plan is raising the quality of provision and improving success rates. In the current year, significant improvement have been made in overall success rates. Overall quality management and the development of effective quality improvement procedures are progressing well. Thomas Cook has made significant progress in developing quality assurance systems and processes and the use of data, setting a challenging service level agreement with Tft. A detailed review of the programme, identifying reasons why learners left the programme early, and the need to attract more employees from minority groups, has resulted in effective changes to recruitment processes.
20. The culture of Thomas Cook is very focused on developing staff and improvement. Arrangements for staff training are good. Managers and mentors receive good training for managing their learners, which includes awareness raising on diversity issues and the ECM themes. However, this is not always timely for mentors who are appointed after the start of the programme.
21. Facilities for off-the-job training at the Thomas Cook head office are good. Learners have access to sophisticated e-learning training materials during on- and off-the-job training. For example, assessment outcomes for training on insurance sales are linked electronically to enable only those who have passed the training to sell insurance.
22. Arrangements for evaluating the quality of teaching and learning are good. Managers regularly observe the quality of teaching and learning of their own and Tft's trainers. Assessments of training sessions are analysed and evaluated and fed back to the trainers. Managers routinely follow up action points with Thomas Cook's trainers, but this does not always happen with trainers at Tft.

23. Self-assessment is accurate and identifies many of the issues found by inspectors. Most managers, as well as the sub-contractor, are included in the self-assessment process. However, branch managers are not yet sufficiently involved in the process, or the subsequent outcome. Questionnaires are used well to evaluate learners' experiences and drive improvement. The outcomes from these are not disseminated to learners or their managers. Outcomes from a recent survey have been compared with those from the previous year to determine the success of actions taken.
24. Communication is good and staff fully understand their roles and responsibilities. Staff appraisal is effective. Most staff are set relevant targets which are monitored and reviewed effectively. Branch managers are set team targets for learning and development, but not a specific target related to the learners' progress.
25. The procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements. Relevant staff, particularly those of Tft, have received appropriate training and an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check.
26. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory, which agrees with the self-assessment report grade. Appropriate procedures are in place for dealing with bullying and harassment, complaints and discriminatory treatment. Most learners have a satisfactory, and some have a good, understanding of equality of opportunity and their rights and responsibilities. They are fully aware of what to do if they experience poor treatment of themselves or others. Equality issues are appropriately covered during induction, but not effectively reinforced during some progress reviews, particularly those relating to learners' responsibilities. Training materials are free of bias with respect to gender, but promotion of diversity is insufficient. Thomas Cook has recently begun to collect and analyse equality and diversity data about its learners. Although managers have a good awareness of the various stages of recruitment, progress and achievement of their learners, this has not yet been analysed for different groups. The company is fully aware of how to improve its promotion of equality and diversity, and is taking appropriate actions, but it is too early to assess their impact.

What learners like:

- Training days and having the opportunity to meet other apprentices
- Support received from their managers, mentors and colleagues
- Career progression opportunities available within Thomas Cook
- Learning new subjects like foreign exchange
- Going on overseas educational visits to improve their knowledge of countries and companies
- Structure of the apprenticeship programme
- The course, which very much relates to, and prepares learners for, the job
- 'My mentor is a great role model for customer service and selling'

What learners think could improve:

- Frequent changes in assessor in some locations
- Provide earlier information about how to progress onto the level 3 programme
- Reduce the amount of paperwork and written evidence in assessment
- 'Provide a list of the top ten apprentice sales performers along with their figures, so I know what I need to aspire to'

Annex

Learners' achievements

Success rates on work-based learning apprenticeship programmes managed by the provider 2006 to 2008

Programme	End Year	Success rate	No. of learners*	Provider NVQ rate**	National NVQ rate**	Provider framework rate**	National framework rate**
Advanced Apprenticeships	06/07	overall	5	100%	56%	100%	48%
		timely	5	80%	41%	80%	36%
	07/08	overall	68	82%	60%	62%	55%
		timely	89	56%	44%	42%	41%
Apprenticeships	06/07	overall	3	100%	65%	100%	60%
		timely	7	57%	44%	57%	41%
	07/08	Overall	123	80%	66%	63%	62%
		timely	133	48%	46%	38%	43%

* 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

** College/provider and national qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the Individual Learning Record (ILR)