External review of Modern Apprenticeship delivery by

SNIPEF Training Services

A report by HM Inspectors

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Apprentice numbers	1095

1. Background

External reviews of Modern Apprenticeship (MA) providers are planned collaboratively between the provider and HM Inspectors. Skills Development Scotland (SDS) provide information regarding provider performance including key data to support this process.

During the review, a team of HM Inspectors evaluated the quality of training provision and the experiences of apprentices and gathered the views of key stakeholders such as employers. The team met with staff, apprentices and other stakeholders. Discussions focussed on the quality of training delivery, how well the needs of apprentices are met and the approaches to improving the quality of provision.

This review includes the evaluation of the quality of the provision where the provider also sub-contracts delivery of certain elements of the apprentice programme to other external providers. The review was undertaken over two phases. Phase one included visits to the providers engaged by the main contractor to deliver elements of the programme. Phase two included a visit to the main contractor, and consideration of the findings from the first phase. This report summarises the findings from the visits, awards grades for the three elements and highlights areas of positive practice, areas for development, and any associated main points for action.

The report will be shared with the main contractor, Scottish Government, and SDS. The report will also be published online by Education Scotland.

2. The provider and its context

The Scottish & Northern Ireland Plumbing Employers Federation (SNIPEF) was founded in 1923 and became the first UK construction trade association to establish its own managing agency, SNIPEF Training Services Ltd (STS), in 1983. Since then, STS has supported around 17,000 apprentices in achieving their Modern Apprenticeship (MA) qualification and has worked with over 5,500 employers across Scotland.

STS is responsible for delivering the Scottish and Northern Ireland Joint Industry Board (SNIJIB) and Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) in the existing MA in Domestic Plumbing and Heating and the recently introduced MA Plumbing and Heating, the only industry-approved training programmes for plumbing and heating apprenticeships in Scotland. This ensures apprentices receive the highest standard of training to meet industry demands.

In partnership with 17 colleges and one private training centre across Scotland, STS manages the delivery of the MA in Plumbing and Heating. Currently, around 1,095 apprentices are in training and employment with over 576 employers, helping to secure the future of the industry.

3. Outcome of external review

The grades for each of the three elements are:

Leadership and Quality Culture	**Good**
Service Delivery	**Very Good**
Safeguarding and meeting the needs of apprentices	**Very Good**

4. Summary of review findings

A summary of the findings of HM Inspectors are set out below.

4.1 Leadership and Quality Culture - Good

4.1.1 Securing improvement of quality and impact of training.

Areas of positive progress

- STS senior managers provide clear strategic direction for the programme and work collaboratively with employers to maximise apprentice recruitment across Scotland. For example, managers have arrangements in place and dedicated resources to support communication with employers in the sector who may wish to take on new apprentices.

- Managers engage in useful *annual centre strategic visits* with all sub-contractors. These help foster positive working relationships. They include discussions on service level agreement (SLA) expectations, review of apprentice outcomes, collaborative working approaches, and sharing ideas to secure improvement.

- STS managers and regional training officers (RTOs) communicate regularly and effectively with employers through formal surveys and follow-up discussions. This enables employers to contribute their views and play an active role in the apprenticeship programme.

- STS managers support improvement through informal reflection and evaluation of the apprenticeship programme, and to identify potential improvements. In addition, a useful task group meets weekly to address specific areas of improvement, track progress made on action plans and implement solutions.

- STS staff take care to ensure delivery providers' staff are kept up to date with latest developments. They co-ordinate regular college network meetings with most curriculum delivery managers and teaching staff, where they share industry-specific information and best practice approaches. This allows sub-contractor staff to discuss their challenges and share good practice across the network.

- Staff in sub-contracted providers utilise SQA training and assessment programmes (TAPs) to ensure consistency in programme delivery and assessment practices. STS staff support providers with the implementation of new TAPs and associated teaching materials through network meetings in collaboration with the SQA senior external verifier. This ensures that sub-contractor staff are kept up to date with the latest delivery and assessment practices.

- Almost all sub-contractors have effective quality assurance and self-evaluation arrangements in place. This helps identify where improvement is required and put in place actions to enhance their apprentices' experience.

Areas for development

- STS arrangements for self-evaluation and action-planning for improvement are not sufficiently systematic or robust. Current arrangements do not support staff to identify consistently, issues raised by employers, RTOs, apprentices and sub-contractors. This limits staffs' ability to ensure a comprehensive and consistent approach to curriculum development and delivery, and to identify actions to secure improvement.

- STS managers do not support consistently, communication and engagement between sub-contractor staff and some employers. This is particularly the case for those employers who contract directly with the provider. As a result, some employers do not receive regular communication about their apprentice's attendance and progression out with formal reviews. This limits their ability to understand better their apprentices' progress.

- STS managers do not engage RTOs sufficiently in STS or sub-contractor self-evaluation activities. The views and information from RTOs are not considered sufficiently when developing action plans for improvement.

4.2 Service Delivery - Very Good

4.2.1 Delivery of training

Areas of positive progress

- Most teaching staff deliver high quality learning and teaching. They ensure sessions are well planned, clearly structured, and supported by useful and appropriate resources. This helps ensure all apprentices understand clearly the concepts within each unit and have opportunities to develop relevant vocational knowledge and skills.

- All teaching staff have recognised vocational qualifications and significant industry experience. They are highly professional and knowledgeable and use this experience to deliver lessons very well.

- RTOs and sub-contractor staff deliver useful induction sessions to apprentices. This ensures apprentices settle quickly into their programme and develop positive relationships with teaching staff and their peers.

- All sub-contractor staff monitor closely, apprentices' attendance and achievement of the group award. This ensures that apprentices stay on track, and for those who may have fallen behind with their programme, receive the support needed to achieve.

- RTOs work closely with apprentices to develop their individual *training plan*, outlining specific goals and outcomes, which is shared with their employers. This helps apprentices develop relevant skills, monitor their progress and achieve their units and outcomes.

- Sub-contractor staff and RTOs use *Apprentice Summary of Achievement Records* (SOAR) to formally record apprentices' achievement. These are shared with employers which helps them take an active role in ensuring their apprentice's progress and provide support where

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required. Where apprentices fall behind, RTOs provide targeted support to ensure apprentices stay on-track and achieve.

- Almost all sub-contractor staff use a useful virtual learning environment (VLE) to provide apprentices with access to a variety of online resources. This supports very well, their learning experiences by providing access to materials and support out with class time.

- All sub-contractor staff provide apprentices with a good range of equipment for their off-the-job training. This ensures apprentices work confidently with existing and emerging technologies and develop the skills required for the workplace.

- Most teaching staff support apprentices to select appropriate units from the apprenticeship framework. These closely match employer needs and align well with apprentice career aspirations.

Areas for development

- RTOs do not undertake consistently a set number of progress review meetings with apprentices and employers. As a result, some apprentices do not have sufficient opportunity to fully reflect on their progress, identify actions to address gaps in their learning or progress or develop strategies to improve their learning.

4.2.2 Staff reflection on provision to improve training

Areas of positive progress

- Managers and RTOs gather feedback from apprentices regularly about their apprenticeship experience. Staff make good use of this feedback to update and improve the MA programme. For example, the apprentice entrance test has been enhanced to provide feedback to apprentices on where they may need to improve their knowledge and skills prior to commencing the MA programme.

- STS work effectively with national groups and carry out industry-wide consultations to develop the national occupational standards (NOS) for the plumbing and heating industry. This collaborative approach ensures the updated NOS, framework and associated qualifications meet industry needs.

Areas for development

- STS managers and RTOs do not review and evaluate systematically, the quality of training programme delivery across all providers to ensure consistency of apprentice experience and outcomes.

4.3 Safeguarding and meeting the needs of apprentices - Very Good

4.3.1 Achieving and maintaining high levels of service delivery

Areas of positive progress

- Positive working relationships are evident between apprentices, RTOs, and employers. All apprentices report that they are supported well during their apprenticeship, and they know who to contact should they have issues to raise or personal concerns.

- Almost all apprentices are satisfied with their training and confirm the MA programme has enabled them to grow in confidence. They acknowledge their training has equipped them well with the underpinning knowledge and skills required to succeed in their job roles.

- Off-the-job release patterns work well for apprentices and employers. Training programmes offer flexibility to ensure both apprentice and employers needs are met.

Areas for development

- Staff in sub-contractors are not involved sufficiently in the recruitment of apprentices. Information about new apprentice enrolments from STS is often not available to sub-contractor staff due to the timing of recruitment activities, with some apprentices recruited just prior to enrolment. This can impact negatively on these apprentices' early experiences of their programme.

- STS staff do not make staff in sub-contractors sufficiently aware of the prior attainment levels of apprentices. This makes it challenging for sub-contractor staff to plan appropriately for apprentices' individual learning needs. On occasion, the levels of literacy and numeracy ability, of some apprentices are not sufficient for the demands of their MA programme.

- STS staff do not consistently ensure that the individual support needs of apprentices are communicated timeously to sub-contractors prior to commencing their programme. This makes it challenging for sub-contractor staff to provide timely and appropriate support interventions where needed.

4.3.2 Adherence to statutory principles and guidance

Areas of positive progress

- The use of a helpful training and registration agreement by STS ensures that both apprentices and employers are aware of, and agree to adhere to, the national working rules set by SNIJIB.

- STS have a range of comprehensive training and employment-related policies in place and provide appropriate online resources for staff, employers, and apprentices. These include relevant codes of conduct, equal opportunities documents and policies, and safeguarding and Prevent procedures. Stakeholders feel well informed and know where to source this information when they require it.

- Both STS and their sub-contractors have in place a range of effective health and safety policies and practices. This ensures high standards of training workshop and site practice safety protocols for both apprentices and employers.

- Sub-contractors undergo external verification of assessment annually by SQA. External verification reports indicate a high level of compliance with the qualification framework and associated standards.

- STS have developed an *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion* action plan. This helps foster a culture of equality within the organisation and throughout the industry, and promotes inclusive recruitment. STS provide employers with *blind CVs*, removing the candidate's name and other personal information, to ensure that apprentices are recruited on merit and helps to mitigate against unconscious bias in the recruitment process.

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- Almost all RTOs have completed mental health first aid training, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to support their own wellbeing and the mental health needs of apprentices.

Areas for development

- STS arrangements for the oversight of safeguarding arrangements in all sub-contractors and employers are not sufficiently systematic.

4.3.3 Apprentice progress and achievement of individual outcomes

Areas of positive progress

- Overall achievement rates for the Domestic Plumbing & Heating framework have exceeded the SDS national benchmark of 75% for the last three years. Achievement rates in 2022-23, and in 2023-24 for this framework are significantly above the national benchmark.

- Most sub-contractors deliver a helpful pre-apprenticeship programme that supports learners to prepare for entry to an apprenticeship and provides a useful pathway into the plumbing & heating MA.

- During their studies, apprentices develop a wide range of skills and can identify how these help them in their job roles. Most apprentices are developing skills in two fuel options. This helps to ensure they develop the skills required to support the transition from gas to emerging technologies.

- Apprentice progression to employment on completion of their programme is high. Almost all apprentices continue in employment with their current employer at the end of their MA programme.

- STS actively promote apprentice success and excellence through the annual apprentice skills competition (SPAY), which showcases apprentices' talents. Additionally, STS recognise outstanding performance by awarding the *Best Plumber of the Year* at each sub-contractor organisation.

Areas for development

- The development of meta skills is not consistently embedded in off-the-job training activities or tracked effectively by sub-contractor or STS staff.

- The proportion of apprentices from key learner groups, e.g. apprentices with a disability, apprentices from an ethnic minority background or care experienced apprentices continue to be below the national average.

5. Main points for action

The following main points for action are required:

STS should:

- ensure self-evaluation arrangements take account of the views and experiences of employers, RTOs, apprentices and sub-contractors to support action-planning for improvement.

- support all staff to engage in regular self-evaluation activities, including arrangements undertaken by sub-contractors.

- ensure arrangements to support the timeous sharing of individual support needs to support sub-contractors to plan to meet their needs from the start of their programme.

- put in place systematic arrangements to ensure oversight of safeguarding arrangements in all sub-contractors and employers.

6. Examples of highly effective practice

None identified.

7. What happens next?

HM Inspectors are confident that the main contractor has the capacity to continue to improve and HM Inspectors will make no further visits as a result of this review.

Stephen McGregor
HM Inspector

Appendix 1 Grades used in reporting

A common grading scale is used in making judgements for provider reviews:

- Grade 1 EXCELLENT – Outstanding and sector leading
- Grade 2 VERY GOOD – Major strengths
- Grade 3 GOOD – Important strengths with some areas for improvement
- Grade 4 SATISFACTORY - Strengths just outweigh weaknesses
- Grade 5 WEAK – Important weaknesses
- Grade 6 UNSATISFACTORY – Major weaknesses

Summary

- An evaluation of **excellent** applies to training which is of a very high quality. An evaluation of *excellent* represents an outstanding standard of training which exemplifies very best practice and is worth disseminating beyond the current provision. It implies that very high-levels of performance are sustainable and will be maintained.

- An evaluation of **very good** applies to training characterised by major strengths. There are very few areas for improvement and any that do exist do not significantly diminish apprentices' experiences. While an evaluation of *very good* represents a high standard of training, it is a standard that should be achievable by all. It implies that it is fully appropriate to continue to provide training without significant adjustment. However, there is an expectation that the provider will take opportunities to improve and strive to raise performance to excellent.

- An evaluation of **good** applies to training characterised by important strengths which, taken together, clearly outweigh any areas for improvement. An evaluation of *good* represents a standard of training in which the strengths have a significant positive impact. However, the quality of apprentices' experiences is diminished in some way by aspects in which improvement is required. It implies that the provider should seek to improve further the areas of important strength but take action to address the areas for improvement.

- An evaluation of **satisfactory** applies to training characterised by strengths which just outweigh weaknesses. An evaluation of *satisfactory* indicates that apprentices' have access to a basic level of training. It represents a standard where the strengths have a positive impact on apprentices' experiences. However, while the weaknesses will not be important enough to have a substantially adverse impact, they do constrain the overall quality of apprentices' experiences. It implies that the provider should take action to address areas of weakness while building on its strengths.

- An evaluation of **weak** applies to training which has some strengths, but where there are important weaknesses. In general, an evaluation of *weak* may be arrived at in a number of circumstances. While there may be some strengths, the important weaknesses will, either individually or collectively, be sufficient to diminish apprentices' experiences in substantial ways. It implies the need for prompt, structured and planned action on the part of the provider.

- An evaluation of **unsatisfactory** applies when there are major weaknesses in training, requiring immediate remedial action. The training experience for apprentices is at risk in significant respects. In almost all cases, staff responsible for training evaluated as unsatisfactory will require support from senior managers in planning and carrying out the necessary actions to effect improvement. This may involve working alongside other staff or agencies in or beyond the immediate support given by the provider.

Appendix 2   Evaluative Terms

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.