

1 July 2025

In February 2024, HM Inspectors published a report on the external review of Modern Apprenticeship (MA) delivery by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS). The report set out a number of areas for improvement which we agreed with the SFRS. We made a further visit in May 2025. During our visit, we looked at the areas that had been identified in the original inspection to review progress made in addressing areas for improvement and how well this supports trainee learning and achievements. This letter sets out what we found.

The SVQ management team should continue to prioritise the implementation of quality arrangements to support improvement to the programme.

The provider has made good progress in addressing this area for improvement. However, there remain areas where ongoing improvement is required.

The Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQ) team have implemented effectively the key improvement actions identified in the previous report. Both SVQ and National Training Centre (NTC) staff have prioritised these actions to ensure a more consistent and standardised approach to programme delivery. The SVQ management team drive continuous improvement through their use of robust quality arrangements to support high-quality apprenticeship experiences.

The introduction of the lead assessor role has strengthened engagement with quality arrangements and improved the consistency of service delivery. The planned recruitment of ten additional lead assessors in 2025 will further support succession planning and promote long-term operational stability across the programme.

Internal verifiers apply rigorously quality assurance measures, providing 100% verification during the first three years of the apprenticeship. This upholds high assessment standards, ensuring fairness and consistency across all pathways. Feedback from internal verifiers supports assessor development and directly contributes to improved trainee performance. Feedback also highlights where trainees need additional support, enabling tailored and more effective learning interventions.

In partnership with Skills Development Scotland (SDS), the SFRS has developed a trainee tracking system. This system improves the accuracy and timeliness of progress monitoring, enabling better programme oversight and more responsive learner support.

Senior leaders are fully engaged in apprenticeship delivery and receive regular updates through the Service Delivery Board. This structured and continuous flow of information supports informed decision-making and enhances strategic oversight of programme outcomes.

The SVQ team has begun to gather and analyse trainee feedback to support continuous improvement. However, it is too early to assess the impact of these changes.

Managers should ensure the skills trainees demonstrate during simulated training activities within local communities and approved SFRS training venues are used as evidence of successful completion of the SVQ.

The provider has made very good progress in addressing this area for improvement.

SFRS has significantly strengthened its simulation training by expanding the number of approved centres from three to six. This expansion has improved access to location-specific training and introduced greater flexibility in scheduling to better align training with operational demands. As a result, trainees benefit from increased learning opportunities across a wider geographical area.

SFRS has introduced twelve annual test and exercise events to support simulation activities, exposing trainees to high-pressure scenarios. These events simulate emergency incidents alongside multiple emergency response agencies, immersing trainees in complex, dynamic environments. These experiences significantly enhance trainees' confidence and decision-making under pressure. After each exercise, trainees reflect on their performance and receive feedback, creating opportunities for comprehensive assessment.

Recent external verification visits by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) express a high level of confidence in the delivery of MAs. This marks a clear improvement from previous evaluations and demonstrates the ongoing commitment of SFRS staff to quality assurance and continuous improvement.

The SVQ management team should improve communication with trainees and assessors to ensure trainees complete their qualification timeously.

The provider has made good progress in addressing this area for improvement. However, there remain areas where ongoing improvement is required.

All current trainees have an assigned assessor who provides ongoing, personalised guidance. This is helping to improve progression and support successful programme outcomes. The training and certification of 59 new assessors and 14 internal verifiers in 2024 is strengthening capacity. Appropriate workforce plans are in place to ensure assessor capacity meets future demand.

Improved communication between the SVQ team, assessors, trainees, and watch commanders is helping to enhance guidance and support. Better alignment of online development sessions with shift rotas is improving attendance and engagement. Local tracking systems and regular communication are supporting transparency and early identification of trainees needing additional support.

The revised annual progress review (APR) helps staff to drive consistency in trainee progression and completion rates. This ensures trainees receive thorough feedback and support from assessors at key milestones.

Arrangements to support effective communication with trainees are currently sufficient. However, ongoing evaluation of these arrangements is necessary to maintain effective coordination.

Managers should ensure that trainees who need to obtain core competencies in numeracy and ICT are informed of this requirement at an early stage of their training. They should also be aware of the acquisition and development of the range of meta skills during their programme.

The provider has made good progress in addressing this area for improvement. However, there remain areas where ongoing improvement is required.

Newly recruited trainees without certificated core competencies in numeracy or information communication and technology (ICT) are now informed of this requirement early in their training. Tailored resources and support help them achieve these units effectively and without delay. Early core skills profiling is improving the timely identification of individual support needs, allowing for a more personalised approach to training.

Senior leaders have made the strategic decision to deliver core skills in-house using the SVQ assessment team. The ICT unit is contextualised to the operational firefighting environment, ensuring relevant, practical learning. Assessors and internal verifiers use a central database to monitor and track trainees' progress, supporting consistent, data-driven decision-making and tailored support.

Meta skills are introduced at induction and their development continues throughout the traineeship. This approach establishes clear expectations from the outset, with SFRS using SDS documentation to guide structured delivery.

The early identification of key meta skills now provides a solid foundation; however, continued development and integration into training is needed to ensure they effectively enhance trainee performance and adapt to evolving operational demands.

Managers should work to improve trainee achievement rates.

The provider has made good progress in addressing this area for improvement.

The SVQ team has worked to improve trainee achievement rates. This has resulted in an increase from 54% in 2023/24 to 92% in 2024/25.

Early identification of at-risk learners has significantly improved through the implementation of a new trainee tracking system. The SVQ team uses data effectively to inform decisions, reduce delays, and support timely interventions. The introduction of a visual management tool using a Red, Amber, Green (RAG) system to monitor assessment progress is tracking overall success rates within the MA programme.

Assessors and internal verifiers receive professional development training including guidance on evidence triangulation. This training helps improve the consistency and rigour of assessments. The increased involvement of expert witnesses further enhances assessment validity, leading to more accurate and credible competency evaluations.

Managers should ensure that all assessors have a clear and comprehensive understanding of the requirements of SVQ qualification and develop a holistic approach to evidence gathering and recognition of prior learning (RPL) to better support trainee attainment.

The provider has made good progress in addressing this area for improvement.

The SVQ management team has introduced a training programme to support an increase the number of qualified assessors and verifiers. Lead assessors guide colleagues on the use of procedures and best practice, ensuring consistent, accurate evaluations that help improve assessment effectiveness. Additionally, lead assessors have implemented standardised approaches to RPL, ensuring assessors and trainees fully understand the approach and its criteria.

Recent improvements in assessment methods, including increased use of simulation, expert witness testimonies, enhanced tracking systems, and the effective use of holistic assessment opportunities, are having a positive impact on trainee outcomes. These developments allow trainees to demonstrate their competencies effectively and apply their learning in practical situations with greater confidence.

Arrangements for RPL are explicit and clearly communicated to trainees and staff. This is significantly reducing the time and resources needed for trainees with existing skills to complete their qualifications.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service should continue to work to improve the gender balance of trainees by increasing the number of female trainee firefighters.

The provider has made some progress in addressing this area for improvement.

Senior managers have developed a cultural action plan to promote diversity and inclusion within SFRS with new recruitment strategies specifically targeting increased female representation in the workforce. A recent promotional event for women in the fire service attracted over 100 attendees, raising awareness of available career opportunities. The senior leadership team has approved a wider, national rollout of this type of event. Whilst these initiatives are advancing female recruitment, the overall number of female trainee firefighters remains low.

What happens next?

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has made good progress since the original inspection. HM Inspectors are confident the provider has the capacity to continue to improve and will make no further visits as a result of this review.

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