

External review of Modern Apprenticeship delivery by

Skillnet Limited

A report by HM Inspectors

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Provider type	Independent Training Provider
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Apprentice numbers	81

1. Background

External reviews of Modern Apprenticeship 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 key stakeholders such as employers. During the visit, the team met with staff, learners and other stakeholders and explored the quality of training delivery, how well the needs of apprentices are met, and approaches to improving quality of provision.

This report summarises the findings from the visit, 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 provider, Scottish Government, and SDS. For colleges, the report will be shared with the college Principals and Board or Regional Strategic Body, and Scottish Funding Council (SFC). An accompanying short report will be published on Education Scotland's website.

2. The provider and its context

Skillnet is the largest provider of apprenticeships to the automotive industry in the United Kingdom. They partner with training centres across the UK to deliver apprenticeship programmes. Skillnet delivers around eighty automotive apprenticeships in Scotland each year at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) levels 5 and 6, which lead to careers in the automotive sector.

The apprenticeship programmes are primarily for light and heavy vehicles, including electric vehicles. A few non-technical apprenticeships such as customer service, and business administration are also delivered. For Scottish apprentices, Skillnet subcontract their off-the-job training to City of Bristol College for heavy vehicle programmes, and the LAGTA Bosch Service Training Base near Glasgow for light vehicle programmes.

3. Outcomes 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 - Grade: Good

4.1.1 Securing improvement of quality and impact of training

Areas of positive progress

- Apprentices are provided with good opportunities to reflect upon their apprenticeship experiences and provide feedback to Skillnet staff. This is supported well through completion of formal surveys and focus group discussions.
- All Managers make good use of apprentice feedback to make improvements to the apprenticeship programme. They respond quickly to feedback provided and introduce appropriate adjustments whenever possible.
- All Skillnet managers develop the apprenticeship programme to include additional qualifications beyond the minimum required to achieve the apprenticeship. Examples include certification in air conditioning, speed limiters, electric vehicles, and Advanced Driver Assistance Systems. Additional qualifications support apprentices' long-term career development aspirations.
- Senior managers recognise the need for apprentices to acquire a wider set of skills for self-management, resilience, and independent working. They have developed a suite of mandatory online modules that enhance apprentices' training and supports skills development. The online modules help to broaden apprentices' knowledge of relevant social issues such as mental health, suicide prevention and prohibited drugs.
- Skills coaches use monthly discussions effectively to engage apprentices in discussions about topical social issues. They promote conversations about personal anxiety, mental health issues, and future career options. These discussions are received well by apprentices and help raise awareness of support options should they experience any issues during their apprenticeship.
- Skillnet managers work purposefully with training staff, employers, and vehicle manufacturers to gather feedback and evaluate programme delivery. They collaborate well with key partners and share information to support improvement.

Area for development

- Skillnet managers do not routinely share programme improvements made based on feedback with apprentices.
- Most employers would welcome increased contact with Skillnet managers to discuss the apprenticeship programme, their apprentices' progress, and to provide opportunities to raise any relevant issues.
- Managers understanding of SDS registration arrangements and the SDS contract requires improvement.
- Terminology such as meta skills is not yet embedded into the apprenticeship programme.

4.2 Service Delivery - Grade: Very Good

4.2.1 Delivery of training

Areas of positive progress

- Managers deliver a comprehensive induction programme for all apprentices to provide them with essential information. This includes key elements such as health and safety, risk assessments, safeguarding arrangements, and programme delivery. It also signposts support arrangements for apprentices and how they can engage with online learning.
- Managers plan and deliver effective induction arrangements with college staff for off-the-job training. They highlight the range of support services available to help apprentices succeed on their programme. Where an additional support need is identified, targeted support is put in place promptly to allow apprentices to fully engage in their programme.
- Training staff plan learning activities well and include good opportunities for workshop activities. Apprentices are encouraged to work in small groups, replicating workplace practice. This approach promotes independent learning and provides experience in solving the technical challenges they may face during their employment.
- Overall, the training facilities at Skillnet are of high quality and provide good access to modern, industry standard equipment. All apprentices are provided with laptop computers and the resources required to engage purposefully in online learning activities. Apprentices have good access to the technical protocols and guidance from major motor vehicle manufacturers.
- Training staff and assessors are appropriately qualified and undertake regular sharing of practice and professional learning. Their professional knowledge, experience and skills in vehicle maintenance are applied effectively to enhance learning and teaching.
- All training staff align their learning and teaching approaches well with the needs of employers including the robust standards set out for apprentice technicians. This helps apprentices to meet the technical requirements set out by employers and supports the development of apprentices' confidence.
- Training staff have regular contact with the two skills coaches who are responsible for all Scottish apprentices at their employer's premises. Training staff communicate effectively and frequently with skills coaches regarding apprentices' support needs and additional training requirements.

- All apprentices have high levels of confidence in Skillnet training staff, and their allocated skills coaches. They feel well supported in their training programme and almost all apprentices express high levels of satisfaction.
- Skills coaches have good relationships with apprentices and their employers. Apprentices value the support provided by their coaches and mentors, and this helps them achieve their apprenticeship goals.

Areas for development

- There is variability between the heavy vehicle and light vehicle facilities and training equipment provided to apprentices. A few light vehicle training vehicles are not consistent with modern technology found in the workplace.
- A few apprentices find the delivery of the induction programme to be uninspiring and would prefer a more active programme, scheduled over a longer period.
- A few apprentices do not engage well with virtual classroom experiences. There has been limited action taken to enhance delivery approaches, or to make virtual classroom experiences more engaging.

4.2.2 Staff reflection on provision to improve training

Areas of positive progress

- Skillnet provide apprentices with helpful QR codes that link to questionnaires for feedback on topics such as learning activities and timing of assessments. Apprentices' comments are reviewed by managers who provide training staff and skills coaches with recommendations for improvement.
- All training staff attend structured professional learning sessions. They also meet regularly to share best practice and review lesson plans and teaching approaches to enhance lesson delivery.
- Skills coaches attend monthly update meetings where they discuss individual apprentice progress. They use meetings well to share good practice in the delivery of training.
- Training staff participate regularly in team meetings with Skillnet staff where they focus on sharing new developments and good practice. Training staff shadow each other, and this helps to improve the delivery of lessons.
- Managers reflect proactively on relevant performance data such as the time taken for programme completion, the reasons why apprentices leave early, and how many remain employed at the end of the programme. This has supported improvements such as a greater emphasis on mental health support training for Skillnet staff.
- The quality department use comprehensive self-evaluation arrangements to identify areas for improvement. When enhancement actions are identified, these are introduced and implemented quickly.
- Managers make good use of feedback received from training centres, employers, manufacturers, and apprentices to make improvements to the apprenticeship programme.

- Skillnet managers use a good range of approaches to improve learning and teaching practice. These include formal lesson observations which are graded annually, learning walks, lesson critiques, peer teaching observations and directed professional learning. Group sessions are arranged to allow staff discussion on improvements to learning and teaching approaches.

Areas for development

- None identified.

4.3 Safeguarding and meeting the needs of apprentices - Grade: Very Good

4.3.1 Achieving and maintaining high levels of service delivery

Areas of positive progress

- Managers consult regularly with training staff and skills coaches to monitor apprentice progress. Most apprentices complete their programme within the expected completion timescale. Around 15% of apprentices are given additional time to complete their programme to accommodate individual needs and circumstances.
- Managers make good use of data and dashboards to monitor apprentice progress and provision of any additional support required. Managers and skills coaches respond promptly to provide tailored support to apprentices who disclose their additional needs during training.
- Managers complete Personal Improvement Plans for skills coaches based on key aims and objectives. These are reviewed bi-annually which helps to ensure the programme is delivered to the required standard.

Areas for development

- A few apprentices leave the programme at an early stage, as they feel vehicle technician work is not a suitable career for them. The current screening and recruitment arrangements do not yet ensure all apprentices are recruited onto the appropriate programme.
- Training centres report apprentice progress directly to apprentices' employers. However, apprentices rely on this information being passed through their mentors. This leads to inconsistency in information sharing, and apprentices would prefer to receive their progress reports directly for discussion with their skills coaches.

4.3.2 Adherence to statutory principles and guidance

Areas of positive progress

- Health and safety is a key element of training and lesson delivery. Managers have established effective risk assessment arrangements with relevant signage and guidance. All apprentices are provided with appropriate personal protective equipment and operate in a safe working environment.
- One member of training staff is identified as safeguarding lead for the Scottish apprenticeship programme and is appropriately trained for this role. Apprentices know who to go to should there be any safeguarding issues or concerns. They confirm they feel safe and supported during their apprenticeship.

- Skillnet managers ensure proactive support is in place for the wellbeing of apprentices during their residential block release, especially for the accommodation requirements of apprentices under 18 years of age. An external accommodation provider ensures that the residential arrangements are planned well, and all necessary support is in place, taking full account of safeguarding needs.
- Managers have a strong commitment to apprentice wellbeing, with robust arrangements in place to support apprentices who may require advice and guidance. A number of mental health first aiders are in place and all Skillnet staff are aware of the importance of the mental health and wellbeing of their apprentices. Action is taken quickly if apprentices require additional support, and all apprentices are satisfied with the support provided.
- All Skillnet staff are trained in safeguarding and there are comprehensive arrangements in place at all levels to safeguard apprentices. Female apprentices have an individual female mentor who can be contacted for tailored personal support.
- All Skillnet staff work effectively to identify apprentice needs and monitor the support actions provided for each apprentice. Almost 12% of Skillnet apprentices are currently benefitting from learning support provision. Most of these apprentices disclosed their support needs after commencing the apprenticeship programme.
- Assessors and verifiers use robust moderation arrangements effectively to ensure compliance with awarding body requirements. Candidate sampling arrangements are risk-based and appropriate.

Areas for development

- There has been limited progress in increasing the number of apprentices from key groups, for example females, those who are care experienced, or those from an ethnic minority.

4.3.3 Apprentice progress and achievement of individual outcomes

Areas of positive progress

- Overall achievement rates are in line with national performance levels for automotive apprenticeship frameworks.
- Apprentices benefit from opportunities to talk openly to staff about the progress they are making and are confident that they receive the support they require to succeed on their programme. They have good awareness of their progress through their training plans and attend formal quarterly meetings with their skills coach.
- Skills coaches meet with apprentices every four weeks in addition to 12-weekly reviews required by SDS. They discuss apprentice training plans and progress made during review meetings. In addition, they offer pastoral guidance, to help ensure apprentices are supported to achieve their individual outcomes.
- Employers value the apprenticeship programme and report that it meets their needs well.
- Major national employers work collaboratively with Skillnet managers and share their resources to good effect. This is helpful in ensuring apprentices receive the right experience to support their employability and skills development.

- Most apprentices complete their apprenticeship and remain in full-time employment in the motor vehicle industry. Skillnet offer further professional learning opportunities after completion of their apprenticeship and the majority accept this offer.
- All Skillnet managers recognise that most new apprentices require additional support with core skills to succeed in their apprenticeship programme. They have recently recruited a Functional Skills Tutor who delivers master classes, boot camps, and mock tests. This supports apprentices' individual needs and helps raise attainment in core skills.
- Managers organise awards ceremonies to acknowledge individual apprentice achievement. These high-profile events celebrate apprentices' success and helps to motivate them by valuing their achievement. A few apprentices have been placed highly in the Scottish Engineering Apprenticeship awards.

Areas for development

- Meta skills are not promoted well by staff within the apprenticeship programme, and the promotion and development of wider employability and career management skills is limited.
- The achievement rate for 2023-24 at the time of the review is 68%. Skillnet has not achieved the SDS target (75%) for overall achievement in the last three contracting years.

5. Main point(s) for action

- Skillnet managers should put in place arrangements to improve the numbers of apprentices from under-represented groups on apprenticeship programmes and improve overall completion rates.

6. Examples of highly effective practice

- None identified.

7. What happens next?

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

Ian Beach
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.