

29 October 2024

For the attention of Chief Fire Officer Ross Haggart.

In February 2024, HM Inspectors published a report on the external review of Modern Apprenticeship (traineeship) (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 to SFRS in August 2024. During our visit, we talked to trainees, staff and watch commanders, and worked closely with the senior managers. We looked at particular areas identified in the original inspection to review progress made in addressing aspects for improvement. 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 some progress in addressing this area for improvement. However, there remain areas where further improvement is required.

The Scottish vocational qualifications (SVQ) team has implemented effectively improvement actions from the previous report. Both the SVQ and national training team (NTC) staff have prioritised actions to ensure standardised programme delivery. The introduction of the lead assessor role is a helpful step and in supporting the co-ordination of evaluation activities and improvement actions. Senior management maintain close links with the training and human resource departments, ensuring executive-level staff are aware of and understand the challenges related to improving programme quality. The SVQ delivery team has implemented more systematic quality assurance and enhancement arrangements to monitor and evaluate the award's delivery effectively. Lead assessors attend regular standardisation meetings to evaluate the consistency and accuracy of assessment and verification arrangements. Trainees' portfolios are now being assessed more frequently to ensure they meet the necessary standards and requirements.

The SVQ management team does not yet consistently gather or analyse feedback from trainees or watch commanders to support self-evaluation and improvement planning. Additionally, SVQ and NTC staff do not collaborate effectively to evaluate and enhance the quality of the training and apprenticeship programme. The current number of lead assessors is not sufficient to adequately support assessors in implementing quality arrangements.

Managers should ensure that the skills that trainees demonstrate during simulated training activities delivered within fire stations are used as evidence of successful completion of elements of the SVQ.

The provider has made limited progress in addressing this area for improvement. There remain important areas where further improvement is required.

The recent expansion of approved simulation sites from three to six has helped increase access to hands-on training opportunities for most trainees.

There are inconsistencies in coordination of simulated activities for assessment purposes and trainees do not have equitable access to approved simulation sites. This is leading to inconsistent opportunities for trainees within the same programme.

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

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

The SVQ team has improved communication with assessors, trainees, and watch commanders, offering clearer guidance and assistance for most trainees. The alignment of online development sessions with shift rotas has improved attendance for both trainees and assessors. Lead assessors and coordinators use locally devised tracking approaches to monitor trainee progress and maintain regular communication with watch commanders and assessors, ensuring transparency and the identification of individual trainees who may need additional support.

A minority of trainees who have been enrolled in the programme for some time do not have assigned assessors. A minority of trainees reported difficulties in accessing an assessor, leading to delays in receiving critical support and guidance.

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 some progress in addressing this area for improvement. There remain areas where further improvement is required.

Newly recruited trainees who do not have certificated core competencies in numeracy and or ICT are now informed of this requirement early in their training. They are provided with tailored resources and support to ensure they achieve these units effectively.

A few trainees enrolled in the programme for some time remain uncertain about whether they require to complete core skills units. Meta skills are not yet comprehensively signposted or integrated into the programme's delivery.

Managers should work to improve trainee achievement rates

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

There has been a significant increase in the rate of in-year trainee achievement. The SVQ team has made considerable efforts to decrease the number of inactive trainees.

The total successful completer/leaver ratio for the last three years has declined and is below the national SDS benchmark of 75%. The tracking of trainee progress is inconsistent.

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 RPL to better support trainee attainment.

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

Lead assessors offer valuable guidance on assessment procedures and best practice, ensuring consistency and accuracy in evaluations and improving the overall effectiveness of the assessment process. A training programme has been introduced to increase the number of qualified assessors and verifiers. Lead assessors have implemented standardised approaches for recognised prior learning to ensure assessors and trainees fully understand the process and its outcomes.

There are few examples of holistic approaches being used to maximise trainee evidence. However, assessors require further training in how to successfully implement these strategies in their practice

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 for the SFRS. New recruitment arrangements for trainee firefighters aim to attract more female trainees and increase their numbers. However, the number of female trainee firefighters is still very low.

What happens next?

The Scottish Fire and Rescue service has made some progress since the original inspection however there remain aspects where further improvement is required. We will ask for a report on progress within 6 months of this visit. HM Inspectors will then consider what further engagement may be required.

Jacqueline Mclellan
HM Inspector