# External review of Modern Apprenticeship delivery by Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

# A report by HM Inspectors

13/02/2024

| CEO/Principal | Chief Fire Officer Ross Haggart |
|---|---|
| External review date | 29 November 2023 |
| Provider type | Employer |
| Lead HMI | Jacqueline McLellan |
| Apprentice numbers | 913 |

## 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 trainee 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 trainees 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 SFC. An accompanying short report will be published on Education Scotland's website.

## 2. The provider and its context

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) was established as a single national service on 1st April 2013. The organisation is responsible for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the Scottish population. The SFRS is the world's fourth largest Fire and Rescue Service, with a workforce of over 7500 employees.

The SFRS headquarters is located in Cambuslang, South Lanarkshire. The facility serves as the central hub for the service's operations, providing support and coordination for activities carried out across Scotland.

The SFRS offers a Modern Apprenticeship (MA) in Emergency Fire Service: Operations in the Community at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 7. The programme is designed to provide apprentices with the skills necessary to operate as effective firefighters in the community. Currently, there are 913 apprentice firefighters undergoing the three-year MA training programme.

## 3. Outcome of external review

The grades for each of the three elements are:

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|---|---|
| Leadership and Quality Culture | Weak |
| Service Delivery | Good |
| Safeguarding and meeting the needs of apprentices | Weak |

## 4. Summary of review findings

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

### 4.1 Leadership and Quality Culture

**4.1.1 Securing improvement of quality and impact of training.**

**Areas of positive progress**

- Instructors at the National Training Centre (NTC) have identified and implemented appropriate improvement actions to enhance apprentices' initial training programme. In response to trainee feedback, changes introduced include adjustments to the curriculum delivery schedule to extend trauma and breathing apparatus training.

- Assessors and trainees have access to and regularly attend, recently introduced online monthly sessions with SFRS Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) centre staff. These sessions are helpful in supporting assessors and trainees to receive guidance, support, and updates on industry standards.

- Managers responsible for the SVQ programme have recently implemented a number of improvements to programme delivery. These include ensuring core skills are delivered in-house, rather than by an external agency, and working to reduce the current high number of inactive trainees.

- Assessors and Watch Commanders conduct quarterly trainee reviews. They are flexible in accommodating trainee shift patterns to enable them to engage in these productively.

- Managers provide trainees with a range of suitable online modules for all elements of their initial training. These resources support trainees to undertake their roles and further enhance their skills development.

- The implementation of the red, amber, and green assessment system supports trainees to create and manage their individual learning and development plans. This provides a structured framework for trainees to navigate their training and fosters a sense of ownership and accountability.

**Areas for development**

- The current assessment strategy for the SVQ qualification offers limited opportunities to use simulation evidence from work-based learning and training activities delivered within fire stations. This is leading to missed opportunities to assess candidates timeously using naturally occurring tasks. Trainees' ability to demonstrate their proficiency and skills in handling complex situations and making critical decisions under pressure is limited.

- Holistic assessment opportunities for trainees are very limited and impacting negatively on their ability to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the framework and reduce the time taken to complete the framework.

- Standardisation and evaluation arrangements for the SVQ programme are underdeveloped. Managers, assessors and trainees have limited opportunities to participate in formal evaluation activities to enhance and improve programme design, planning and delivery.

- The number of qualified assessors is not sufficient to effectively support trainees (750 active and 173 inactive) to complete their programme in a timeous manner.

- Communication by the SVQ team with assessors, Watch Commanders and trainees is inconsistent and often too slow. This is leading to confusion and frustration for trainees and assessors.

- Arrangements to support recruitment of a more inclusive workforce are not yet leading to an increase in the number of female trainees or trainees from ethnic minorities.

## 4.2 Service Delivery

### 4.2.1 Delivery of training

**Areas of positive progress**

- All trainees enjoy their training and take pride in the opportunity to become qualified firefighters. They exhibit positive attitudes toward their work and their learning, exemplifying professionalism and high levels of motivation.

- NTC instructors deliver well planned training, ensuring trainees understand the aims and content of each session. They support their trainees well, enabling them to demonstrate the skills and knowledge they have acquired and help to foster confidence during the training programme.

- NTC instructors participate in peer observation activities to enhance their learning, teaching, and assessment practice. This ensures ongoing application of professional knowledge and skills to support training delivery.

- Trainees at the NTC are encouraged and supported to catch up on missed work or review previous material with their instructors. NTC Instructors encourage personal learning activities and ensure trainees take responsibility for their own progress.

- A number of Watch Commanders and Station Commanders have attained assessor and verifier qualifications. As a result, they are better equipped to offer trainees the necessary guidance and mentorship as they progress through their training programme.

- All assessors, instructors and mentors have significant experience in their job roles. They are highly professional and knowledgeable and are experienced in operations and in the qualifications they assess. They support trainees well to gain knowledge and acquire relevant skills.

- Assessors place a strong emphasis on the collection of appropriate evidence to support trainees' attainment and achievement. They support trainees well in generating and collecting evidence for their portfolios.

- Almost all trainees receive a comprehensive induction to their programme. Trainees are provided with detailed information about the goals and objectives of their MA programme.

- All trainees make good use of digital technology which meets their learning needs effectively and enhances their training experience. This includes access to online resources, interactive learning platforms, and communication tools, which allow trainees to connect with their instructors and peers.

- All Watch Commanders facilitate intensive station-based training activities. Training drills are conducted alongside qualified and experienced staff, which enables trainees to learn from experienced firefighters. Through this process, trainees develop situational awareness and learn to make informed decisions in emergency situations.

- Assessors and Watch Commanders provide constructive feedback to trainees after practical activities, highlighting achievements and outlining areas for development. Feedback is recorded in the Professional Development Review (PDR Pro) System, which ensures trainee's progress is monitored over an extended time period.

- The resources used for training are of a high quality, appropriate, and reliable. They match the complexity of the training objectives and trainee skill levels. This ensures training is effective and meets the needs of emergency situations when they arise.

**Areas for development**

- Meta skills and core skills are not yet fully signposted or integrated within the delivery of the programme. This result in missed opportunities during training activities for trainees to demonstrate progress in developing these skills.

**4.2.2 Staff reflection on provision to improve training.**

**Areas of positive progress**

- All staff responsible for training and assessment activities have undertaken professional learning to reflect and improve their practice. This ensures they remain occupationally competent and aware of emerging industry standards.

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- Trainees provide feedback during progress reviews which helps identify areas for development and target specific areas of training.

- Some assessors and trainees work similar shift patterns. This provides good opportunities for dynamic observations, hands-on training, and helps to reduce assessors' workloads.

**Areas for development**

- Assessors currently do not have sufficient opportunity to gain a comprehensive understanding of SVQ requirements to better plan and support trainees' progress.

- Quality assurance and enhancement arrangements are not sufficiently systematic in tracking overall performance of the delivery of the award. This is resulting in inconsistency in capturing issues and monitoring the impact of actions taken.

## 4.3 Safeguarding and Meeting the needs of trainees.

### 4.3.1 Achieving and maintaining high levels of service delivery.

**Areas of positive progress**

- All trainees express a high level of satisfaction with the support provided by their line managers and assessors. This positive reinforcement contributes significantly to their overall wellbeing and rising levels of confidence throughout their training.

- The SVQ management team has recently introduced drop-in sessions. These sessions offer a forum for trainees to seek guidance on any issues related to the programme and obtain support from qualified professionals.

- Watch Commanders take responsibility for the training and development needs of trainees. Collaborating with trainees, they establish individualised development plans that are regularly updated and adjusted in response to individual trainee progress.

**Areas for development**

- Overall successful completion rates have declined over the last two years and are currently 67.2%, 7.8% below the national SDS benchmark.

- Recruitment of female firefighters is very low, and currently 55.8% lower than the SDS benchmark for female recruitment. Recruitment of ethnic minority firefighters is also slightly below the national SDS benchmark.

- A high number of trainees are currently inactive in their training due to non-completion of the core skills units in numeracy and Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

### 4.3.2 Adherence to statutory principles and guidance

**Areas of positive progress**

- Appropriate arrangements are in place to ensure trainees understand their role in relation to safeguarding, and health and safety responsibilities. These arrangements are explained at induction and reinforced during trainee progress reviews.

- Trainees are supported well on their programme by staff, and they know who to contact should they have any wellbeing issues or matters of concern.

- All trainees have completed Protection Vulnerable Group (PVG) checks. Trainees complete mandatory safeguarding training as part of their induction, and they also benefit from regular refresher updates. Training sessions outline trainee responsibilities and the actions they should take if they encounter safeguarding concerns.

- SFRS has established a network of mental health champions with the aim that all stations to have a nominated mental health champion. This initiative helps ensure the wellbeing of all individuals and promotes a healthy and supportive learning environment.

- All trainees complete online modules in adult and child protection training. These modules equip individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable individuals.

- Employees delivering apprentice training ensure trainees have a comprehensive understanding of statutory and regulatory responsibilities. Trainees are well-versed in their roles, their legal and regulatory requirements, and know how to operate competently and safely.

**Areas for development**

- The hold placed on certification of the Learning and Development qualification is restricting growth in the numbers of assessors required to meet the assessment needs of trainees. The shortage of qualified assessors is negatively impacting on the timescales for completion for trainees.

### 4.3.3 Apprentice progress and achievement of individual outcomes

**Areas of positive progress**

- The SVQ management team provide helpful support for individual trainee learning support needs. Where there are any issues, appropriate support is provided, and suitable adjustments are made.

- SFRS staff support as many trainees as possible to access the programme and ensure the programme is accessible to a wide a range of candidates, subject to age restrictions and medical requirements

- Trainees have a clear understanding of the various career paths and specialised areas available to them. This includes information on the skills and knowledge required for each job role.

**Areas for development**

- A significant number of trainees have needed to repeat aspects of their qualification in response to updated guidance from the Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA) albeit with certain limitations imposed by age restrictions and medical requirements. Communication from staff in the SVQ assessment centre regarding these changes was inadequate, which resulted in confusion and uncertainty among trainees about what they needed to do to achieve.

- Delays in learning and assessment arrangements have impacted a significant number of trainees. Some trainees have been unable to achieve learning milestones and have experienced unnecessary stress.

- Arrangements for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) are not effective or understood by trainees. Staff do not use RPL sufficiently well to support trainees to complete their full award in a timely and effective manner.

## 5. Main points for action

The following main points for action are required:

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

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

- 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.

- Managers should work to improve apprentice achievement rates.

- 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 SFRS should continue to work to improve the gender balance of trainees by increasing the number of female trainee firefighters.

## 6. Examples of highly effective practice

None identified.

## 7. What happens next?

Overall, HM Inspectors found that the provider needs to improve a number of aspects of the delivery of apprenticeship training. HM Inspectors will make a further visit to review progress within 6 months of initial visit.

**HM Inspector**
**Jacqueline McLellan**

## 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 trainee' 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 trainee' 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 trainee' have access to a basic level of training. It represents a standard where the strengths have a positive impact on trainee' experiences. However, while the weaknesses will not be important enough to have a substantially adverse impact, they do constrain the overall quality of trainee' 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 trainee' 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 trainee 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:

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| 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.