



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

A report on

**Acorn Learning Solutions Limited
Head Office
Somerton House
Hazell Drive
Newport
NP10 8FY**

Date of inspection: November 2017

by

**Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education
and Training in Wales**

About Acorn Learning Solutions Limited

Acorn Learning Solutions Ltd is part of the Acorn Group of companies, with its main base in Newport. It has a £5.4m contract with the Welsh Government to deliver training to 1,191 foundation apprentices, apprentices and higher apprentices across Wales in vocational routes that include:

- health care and public services
- engineering and manufacturing technologies
- business administration and law including financial services
- information and communication technology
- retail and customer service
- management and professional
- education and training
- hospitality

The provider subcontracts about a third of its provision to:

- Accountancy College Wales
- Progression
- Vocations
- Care Credentials Wales
- Connective Care Education
- Mountain View Residential and Respite Services Limited (MVRRS)
- Whitehead-Ross Education & Consulting
- Newport Council
- British Telecom

Summary

In Acorn Learning Solutions, most learners make strong progress towards completing their training programmes and qualifications and in developing their knowledge and skills. The majority of learners produce written work of a good standard.

Nearly all learners are confident and have a professional approach to their learning and employment responsibilities

The provider's comprehensive range of programmes meets the needs of learners and employers well. The quality of training and assessment is effective in helping learners to make progress. The majority of training advisers plan and deliver training and assessment well.

The provider monitors learners' progress well regularly and thoroughly. Where learners are at risk of dropping out from their programme the provider takes appropriate steps to help them continue. Overall, employers are very supportive and most have a keen focus on learners' wellbeing. The provider and its sub-contractors promote health and safety in the workplaces well. The provider manages safeguarding matters appropriately.

The provider has a clear vision, which it communicates well to staff. Leaders have introduced a new management structure that gives a stronger focus to the management of specialist vocational areas. The provider uses performance dashboards well to monitor performance and to identify action that sub-contractors need to take to achieve their targets. Overall, leaders and managers use resources well to improve provision and support learners.

Inspection area	Judgement
Standards	Good
Wellbeing and attitudes to learning	Good
Teaching and learning experiences	Good
Care, support and guidance	Good
Leadership and management	Good

Recommendations

- R1 Improve the promotion and use of Welsh language as a workplace skill
- R2 Strengthen training advisers' questioning skills to stretch learners' understanding and knowledge
- R3 Improve the clarity and focus of the targets that training advisers agree with learners to guide and drive forward their learning and progress
- R4 Strengthen the impact of the management of quality across all subcontractors

What happens next

The provider will draw up an action plan to address the recommendations from the inspection.

Main findings

Standards: Good

In their workplaces, most learners demonstrate strong, work-related, practical skills and knowledge. Most learners engage well with learning, are self-motivated, and prepare well for review sessions. Nearly all respond well when training advisers question them about the detail of their work. They explain accurately how the theory they have learned applies in their work activities. For example, a financial services higher apprentice working in an international call centre explained clearly how the law regulates which products the bank can sell in different countries. A higher apprentice operating an IT help desk responded well to complex queries from customers and demonstrated strong verbal skills and detailed IT knowledge in identifying a potentially hijacked computer. One business administration apprentice delivered useful training to other staff on time management.

Nearly all learners achieve their Essential Skills qualifications at levels appropriate to their programme. At foundation level, a minority of learners study and achieve Essential Skills at a level higher than required by the framework.

Nearly all learners complete an initial literacy and numeracy assessment to identify their strengths and areas for development. However, only a few learners make good use of on-line activities to develop these skills or to identify how they need to improve their skills.

Most learners produce written work of a good standard and in line with their programme level. Learners who start their programmes with relatively strong skills do not extend their skills enough throughout their programmes.

Learners use numeracy and digital literacy skills well in the workplace. For example, an apprentice training to be a learning support assistant develops useful teaching materials on fractions and ratios for her pupils. A business administration apprentice produces spreadsheets to improve recruitment procedures.

Very few Welsh language speakers, or those learning Welsh, practise their language skills in work. Very few Welsh language speakers choose to study units of their qualifications through the medium of Welsh.

The rates at which learners achieve their apprenticeship frameworks have improved steadily over the last three years. The overall success rate has risen from being below the sector average in 2013-2014 to being slightly above the average overall. The success rate for foundation apprentices and apprentices, in particular, which represent 90% of learners, has improved in 2015-2016. The improvement in success rates of higher apprentices, which represent 10% of the provider's learners, has been slower. Despite this, when compared to the sector averages for similar higher apprenticeship programmes, learners achieve their frameworks at rates around or slightly better than the sector averages for these programmes.

Around half of learners complete their frameworks beyond their scheduled completion date.

Learners from different ethnic groups, of different ages, and male and female learners perform at around the same level as that of other learners.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Good

Nearly all learners feel safe in their workplace and learning environments. They are aware of their rights and responsibilities, and have a clear understanding of health and safety regulations and requirements in the workplace. A majority of learners think that their learning has helped them improve their attitude to keeping healthy and safe.

Many learners display a positive attitude to healthy living and know what to do to keep themselves healthy and fit. Many learners apply this knowledge well in their personal life and in the workplace. For example, a few learners participate in a wide range of sporting activities. In care apprenticeships, learners raise their clients' awareness of maintaining a healthy diet.

Many learners understand the value of fairness, equality, respect and tolerance for their peers, training advisers and employers and recognise how they can encourage equality and tolerance in the workplace. For example, one learner explained how they had challenged stereotypes in their community in response to the Manchester attack, during a discussion with the training adviser.

Nearly all learners are confident and have a professional approach to their learning and employment responsibilities. Generally, learners make a valuable contribution to the workplace, and show respect for their managers and peers.

Many learners are ambitious and are eager to progress onto higher qualifications or apply for promotion opportunities in the workplace. For example, one learner working in a care home has achieved a level 2 qualification and is working towards a level 3 qualification in adult social care. When she has completed her qualification she plans to pursue a career in nursing.

A minority of learners find it challenging to manage the pressure of work and shortage of time to complete their qualification. Despite this, and with effective support from training advisers, learners persevere with their work.

Nearly all learners enjoy their learning and value the opportunity to earn while they learn. Many learners feel the training will benefit their long term career plans. Most learners work effectively in small teams or independently. Where appropriate, learners attend workshops or off the job training sessions to broaden their theory knowledge and network with other learners who are studying a similar qualification.

Teaching and learning experiences: Good

Overall, the quality of teaching, training and assessment has strong features, with only a few minor areas requiring improvement.

Most training advisers form strong working relationships with learners and employers and create positive environments for learning. Many learners and employers benefit from particularly strong personal support that encourages learning. Training advisers have a wide range industrial experience, expertise and qualifications. The majority are good language models and this helps supports the development of learners' verbal communication skills.

Training advisers carry out regular progress reviews with their learners. A few agree targets that stretch and challenge learners and the majority set appropriate targets for learner assessments. In a minority of cases, the targets that training advisers set in learner review documents are not clear or tailored to the individual learner's needs.

The majority of training advisers plan and deliver off-the-job training sessions well. Most use an appropriate range of teaching and assessment methods, such as coaching, direct observation and use of materials related to the vocational area to engage learners well in these activities. Training advisers deliver higher apprenticeship sessions in good quality environments and use a wide range of appropriate learning resources. For example, in the ambulance service, the provider has developed a bespoke programme that has enabled the employer to put all team leaders through management training, incorporating off-the-job training sessions and assessment programmes that take account of the fact that many learners have not taken part in formal education for many years.

The majority of training advisers use questioning techniques effectively. They encourage learners to expand their answers and deepen their understanding of a wide range of complex topics. In the best cases this contributes particularly well to developing learners' ability to learn independently. A few training advisers do not use follow up questioning well enough to further develop learners' knowledge and probe their understanding.

Most training advisers give useful oral feedback to learners on their performance that ensures that they understand what they need to do to make further progress.

Many training advisers provide useful written feedback on learners' work. A few do not correct spelling and grammar errors or give sufficient constructive feedback either written or orally to help learners improve their skills.

Many training advisers support learners well to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. Training advisers use exemptions appropriately when learners have previously achieved qualifications at the required level. A few training advisers do not set targets that explain clearly which particular aspects of literacy, numeracy or digital literacy learners need to improve.

Training advisers challenge a minority of foundation apprenticeship learners well to achieve their essential skills at higher levels. However, a few training advisers do not challenge and stretch higher level learners to develop literacy and numeracy skills at higher levels.

The provider delivers a comprehensive range of programmes that meet the needs of learners and employers well. They have been particularly effective in working with employers to develop and deliver a range of innovative and tailored higher apprenticeship programmes to meet employers' and learners' needs, such as bespoke programmes in information technology, statistics and financial services.

Despite the provider's development of a Welsh language policy and matching learners with Welsh speaking assessors, the majority of training advisers do not give learners sufficient encouragement to develop and use their Welsh language skills to undertake tasks and assessments.

Care, support and guidance: Good

At induction, learners receive a useful induction pack, which gives them detailed information about the support and guidance available. This pack includes helpful information about a comprehensive range of policies and guidelines, such as the management of their learning, expectations of their behaviour, and the acceptable use of ICT and the internet. This guidance is available bilingually.

The provider monitors learners' progress well, through a weekly analysis of learner reviews. They share this information with sub-contractors to help them provide the support learners need. Despite this monitoring, a few learners do not complete their programme and a minority of learners take longer than scheduled to complete. However, most learners who do not complete by their scheduled finish date complete shortly afterwards.

Where learners are at risk of dropping out from their programme due to changes in their employment status, the provider takes appropriate steps to maintain contact and help them continue when possible. In one case, following a redundancy the training adviser maintained contact with the learner and was able to arrange for them to restart their programme when they regained employment.

Overall, employers are very supportive and most have a keen focus on learners' wellbeing. Nearly all support learners particularly well, making sure that they have the time and resources needed to undertake their programme. In the best examples, employers make reasonable adjustments in response to learners' needs. In one case, a quiet room was available for learners to use should the pressure of work get too much. Another employer recruits learners onto an 18 month fixed-term contract that includes working towards a level 3 qualification in business administration. This helps to improve these learners' chances of permanent employment or promotion opportunities in the workplace.

A very few learners have additional learning needs, which in nearly all cases are identified when they start their programme. Training advisers discuss the appropriate strategies for support with the learner, and their employer. The provider works well with external partners to secure advice and support when necessary for its learners. For example, the provider seeks advice from dyslexia charities: learners with dyslexia have access to specialist software and aids such as a yellow acetate-reading tool.

Nearly all training advisers and learners agree clear timescales and interim completion dates for their programmes. They use the provider's e-tracking system well to monitor learners' progress against these dates.

In most cases, the provider and its sub-contractors promote health and safety in the workplaces well. Training advisers discuss this topic with learners regularly during induction and monthly review sessions.

During reviews, a minority of assessors do not make the best use of thematic questions the provider sets. These questions provide a useful focus to help training advisers and learners think about a range of topics such as citizenship, health, safety, and safeguarding issues.

All training advisers have undertaken useful training on safeguarding and preventing radicalisation. Nearly all staff demonstrate an appropriate understanding about safeguarding procedures. A very few were not clear enough about how to respond to concerns about potential extremist influences on learners.

The provider manages safeguarding matters appropriately. There are no significant concerns about safeguarding arising from the provider's provision.

Leadership and management: Good

The provider has a clear vision and strategic objectives that support its move towards establishing a stronger role in supporting professional and managerial sectors of commerce. This reflects the company's active role in developing apprenticeships in routes such as project management, data analytics and cybersecurity.

The provider's strategic planning pays very good attention to the aims of the Welsh Government to develop high level skills that will encourage economic growth. This enables the provider to be well placed to support several Welsh and UK government departments to support their own apprenticeship programmes.

Having identified the need to work with sub-contractors to extend its provision, senior managers have increased the number of sub-contractors that deliver its training. Senior managers have developed strong partnerships with higher education institutions to design and develop progression routes for higher apprentices.

In late 2017, leaders and managers finalised a new management structure to strengthen teams' focus on vocational specialisms and to provide managers of these areas with more autonomy to develop the business. Team managers' roles and responsibilities have been redefined to ensure clarity of the provider's new expectations of them. While it is too early to judge the full impact of these changes, team managers understand well the priorities and objectives they need to address to move the provider forward. They meet regularly with senior managers and their involvement with employers and partners has improved their ability to respond flexibly to industry's needs. For example, after consultation with the ambulance service, one team has developed a bespoke programme to train ambulance service managers.

Leaders and managers communicate well with staff to ensure that they understand the focus and direction of the provider's plans. Regular staff conferences and meetings help managers to share the provider's aims and to support the training and development of staff. The recent inclusion of team leaders in stakeholder consultation enables them to communicate recent developments to their teams.

The provider makes appropriate use of due diligence to evaluate whether sub-contractors meet a broad range of minimum standards that the provider requires. However, there is insufficient evaluation of a new sub-contractor's quality of standards of learning and of training and assessment prior to commencement of the contract.

The provider uses performance dashboards well to monitor performance and to identify action that sub-contractors need to take to achieve their targets. The provider takes appropriate action when a sub-contractor underperforms.

There are appropriate systems in place for managers to ensure the quality of provision. The provider has developed a suitable range of processes that enable sub-contractors / provider departments to contribute to the self-evaluation. These include questionnaires, self-assessment proforma, data analysis and evaluation of learner observations. However, in a few areas, such as learners' timely completion, the provider's self-evaluation report does not make enough use of data to support its evaluations. Quality development plans are detailed and in 2015-2016 identified clearly how the provider took effective action to support training advisers to introduce digital literacy and an on-line assessment tool. However, improvement targets for sub-contractors are not always specific enough.

The provider has recently supplemented its approach to the evaluation of teaching, training and learning with potentially helpful peer "coaching" observations. However, in a few sub-contractors, the assessment of training advisers is not evaluative enough.

Managers use appraisal effectively to discuss the skills that staff need to enhance. Managers respond effectively to any training needs they identify through this process by arranging training to develop staff skills. In support of its recent restructure, the provider has given staff who needed it opportunities to strengthen their sector specific skills and qualifications. For example, one individual in the finance team has gained Chartered Institute of Insurance qualification.

The provider's sub-contractors participate well in a range of core training events in important areas: such as safeguarding; radicalisation; Essential Skills; and diversity.

Leaders and managers work well in partnership with the National Training Federation for Wales to develop resources for such training.

The provider has identified key priorities in relation to apprenticeship planning, quality and delivery, which has enabled it to increase provision by 30% in 2017-2018. The annual planning cycle includes the production of a financial forecast based on current and predicted delivery patterns and that taken into account growth in priority vocational areas, such as IT. The provider generates a small surplus, which it has used appropriately to build capacity to develop and deliver two new programmes. In addition, the provider has prioritised investment in a range of enhanced equipment and online resources to support higher apprentices and to improve their progress towards their qualifications. Overall, leaders and managers use resources well to improve provision and support learners.

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the provider and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

Estyn evaluates a provider's effectiveness using a four-point judgement scale:

Excellent	Very strong, sustained performance and practice
Good	Strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement
Adequate and needs improvement	Strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement
Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement	Important weaknesses outweigh strengths

The report was produced in accordance with Section 77 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

Publication Section
Estyn
Anchor Court, Keen Road
Cardiff
CF24 5JW or by email to publications@estyn.gov.wales

This and other Estyn publications are available on our website: www.estyn.gov.wales

© Crown Copyright 2018: This report may be re used free of charge in any format or medium provided that it is re used accurately and not used in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Crown copyright and the title of the report specified.

Publication date: 20/02/2018