

Report of a Pilot Inspection
ApprenticeshipsNI Provision in Loughview Training Services Limited

October 2023



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Loughview Training Services Limited (Loughview), established in 1982, is a not-for-profit, work-based training organisation registered for charitable status. It is based in West Belfast, having relocated in 2021 from its well-established location in Glengormley. It is governed by a voluntary board of governors (the board), made up of seven members.

Loughview is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the ApprenticeshipsNI programme (the programme). The programme is managed by a manager and assistant manager, supported by an administrative member of staff. As a small organisation, managers and other staff assume multiple roles, including the coordination of professional and technical (P&T) areas. The programme is delivered across Northern Ireland (NI) by three vocational and two essential skills peripatetic tutors/assessors.

At the time of the pilot inspection in October 2023, of the 56 apprentices registered across the P&T areas, 38 were in retail and 13 were in warehousing and storage (warehousing), with the remainder registered across business administration, customer service, and hospitality. Of the apprentices registered on the programme, 36 were at level 2 and 20 at level 3.

All of the apprentices are aged 18 years and over. Very few of them entered the programme with no prior level 1 or level 2 qualifications, and none of them declared a disability or learning support need. A minority of the apprentices needed to complete the essential skills of literacy (6, 11%) and numeracy (15, 27%), with a significant minority of them needing to complete information and communications technology (ICT) (25, 45%).

All data used for the inspection and presented in this report has been supplied and verified by Loughview at the time of the pilot inspection.

B. VIEWS OF APPRENTICES AND STAFF

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to apprentices and staff in advance of the pilot inspection.

Almost half (25, 45%) of the apprentices responded to the questionnaire and they were highly positive. They all indicated that their programme is interesting, challenging and well-managed and that they are well-informed of their progress across all aspects of their learning. They receive constructive feedback regularly. In discussions with inspectors, seven apprentices highlighted how the delivery method of face-to-face and online sessions in the workplace works well for them, and their employers. They spoke about how the essential skills provision is supporting them in their career progression. They are appreciative of how the staff in the organisation care about their progress and wellbeing, and provide them with good advice about relevant personal and social matters.

All of the staff (eight), which includes the management team, P&T and essential skills tutors/assessors, completed the online questionnaire. They indicated that the organisation has a strong team approach with shared goals, good channels of communication, and good working relationships with the apprentices and their employers. They indicated that the organisation supports them well to deliver learning, and that they have access to appropriate information technology (IT) equipment, internet facilities and learning resources.

Inspectors also met with staff in a focus group and during P&T and essential skills sessions. In these discussions, staff stated that they appreciated the support provided by management, in particular the facilitation of an effective life-work balance and the flexibility in working arrangements provided to them when necessary. The tutors value their ability to provide training in employers' premises and to focus on the quality of delivery within the specific work context.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

During the pilot inspection and informed by Loughview's quality improvement planning and underpinning self-evaluation processes, the ETI inspectors worked alongside the organisation to consider how well the organisation:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

The programme, the P&T areas of retail and warehousing, the provision for essential skills and the arrangements for child and adult protection were evaluated.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The organisation's vision and ethos are embedded into the planning, practice, and interactions that staff have with the apprentices, to ensure that the apprentices learn and progress within a caring and supportive programme. As a result, the provision for the apprenticeship programme is effective.
- The provision for the P&T areas of retail and warehousing, and the essential skills is effective. The organisation has appropriately identified the need to develop its strategies to increase recruitment, and continue to improve further the retention rates at level 2 and level 3 which are on an upwards trend.

- The quality of the learning, teaching and training observed in the P&T areas sampled and in the essential skills was consistently effective and contextualised well to the apprentices' job roles.
- In the learning and training sessions observed, the apprentices' standards of written work and oral responses were good or better.
- The effective systems in place to track and monitor the progress of the apprentices are regularly reviewed, and the outcomes are used appropriately to inform robust self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes.
- The tutors/assessors are experienced and committed. They have good opportunities to engage in a range of relevant continuous professional development activities to ensure that their knowledge and skills are up-to-date.
- The organisation's policies and procedures for child and adult protection do not take full account of current policy and guidance. There is a need to take full account of the Northern Ireland context in the policies and procedures and for staff to undertake any additional training as required.

Areas for further action

- Continue to further develop and implement the strategies for recruitment across all of the contracted P&T areas, and improve further the retention rates at level 2 and level 3.
- Update the organisation's child and adult protection policies and reporting procedures, to take account of the Northern Ireland context and for staff to undertake any additional training as required.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

Loughview's vision *"to enhance the lives and career prospects of our learners through quality, professional and personal training"* is a shared organisational vision which takes good account of the NI economic and skills policy position*. It is underpinned by key principles of providing learner focused, high quality and holistic personal training, tailored to individual need, and values of respect, continual improvement, and transparency. The organisation's aims are to: enhance lives through attainment of new skills, knowledge and greater confidence; improve digital skills through the ongoing use of technology and blended learning; improve their career prospects; remove or lessen barriers to learning; and set them on a path to lifelong learning. The responses to the ETI questionnaires, the inspectors' discussions with apprentices and staff and evaluations of the provision affirm that this vision is central to the work of the organisation.

Throughout the report, where text is accompanied by an asterisk, this indicates that additional information can be found in Appendix 2: Notes.

The self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes are well-established and embedded across the organisation, taking good account of feedback from the apprentices and the staff. In support of the further realisation of the vision, key areas for ongoing development and improvement of the apprenticeship provision have been appropriately identified. The key areas identified include continuing to monitor and further improve retention rates, and the continued sustainability of the organisation, through the further recruitment of apprentices across all of the P&T areas. The overall quality improvement plan is underpinned by well-developed quality improvement plans for the P&T areas and the essential skills. The plans have meaningful actions and measurable targets to address the appropriately identified areas for improvement.

The board is well-informed and involved in the stewardship of Loughview and is active in the strategic decision-making of the organisation. They engage regularly and effectively with the management team and staff, and support the organisation well with their expertise; for example, in the development of an organisational marketing and recruitment plan and strategy to increase recruitment to the contracted P&T areas. The collegial support and challenge they provide to staff as part of the self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes has resulted in the apprentices being well cared for and enabled to achieve and progress.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The curriculum in the P&T areas of retail and warehousing is tailored to effectively meet the needs of the individual apprentices and the needs of the employers. The strategic oversight and management of the mandatory essential skills provision is highly effective, and learner centred. The programme is supporting the apprentices well in the development of their personal, social and employability skills.

Most of the apprentices in these P&T areas were employed by two large regional retail employers. All of the employers spoken to report that the organisation staff communicate effectively with them; where appropriate, the employers have an input into the selection of optional units to reduce repetition. As a result, the units selected are aligned well to the apprentices' work roles and support well their development and consolidation of skills and occupational competencies in the workplace.

Almost all of the directed training, for the P&T areas and the essential skills, is delivered on a one-to-one basis, either online or in-person at the employer's premises. Sessions are scheduled to meet the apprentices' individual needs and preferences and are therefore weekly, fortnightly, or monthly. There is a range of effective quality assurance processes in place to regularly monitor the quality of the provision, including observations of practice.

The quality of the learning, teaching and training observed in the P&T areas sampled and in the essential skills was consistently effective and contextualised well to the apprentices' job roles. The apprentices made good responses when questioned. Lessons were well-planned, structured, and appropriately paced, with a good range

of learning and teaching strategies, resources, and effective use of technology enhanced learning. There were respectful working relationships and a good rapport between tutors/assessors and apprentices, who engaged well and displayed positive dispositions to their learning.

The health and wellbeing of the apprentices is a focus of the organisation. The working relationships of the apprentices with managers and staff are based on an ethos of mutual respect, inclusion and transparency. As a result, the apprentices feel well supported and valued as individuals. Their personal and social development is viewed as an integral and important aspect of the programme, with good opportunities for discussion and reflection. They can also access and avail of the wide range of signposted services, such as counselling and other support available through the organisation's website and online library, as well as from other specialist providers on issues or topics such as alcohol, anxiety, stress, and self-care.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

The realisation of the organisation's vision is demonstrated in a firm commitment to the holistic development of the apprentices. There is a good understanding of their individual needs, learning styles and preferences, informed by the effective analysis and sharing of data and information through regular team meetings. Where needed, the apprentices are provided with appropriate support. The employers reported that Loughview provides high levels of support for the apprentices. During the pilot inspection, a number of examples were provided of how the apprentices are supported to overcome personal and social barriers to remain on the programme and progress in their learning. For example, in response to expressed preferences, the organisation has put in place online delivery, including fast-track provision.

The tracking, monitoring and review of the progress of each apprentice is robust at all levels in the organisation. The levels of engagement and progress being made by the apprentices across the P&T areas and in the essential skills are regularly monitored and tracked. The quality assurance processes in place are enhanced by the use of an internal management information system and e-portfolio tracking. The process for tracking early leavers and recording the reasons why they leave is effective. Work is currently being undertaken to develop internal benchmarking data across the provision in order to promote further improvement.

The standards of the apprentices' work are good or better and they demonstrate good or better standards of written work. The apprentices are mostly developing well their digital skills and those observed have good ICT skills. They are encouraged to use the e-portfolio to submit work and to access online learning resources. The importance of online safety is highlighted to apprentices. Of the cohort of apprentices registered since 2021, the small number of apprentices who have completed have achieved their targeted level in the essential skills in literacy; all those who have completed have also achieved their targeted level in the essential skills in numeracy (7) and ICT (19). There should be consideration given to enabling the small number of level 2 apprentices who have a grade D in General Certificate in Secondary Education English and/or maths to achieve an essential skill at level 2, to support future progression to level 3.

While the flexible delivery model of online and in-person sessions generally meets the needs of the apprentices and the employers, in a small number of cases it should be kept under review to ensure the balance is appropriate. Where appropriate, consideration should also be given to the delivery of training to small groups in the workplace to provide more opportunities for the apprentices to share and contrast their experiences, and improve their interpersonal and transversal skills, alongside their confidence and self-esteem.

The apprentices are aware of progression routes at and beyond level 3 as there is a good focus on careers education, information, advice and guidance. This includes the sharing of a range of information on community-based provision, higher level apprenticeships, and level 4 and level 5 progression opportunities in the Further Education colleges.

Overall, the quality of the learning resources and accommodation observed during the pilot inspection, both in the organisation and the workplaces visited, were good. In a number of the smaller workplaces visited by inspectors, however, the training took place in shared spaces, for example, in the kitchen or staff room where some interruptions took place.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

There is a well-structured, comprehensive induction process in place for the apprentices and the employers which prepares them well for the requirements of the programme. It includes a general induction to the organisation, the programme, the P&T areas, and the provision for the essential skills.

High aspiration and expectation for achievement and progression is part of the ethos in Loughview. Tutors/assessors are reassuring, encouraging and supportive and provide ongoing positive and constructive feedback on the apprentices' work. A notable strength of the practice in the essential skills is the sampling of standards of written work in all of the apprentices' vocational portfolios, including those who do not require the essential skills. The apprentices have developed good or better occupational skills and are developing well their self-confidence and their ability to work effectively in teams or independently. They are also developing a sound knowledge and understanding of their work environment.

The apprentices (71; 69%) who have completed their programme since 2021, to date, have achieved their full framework qualification. All of the current apprentices are achieving at a pace appropriate to their individual needs and in line with their previous attainment.

Currently the one-to-one nature of the training provision means that the success of apprentices is celebrated mainly through the use of social media platforms. The organisation should consider the planning of award events and the increased involvement of employers to celebrate the success of the apprentices.

The need to develop strategies to increase recruitment across all of the contracted P&T areas has been appropriately identified as part of the quality improvement planning process. Managers are focused on sustainability and the future viability of the organisation. Retail is the only area where recruitment has been consistently high to date.

Managers have also appropriately identified the need to improve further the overall retention rates for the apprentices and at both levels 2 and 3. The reasons why the apprentices leave their programme early are recorded effectively and the factors impacting retention have been analysed by the organisation. These are namely the impact of the pandemic on the retail and warehousing sectors and the relocation of Loughview. Since 2021/22 the overall retention rate for level 2 apprentices has improved from 66%, to 77% in 2022/23. At level 3 the overall retention rate in 2021/22 was 63% and 60% in 2022/23.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

The managers in Loughview have now established themselves in their new roles and in their new location in West Belfast. They are clearly focused on the growth and development of a community of learning, with collaborative and collegial working by the staff being fostered with a range of other work-based learning and community-based providers. For example, Loughview staff provide essential skills training for other small work-based learning providers and a range of short employability programmes for community-based organisations.

Staff within Loughview have been provided with a good range of professional learning and upskilling opportunities, and most maintain their knowledge and skills through additional part-time work and business interests. They avail of a range internal and external training, including for example, regular standardisation meetings, assessor awards, online safety, suicide awareness, domestic abuse and specific learning disability training, along with tailored development opportunities.

The staff appreciate the support from management and the flexible working that is facilitated. As a result, the morale of the workforce is positive and there is a collective commitment to realising the organisational vision and supporting the ethos and culture of successful outcomes for all apprentices. Strong channels of communication and working relationships are apparent among staff involved in the delivery of the programme, at all levels. The organisation has identified the need to build further their staffing and at the time of the pilot inspection, recruitment for a small number of P&T staff is underway.

Links are being developed with a greater range of employers to support the further development of the programme. The two main retail and warehousing employers are very positive about their working relationships, communication, and the quality of provision from Loughview.

F. CHILD AND ADULT PROTECTION

At the time of the pilot inspection, the organisation's policies and procedures for child and adult protection do not take full account of current policy and guidance. There is a need for:

- the child and adult protection policies to take full account of the Northern Ireland context;
- the reporting procedures to include the contact details for the child and adult protection statutory organisations; and
- for all staff, relevant to their role, to undertake any additional training as required.

4. GOING FORWARD

Loughview Training Services Limited is realising its vision "*to enhance the lives and career prospects of our learners through quality, professional and personal training*". The key principles which underpin this vision, of providing learner focused, high quality and holistic personal training, tailored to individual need are apparent in the day-to-day work of the staff. They work collegially to ensure that the apprentices are well cared for, enabling them to achieve and progress.

The continued improvement of the retention rates for apprentices is required, along with undertaking the recommended actions to take full account of current policy and guidance for child and adult protection.

The further development and implementation of the strategies for recruitment to all of the contracted P&T areas is also required.

ETI will continue to work with Loughview which is well placed to take forward the areas for further action detailed above and in the body of this report.

5. APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

Quantitative terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

APPENDIX 2: NOTES

Page 3 **the Northern Ireland (NI) economic and skills policy position***

Including the NI Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework; the New Decade, New Approach Social Inclusion Strategies, 2020; the OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland, 2020; the Economic Recovery Action Plan 2021; 10x Economy - an economic vision for a decade of innovation, 2021; the NI Skills Barometer 2021; and the NI Draft Industrial Strategy 2030.

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