

Report of an Inspection of ApprenticeshipsNI
provision in Riverpark Training and
Development (NI) Limited

November 2024



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Riverpark Training and Development (NI) Limited (Riverpark) is a private limited company, based in Mallusk, Co. Antrim. Riverpark is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the ApprenticeshipsNI programme (the programme). The organisation is led by a managing director, supported by a training and business development coordinator. Directed training for the professional and technical areas of the programme is delivered by the managing director, one full-time trainer and an associate trainer. A part-time tutor delivers the essential skills provision. All of the apprentices' directed training is delivered in person.

At the time of the inspection, 185 apprentices (120 at level 2 and 65 at level 3) were registered across the professional and technical areas of vehicle refinishing (59), body repair and mechanical and electrical trim (82), vehicle parts (3), light vehicle maintenance and repair (13), and heavy vehicle maintenance and repair (28).

A majority (57%) of the apprentices entered the programme with four or more GCSEs at grades A* to C or equivalent, including English and Mathematics. Of the current cohort, 45 are enrolled for an essential skills qualification in Communication, 47 for Application of Number and 48 for Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

At the time of the inspection, three of the apprentices were over 25 years old.

All data used for the inspection and presented in this report has been supplied and verified by Riverpark at the time of the 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 inspection. One hundred and one (55%) apprentices responded. All of them indicated that they find the programme both interesting and challenging, that they have good access to resources for their programme and that they have been provided with clear guidance and rules around acceptable and unacceptable behaviours while learning. The small number of written responses all indicated high levels of satisfaction with the programme.

Inspectors also met and spoke with a sample of the apprentices in focus groups. The apprentices spoke of the respectful and supportive relationships with the staff, the good balance between theory and practical aspects of their learning and teaching, and high standard of skills training they receive.

Almost all of the staff completed the online confidential questionnaire. They all indicated that there are good channels of communication in the organisation and that the organisation supports them well to deliver learning.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) 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.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The organisation is achieving well its vision to “provide the best available training and support to the apprentices while they progress throughout their apprenticeship”. It is realised through the well-established partnerships with employers to deliver high-quality industry-relevant skills training in line with the Department for the Economy’s economic priorities.
- Curriculum provision for apprentices is well considered and balanced to meet the training and development needs of the apprentices, along with the workforce planning needs of employers. There are well-planned opportunities for the apprentices to develop their practical occupational skills, knowledge and understanding, which they apply well in the workplace.
- The planning for teaching and learning is aligned to the training and development needs of the apprentices and their employers. The learning and teaching are characterised by: positive relationships; the effective integration of technical knowledge and practical skills; and, intuitive support from the highly experienced tutors.
- The outcomes for the programme are significantly higher than the level 2 and 3 programmes respective averages for the sector, as published [in the DfE ApprenticeshipsNI Statistical Bulletin](#), October 2024. Over the three years from 2020/2021 to 2022/2023, 72% of the level 2 apprentices completed their training and achieved the full qualification framework. Over the same period, 86% of the level 3 apprentices completed their training and achieved the full qualification framework.
- The apprentices develop their occupational skills to a high standard. They develop good levels of self-confidence to work independently and responsibly to industry standards in a fast-paced industrial environment.

- While the organisation's self-evaluation has identified appropriately the need to provide a preventative curriculum so that apprentices are better informed about contemporaneous issues to support their health and well-being, not enough progress has been achieved in addressing this need.
- In line with the organisation's ApprenticeshipNI contract, the organisation recruits apprentices to good effect across Northern Ireland. The quality of the training provided by the organisation is highly valued by employers and is contributing positively to workforce development within the motor vehicle repair industry.
- The apprentices are developing well their digital skills. They can use digital technology confidently to support and enhance their training programme.
- There is good promotion and awareness of progression opportunities within the motor vehicle industry; almost three quarters of the level 2 apprentices progressed to level 3.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the organisation demonstrates that the arrangements for child and adult protection do not align sufficiently to the current guidance.

Areas for action:

- provide a preventative curriculum so that apprentices are better informed about contemporaneous issues to support further their health and wellbeing;
- ensure that all staff have child and adult protection training appropriate to their roles and that training and vetting records are maintained appropriately; and
- ensure that the induction information includes the safeguarding arrangements for the apprentices.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

Riverpark's vision is to "provide the best available training and support to the apprentices while they progress throughout their apprenticeship, to provide excellent pastoral care and support, and provide them with a vision of the available pathways to national and international achievements." The vision is informed through effective links and partnerships with employers in the motor vehicle repair industry. It has a focus on meeting the demand for training to ensure a highly skilled workforce, which is aligned with the Department's economic priorities of creating better jobs and providing regional balance. The skills development of the apprentices is underpinned by the expertise of the trainers whose passion for excellence is evidenced by their commitment to provide opportunities for the apprentices to achieve in regional and national skills competitions.

The planning for the delivery of the apprenticeship programme is well informed by the self-evaluation process and is supported by the effective use of key data to track and monitor the outcomes and progress of the apprentices. The areas identified for improvement in the action plans are appropriate. The process would benefit from setting sharper targets to ensure that progress against the actions is monitored and evaluated more effectively to ensure improvement.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The curriculum provision is well considered and balanced to meet the skills training and development needs of the apprentices, along with the workforce development needs of their employers. In directed training sessions, the apprentices have well-planned opportunities to develop their knowledge and understanding of key technical principles, which they can apply and consolidate when undertaking simulated practical repair tasks. They develop a good awareness of industry-set repair methods and quality standards. In the organisation's well-equipped training workshops, the apprentices are afforded good opportunities to develop their hand skills and practical techniques to repair vehicles in a realistic work environment.

The trainers are experienced and have up-to-date working knowledge and skills, aligned with contemporary practice, which they use effectively to instruct and coach the apprentices. As a result, the apprentices develop employer-focused occupational skills that build competence and inspire self-confidence. The content of the theory sessions is aligned to the practical sessions and there is an appropriate balance between theory and practical training. In the workplace, the apprentices engage readily in a broad range of practical tasks, with the support, guidance and instruction of a mentor. Skills development is progressive and assessed regularly, including in the apprentice's workplace, with informative feedback. All of the directed training is delivered in person in the training organisation's premises, along with on-the-job training on the premises of their employers, which all together improves the motivation of the apprentices.

Across all of the directed training sessions observed, the training was planned appropriately and well-paced, with a focus on the acquisition of practical skills alongside the development and understanding of key underpinning technical knowledge. The units of study are chosen in collaboration with the employers and the quality of the work is of a high standard. The apprentices demonstrate a willingness to learn and have highly respectful attitudes to their trainers and peers.

There are good channels of communication between the organisation, the apprentices and their employers, including for example facilitating at short notice assessment by online video link to maximize assessment opportunities in the workplace.

There is a need for the organisation to provide a preventative curriculum so that apprentices are better informed about contemporaneous issues to support further their health and well-being.

The apprenticeship programme is an integral part of employers' workforce planning and development strategy, including access to professional training for qualified technicians. The apprentices who spoke to inspectors in the focus groups have a good awareness of the range of job opportunities and career pathways available to them.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

Apprentices are recruited to the programme from across Northern Ireland and the organisation has taken steps to address the gender imbalance on the programme by promoting female apprentices as role models in their recruitment activities. At the time of the inspection seven (4%) of the apprentices were female. The apprentices attend the training organisation on a block timetabled basis and the employers and apprentices spoken to during the inspection reported that the model of delivery suits their work activities and is facilitated through effective communication with Riverpark. The use of a video link for assessment of practical activities in the workplace ensures that the opportunities for assessment of essential performance criteria are maximised.

To develop further the delivery of heavy vehicle repair, the organisation has entered an innovative partnership with a heavy vehicle maintenance company to provide the apprentices with an integrated seamless workplace and directed training programme. The range and content of learning experiences provided, and the standards achieved by the apprentices are aligned closely to the needs of the heavy vehicle industry.

Riverpark is committed to the well-being of the staff and the staff spoken to during the inspection benefit from flexible working arrangements.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

The progress of the apprentices is reviewed regularly and the tracking and monitoring of attendance and assessment milestones is robust. The apprentices and the employers are well informed of progress through effective communication. Success is recognised by awards schemes including, for example, apprentice of the year at Riverpark, and apprentices are encouraged to prepare for and compete in the national and international heats of the WorldSkills competitions. Over the past five years, apprentices have achieved significant success including one Gold, three Silver and two Bronze awards in national competitions, and one Silver and two Bronze awards at international level.

The outcomes on the apprenticeship programme are high. Over the three years from 2020/2021 to 2022/2023, of the 72% of the level 2 apprentices who completed their training, all achieved the full qualification framework. Over the same period, of the 86% of the level 3 apprentices who completed their training, all achieved the full qualification framework. In the 2022-2024 reporting period, all of the apprentices who remained on and completed the programme achieved their targeted qualification, or above, in all three essential skills.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

There are good personal relationships between the employers and staff at Riverpark and the apprentices, which underpin the successful development of a community of learning.

Learner surveys are used on completion of the programme to evaluate the experiences of the apprentices on the programme. The organisation has recognised that the views of the apprentices should be surveyed earlier in their training programme in order to improve their learning experience in a timelier manner. During the inspection, inspectors met and spoke with six employer representatives; most of them said that, in upskilling the apprentices, support from Riverpark had also impacted positively on the development of the professional learning of their staff.

Riverpark works closely with relevant industry bodies including the British Standards Institute (BSI) and the Institute of Automotive Engineer Assessors (IAEA) and WorldSkills to ensure that their training methods are current. Riverpark has hosted the local heats of the WorldSkills competition programme for the past eight years and their support and involvement in this programme is having a positive impact in the development of world class skills for the benefit of the apprentices and the local motor vehicle industry. In addition to the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, Riverpark works to support accident repair centres to achieve and maintain their required BSI kitemark and they provide a training service for the industry in specialist skills areas including vehicle welding to BSI standards, damage assessment and Advanced driver-assistance systems. This support is highly valued by the employers and strengthens the relationship between Riverpark and the industry, thus impacting positively on the progression opportunities for the apprentices.

F. CHILD and ADULT PROTECTION

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the organisation demonstrates that the arrangements for child and adult protection do not align sufficiently to the current guidance.

The actions to take this work forward include:

- ensure that all staff have child and adult protection training appropriate to their roles and that training and vetting records are maintained appropriately; and
- ensure that the induction information includes the safeguarding arrangements for the apprentices.

A child and adult protection progress inspection will take place on the first available date after the external training (planned for 14 January 2025), and the internal training (planned for 23 January 2025) are completed.

4. GOING FORWARD

Riverpark Training & Development (NI) Limited is realising well its vision to “provide the best available training and support to the apprentices while they progress throughout their apprenticeship” through their strategic links and partnerships with the motor vehicle industry and their focus on the development of a highly skilled workforce in the sector. The curriculum provision is well considered and the outcomes achieved by the apprentices, including the progression to level 3 apprenticeships, are high.

The ETI, through the engagement of the district inspector, will continue to monitor Riverpark’s progress as it takes forward the areas for action outlined in this report.

5. APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: 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

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