

Colas Rail

Monitoring visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Philida Schellekens, Ofsted Inspector

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Address: Dacre House
19 Dacre Street
London SW1H 0DJ



Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

From October 2018, Ofsted undertook to carry out monitoring visits to all newly directly funded providers of apprenticeship training provision which began to be funded from April 2017 or after by the Education and Skills Funding Agency and/or the apprenticeship levy. This monitoring visit was undertaken as part of those arrangements and as outlined in the 'Further education and skills inspection handbook', especially the sections entitled 'Providers newly directly funded to deliver apprenticeship training provision' and 'Monitoring visits'. The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below.

Colas Rail (Colas) is an employer provider that provides railway engineering services, such as track renewal and the electrification of railway lines. Colas gained a direct contract to offer levy-paid apprenticeships in May 2017 and enrolled their first group of apprentices in September 2017. At the time of the monitoring visit, 27 apprentices were on programme. All apprentices were aged 18 years or older. Apprentices work towards a level 3 rail engineering technician standard, specialising in subjects such as track and rolling stock, overhead structures and signalling. Colas works with two subcontractors to support the delivery of the programme. Infraskills is responsible for off-the-job railway training and assessment; and Runway for English and mathematics.

Themes

How much progress have leaders made in ensuring that the provider is meeting all the requirements of successful apprenticeship provision?

Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have a clear rationale for delivering the apprenticeship programme. Leaders recognised in 2016 that they needed to recruit well-trained staff and customise engineering training to industry requirements. Leaders worked closely with other employers and awarding organisations to develop the apprenticeship programme and to ensure that apprentices develop the right skills needed in the sector.

Leaders and managers have ensured that the requirements of the apprenticeship programme are met in full. Apprentices access frequent and well-planned on- and off-the-job training and receive good support in the workplace. Apprentices benefit from working closely with experienced managers and mentors at work. As a result, they develop into competent team members. Managers appreciate the value that the apprentices add to the business. Quite a few apprentices have taken on extended responsibility and one has already been promoted and now has employed status.

The recruitment process is thorough and includes relevant advice and guidance. As a result, apprentices develop a good understanding of the apprenticeship scheme and the specialist nature of the job before they enrol. The vast majority of apprentices who have started the programme are still on programme.

Colas staff make sure that they recruit apprentices who meet the requirements of the apprenticeship programme. Nearly all are completely new to the railway sector and they develop relevant skills, knowledge and behaviours. In addition to the new recruits, a small group of existing Colas employees who were qualified at a lower standard now have an opportunity to achieve level 3.

Leaders and managers have good partnership arrangements with their subcontractors and have designed effective programmes of training. However, they rightly recognise that they need to strengthen the quality assurance of the subcontracted provision, in particular the quality of the off-the-job training and the progress that apprentices make towards completing their formal qualifications.

The vast majority of apprentices have good English and mathematics skills and apply these well in the workplace and in their written work. However, managers have been slow to implement appropriate support for the small number of apprentices who do not yet have appropriate qualifications in English and mathematics. Provision is now in place but the delayed start has resulted in slow progress towards the completion of English and mathematics qualifications.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that apprentices benefit from high-quality training that leads to positive outcomes for apprentices? Reasonable progress

The majority of apprentices make good progress at work and develop good technical skills. They learn how to follow a work plan and how to use equipment in the rail industry. They enjoy their apprenticeship programme and grow in confidence as their skills develop. They become an increasingly valuable asset and enhance the capacity of the company to take on new contracts.

Managers and trainers link the on- and off-the-job training effectively. They have become skilled at dovetailing the apprenticeships' training with their workload and schedules. This results in good opportunities for apprentices to learn and to practise new skills and knowledge. More recently, managers have extended their planning to anticipate training and work requirements by setting up specific placements across railway depots.

Workplace mentors provide apprentices with key support at work. They provide effective day-to-day management and check that apprentices produce work tasks to a good standard and that their work meets course requirements. They make sure that apprentices attend training, and that they know how to develop their skills and knowledge further.

Apprentices reflect regularly and well on the development of their technical skills. For example, one apprentice had learned how to bolt the ends of two rails together while laying tracks by using a fishplate or joint bar. He produced a clear and well-written report on how he changed a fishplate for the first time. His workplace mentor gave clear feedback on the quality of his work, including what he could do to improve further.

While apprentices benefit from detailed and helpful feedback from their workplace manager/mentors, the off-the-job trainers do not give apprentices sufficiently clear feedback which helps them improve their work; nor do apprentices know what they should do to achieve a merit or distinction grade. The initial assessment activities provide useful information on the trainees' strengths and weaknesses but trainers make too little use of the outcomes to plan learning.

Apprentices benefit from a wide range of additional training beyond the core units required for accreditation. For example, apprentices attend a three-day army training course that helps them develop team-working skills and desirable behaviours, such as working respectfully alongside people from different backgrounds. The focus on communication and team building has a positive impact on the apprentices, as they grow to enjoy being part of the railway community.

How much progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that effective safeguarding arrangements are in place? Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers ensure that apprentices' health and safety practice in the workplace is strong. Apprentices develop a good working understanding of health and safety procedures that are appropriate for the railway sector. They understand that a poor focus on health and safety can have a significant impact on themselves, colleagues and railway users.

Managers have a good focus on the well-being of their apprentices and provide relevant training on this aspect. As a result, apprentices are alert to their own and colleagues' mental health and how fatigue can affect their performance. They know what action to take if it this happens.

Apprentices feel safe and know when and how to report concerns if they have any. Staff responsible for the off-the-job training have appropriate safeguarding qualifications. The designated safeguarding lead understands her responsibilities well and has set up an appropriate process should any safeguarding concerns be reported. Safer recruitment practices are in place.

Apprentices have a good understanding of the risks posed by radicalisation and extremism. They receive regular updates and training during progress reviews.

However, not all managers are aware of the 'Prevent' duty and how this might impact on the job roles of the apprentices.

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