

Report of a Pilot Inspection

ApprenticeshipsNI Provision in Network Personnel Limited

October 2023



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Network Personnel Limited (Network Personnel) is based in Magherafelt and delivers employability programmes in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, where it also has premises in the border counties of Cavan and Monaghan. It was set up in 1989 as a wholly-owned training and employment subsidiary of the social enterprise and ‘profit for purpose’ company Workspace Group (Workspace), which was established in Draperstown in 1985 to stimulate social and economic regeneration in the local area.

Since September 2021, Network Personnel has been contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the ApprenticeshipsNI 2021 programme (the programme). It is one of five employability programmes which Network Personnel delivers. At the time of the pilot inspection in October 2023, the programme was delivered across five council areas* from premises in Antrim, Ballymena, Coleraine, Draperstown, Magherafelt and Omagh.

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

The programme is managed by two operations managers from Network Personnel, one of whom is the programme contract manager. The operations managers, as members of Workspace’s senior management team, report directly to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the voluntary board of nine directors (the board). Sixty-five staff are employed across its eight premises, with eight of them, including one sub-contracted tutor*, directly involved in the delivery of the programme.

Apprentices are mainly recruited to the programme in cohorts on a quarterly basis. At the time of the pilot inspection in October 2023, 34 apprentices were registered on the programme; 23 (68%) at level 2 and 11 (32%) at level 3. The majority (64%) of the registrations were in customer service (13, 38%) and warehousing and storage (9, 26%). The remainder (12, 36%) were in business administration and children’s care, learning and development.

Health and social care and retail are also part of Network Personnel’s ApprenticeshipsNI 2021 contract, but no apprentices were registered in these professional and technical (P&T) areas at the time of the pilot inspection, nor since the start of the programme.

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, or with a declared disability or learning support need. A minority of the apprentices needed to complete the essential skills of literacy (5, 15%) and numeracy (6; 18%). A majority (20, 59%) needed to complete information and communications technology (ICT).

All data used for the inspection and presented in this report has been supplied and verified by Network Personnel 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.

Twenty-eight apprentices (82%) responded to the questionnaire. All of them indicated that: they found the organisation's pre-enrolment and induction processes useful; their work is regularly assessed, and they are given useful feedback on how to improve; staff care about their progress and wellbeing; and they feel safe and secure in the organisation. A small number of those who responded also made positive written comments about their experiences on the programme.

Inspectors also met and spoke with a sample of the apprentices (17, 50%) during their learning, teaching and training sessions, in focus groups, and in the workplace. They reported that they are happy on their programme, the content is related well to what they do in the workplace, they are making progress, and they feel safe in the workplace and know who to talk to if they have a concern.

A small number of apprentices raised concerns about the one-to-one online delivery of their training, particularly for the essential skills, which limited the opportunity for them to meet in-person with the tutors and to interact and learn with the other apprentices.

All of the staff involved in the delivery of the programme responded to the questionnaire and a small number provided additional written comments. The responses were wholly positive, and staff reported that they were happy with their experiences of working in Network Personnel and delivering the programme.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

During the pilot inspection and informed by Network Personnel's quality improvement planning and associated 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 customer service and warehousing and storage, the provision for essential skills, and the arrangements for child and adult protection were evaluated.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- Overall, the provision for the apprenticeship programme is effective in supporting the apprentices to achieve their apprenticeship qualification framework. The P&T provision for the customer service and warehousing and storage apprenticeships is effective. The provision for the essential skills is not effective enough in meeting the needs of all of the apprentices.
- The curriculum is matched to the apprentices' job roles and is meeting well their learning and development needs, and the needs of their employers.
- Available information and data should be used to set more meaningful targets, and better inform the actions to address the areas for improvement appropriately identified by the organisation, such as to improve the retention rates.
- The standards of occupational skills demonstrated by the apprentices in the workplace are good or better.
- The health and wellbeing of the staff and apprentices is supported well across the organisation.
- Effective links and partnerships have been established with a range of stakeholders to support the delivery of the apprenticeship programme.
- Staff are provided with relevant professional learning and upskilling opportunities.
- The organisation's arrangements for child and adult protection take full account of current policy and guidance.

Areas for further action:

- Analyse and use more effectively the available information and data from the organisation's various tracking and monitoring systems. This information and data should be used to set more meaningful targets, and better inform the actions to address the areas for improvement appropriately identified by the organisation, such as to improve the retention rates.
- Review and improve the quality of the provision for the essential skills as the delivery model is not effective enough in meeting the needs of all of the apprentices.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

Network Personnel's person-centred ethos of "*improving lives through employment*", underpins the development and delivery of the apprenticeship programme and supports the wider Workspace vision of "*building a prosperous, dynamic and healthy community*". The delivery of the programme is aligned well to a number of key government and departmental strategies* and the organisation reports that it adds value, as a potential progression route from the other employability programmes it offers. In realising its ethos and the wider vision, account is taken by the organisation of feedback from the apprentices through learner surveys.

The organisation's self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes have recently been revised and streamlined to make them less bureaucratic. Through these processes key issues and the actions to address these have been identified. The actions are intended to support the improvement and on-going development of the programme provision, in line with the organisational ethos and wider vision. These appropriately include the need for continued monitoring and improvement of the retention rates, and on-going support to provide quality learning, teaching and training.

The board is actively involved in the leadership of Network Personnel. The CEO and directors engage regularly and effectively with the management team and staff, and are kept well informed about ongoing matters. With their varied range of backgrounds, experience, skills, and expertise, they support the organisation well.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The induction and registration processes prepare the apprentices and the employers well for the requirements of the programme. From the outset, the apprentices and employers are made aware that the essential skills are not only mandatory, but a means to ensure progression and improve life chances. The prioritisation of the health and wellbeing of the apprentices is addressing well their needs. The apprentices are valued as individuals. The apprentices' personal and social development is viewed by the organisation as an integral and important aspect of the programme.

The provision in the P&T areas sampled is effective in meeting the needs of the apprentices. The qualifications and individual units being completed by the apprentices are matched well to their job roles. The quality of the learning, teaching and training observed was effective and contextualised well to the apprentices' job roles which are clearly defined, and the employers have high expectations of the apprentices.

The apprentices engage well in their learning and training and demonstrate good or better standards of written work. Those apprentices visited in the workplace, during the inspection, demonstrated that they have developed good or better occupational skills. They are developing well their self-confidence, their ability to work effectively

in teams or independently, and are developing a sound knowledge and understanding of their work environment. The working relationships of apprentices with managers and staff of Network Personnel are based on an ethos of mutual respect and inclusion.

All of the employers (7) spoken to report the positive impact the apprentices are having in their workplaces. The employers value how the programme can be used to support training across a range of roles and the development of the occupational skills needed to operate their businesses. Training for the apprentices is mainly delivered on a group basis online or in-person at Network Personnel's premises, with one-to-one support offered if required. Of those apprentices the inspectors met with, some would also benefit from delivery of in-person training in the workplace.

The quality of the provision for the essential skills is not effective enough as the delivery model needs to be reviewed, to better meet the needs of all of the apprentices. The apprentices should undertake required essential skills as close to their start date as possible. At the time of the inspection, no apprentices had completed the essential skills in ICT, which is a concern given the high levels of motivation of the apprentices and their prior attainment. The balance of online and in-person training should also be reviewed, to provide greater opportunities for the apprentices to develop better their interpersonal skills and those skills required for completing external assessments under timed conditions. The apprentices who have started their essential skills are undertaking the qualifications at an appropriate level. In the small number of sessions observed, the apprentices who spoke to an inspector were highly motivated, worked independently and engaged well. The tutors provided good support for those who were experiencing low confidence or anxiety.

The apprentices are developing their digital skills effectively through the competent use of digital devices to present information in a range of formats, using email, attending online classes, engaging in online discussions, and submitting assignments/tasks to their e-portfolio and receiving, and acting on, online feedback.

Effective internal quality assurance processes are in place, including regular apprentice reviews, workplace assessments, attendance trackers, and updates to employers on the progress of their apprentices. Learner progress is also tracked and monitored well in the e-portfolio with regular sampling of the apprentices' work, effective feedback to staff and apprentices, and clear actions for improvement to ensure that the standards for the P&T areas are being met.

Quality improvement plans are in place for the P&T areas and the essential skills, but these are unduly variable in quality. There is insufficient analysis of available information and data from the organisation's various tracking and monitoring systems. This information and data should be used to set meaningful targets, and better inform actions to address the areas for improvement appropriately identified by the organisation.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

During the pilot inspection, a number of examples were provided of how the apprentices and all learners, across the organisation, overcome personal and social barriers in a staged and tailored approach to progress in their learning. This included, in one instance, progression from an entry level programme to registration on a level 2 apprenticeship programme. The regular communication and consultation established with parents/carers and external support services is to ensure that any adjustment to the provision is appropriate and manageable for the learners.

Staff skills and expertise, across the range of employability programmes offered by the organisation, are used well to provide support for the apprentices on the programme. The apprentices can also access and avail of the services and support available to any of the learners across the wider Workspace organisation. Network Personnel has recently undergone an internal restructuring process which has resulted in significant changes in staffing levels and job roles. At present, staffing levels on the programme are sufficient but the organisation has identified appropriately the need to build further contingency, to support its ongoing delivery and sustainability.

High levels of support are in place for staff, with good buy-in and participation by senior managers including the CEO and directors. This includes 'themed' months, health and well-being checks and team building activities. Staff are provided with relevant professional learning and upskilling opportunities in their own specialist area and in the range of personal and social issues pertinent to young people. Good channels of communication and working relationships are apparent among staff involved in the delivery of the apprenticeship programme, at all levels.

The quality of the learning resources and accommodation observed during the visit, both in the organisation's premises offices and the workplaces visited, was good.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

As part of the quality improvement planning process, managers have identified appropriately the need to improve retention rates for the apprentices, at levels 2 and 3. The overall retention rate is currently 66% for the period from the start of the apprenticeship programme in September 2021 to present and the organisation has identified this as an area for improvement. For the period 2021/22, it is 80% for the apprentices in warehousing and storage, but is significantly lower (40%) for the apprentices in customer service at level 2. The reasons why the apprentices leave their apprenticeship programme early are recorded effectively; retention to date has been impacted by factors such as the apprentices moving jobs or relocating, and also the cessation of DfE's employer incentive payments for apprentices.

The apprentices from the 2021/2022 cohort who have completed their programme, to date, have achieved their full framework qualification (8; 67%). Of the low numbers that have completed the essential skills programmes in literacy and numeracy to date, all have achieved the targeted qualification. At present, the progress of a majority of the apprentices is slow. Managers and staff should ensure that all of the apprentices are challenged to achieve 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 social media platforms or the Network Personnel section of the wider Workspace website and staff intranet. The organisation should consider the planning of award events and the increased involvement of employers to celebrate the success of the apprentices.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

Through the operation of the wider Workspace organisation, Network Personnel is embedded well within its local community, providing learners with a continuum from school to employment which includes the opportunity to complete the programme. Through Workspace's environmental strategy, staff from Network Personnel have been involved in a number of green initiatives, including working with employers of apprentices, recycling and upcycling, reforestation, and administering a community fund created through the development of a local wind farm.

Links and partnerships have been established with a wide range of stakeholders across the mid-Ulster area, including primary and post-primary schools, community groups, youth organisations, parents/carers, volunteering organisations, and external support and statutory agencies. These have helped to identify community need and support the development of a range of facilities such as an after school club, a food bank, an activity shed, small business start-ups and a community sports hall which have benefitted all of the learners, including the apprentices and the wider community.

Effective and well-managed links and partnerships have been established with employers across a range of businesses to promote the programme and support recruitment, upskilling/reskilling and progression opportunities for learners aged from 16 years and over. However, the organisation reports that while it promotes the programme and its benefits to young people and parents/carers within the local community and beyond, apprenticeships are still not recognised by some of the schools or parents as a viable career progression pathway.

F. CHILD AND ADULT PROTECTION

At the time of the pilot inspection, the organisation's policies and procedures for child and adult protection take full account of current policy and guidance.

4. GOING FORWARD

Network Personnel Limited is an organisation that has high expectations and aspirations for its apprentices. Its person-centred ethos of “*improving lives through employment*” is evident in how staff work collegially to ensure that the apprentices are supported to be able to engage, learn, achieve and progress. Priority is given to actions to support the on-going development and improvement of the provision for the apprenticeship programme, in line with the organisational ethos.

The more effective analysis and use of information and data is required, to set more meaningful targets, and better inform the actions to address the areas for improvement appropriately identified by the organisation, such as to improve the retention rates. The delivery model for essential skills needs to be reviewed and improved as the provision is not effective enough in meeting the needs of all of the apprentices.

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

There will be a follow-up inspection of the provision for the essential skills in 12 to 18 months.

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 1 **Five council areas***

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council
Mid Ulster District Council.

Sub-contracted tutor*

Warehousing and Storage

Page 4 **Government and departmental strategies***

Department for Communities

Building Inclusive Communities Strategy, 2020-2025
New Decade, New Approach Social Inclusion Strategies, 2020
Community Wealth Building in Northern Ireland, 2022

DfE

10x Economy - an economic vision for a decade of innovation, 2021

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

A Green Growth Strategy for Northern Ireland, 2021

Department of Health

Mental Health Strategy, 2021-2031
Health and Wellbeing Strategy, 2026
Active Living - Sport and Physical Activity Strategy for Northern Ireland, 2022.

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