

Report of an Inspection

of Skills for Life & Work and
ApprenticeshipsNI provision

Rutledge Training Ltd

March 2025



Education and
Training Inspectorate
Empowering Improvement

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Rutledge Training Ltd (Rutledge) is a private limited company contracted by the Department for the Economy (Department) to provide the Skills for Life and Work (SfLW) and ApprenticeshipsNI (AppsNI) programmes. The organisation operates from 17 offices across Northern Ireland, located in Antrim, Armagh, Ballycastle, Ballymena, Bangor, Belfast, Carrickfergus, Coleraine, Downpatrick, Enniskillen, Londonderry, Larne, Magherafelt, Omagh, and Portadown; they have recently opened two new branches in Lisburn and Newry which are not yet operational for training.

Strategic acquisitions and contract novation from other training organisations have been integrated into the Rutledge network. These include Oriel Training and PeoplePlus NI Ltd in 2017, Larne & Ballymena Skills in 2019 and most recently Ballycastle Community Workshop Training (BCW) in 2024. These, along with the introduction of the all-age apprenticeships in September 2023, have resulted in significant expansion in trainee and apprentice recruitment levels across Northern Ireland.

Rutledge is led by a chief executive officer who is supported by a senior leadership team comprising an operations director, head of quality teaching and learning, head of business improvement, human resources (HR) manager, finance manager, and three regional operations managers. There are eight branch managers, 15 student advisers, ten support staff, 85 tutors, and a team of 34 administrative staff who work in quality, finance, and HR. The head of quality, teaching and learning leads a team of four quality managers; a competition is underway for the recruitment of one more. Each professional and technical area, along with the essential skills, is assigned a quality manager from the teaching and learning team to support the delivery of the programmes.

At the time of the inspection, 604 trainees were registered on the SfLW programme across the professional and technical (P&T) areas of Business Administration (8), Children's Care Learning and Development (CCLD, 76), Construction (87), Creative Arts & Digital Tech (6), Customer Service (95), Engineering (35), Hairdressing (69), Barbering (49), and Beauty (28), Health & Social Care (H&SC, 71), Hospitality (11), Information Technology (IT) Users (38), Retail (20) and Stores & Warehousing (11).

In addition, 1723 apprentices were registered across the P&T areas of Business Administration (11), Catering (34), CCLD (294), Construction (63), Contact Centre Operations (61), Customer Service (15), Engineering (18), Equine Industry (9), Food & Drink (15), Hairdressing (21) & Barbering (2), H&SC (1031), Hospitality & Catering (31), Information Technology (IT) User/Professionals (7), Retail (3), Social Media and Marketing (14), Stores & Warehousing (23), and Team Leading (71); 864 at level 2 and 859 at level 3.

A small number (<5%) of the trainees entered their programme with four or more GCSEs at grades A* to C or equivalent, including English and mathematics. Most of the trainees require essential skills in literacy (80%), numeracy (86%) and the majority require essential skills in information and communication technology (ICT) (74%). Almost all (91%) declared, on entry, that they held no qualifications.

A low proportion (149, 9%) of the apprentices entered their programme with four or more GCSEs at grades A* to C or equivalent, including English and mathematics.

A majority of the apprentices require essential skills in literacy (53%), numeracy (54%) and ICT (67%).

Over one-half (327, 52%) of the trainees and <5% of the apprentices have additional learning needs such as: cognition and learning; social, behaviour, emotional and well-being; speech and language; sensory; and physical needs. One hundred and eighty-four (30%) of the trainees receive help from the Disability Support Service. Forty-five (7%) trainees and 245 (14%) apprentices do not have English as their first language.

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

B. VIEWS OF LEARNERS, PARENTS AND STAFF

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

One hundred and ninety-six, 33% of the trainees and 58, <5% of the apprentices, responded to the online questionnaire, with almost one-fifth of the respondents providing written comments (44, 17%). Almost all of the respondents indicated that: their programme is well managed, and they find it both interesting and challenging; they have been provided with clear guidance and rules around acceptable and unacceptable behaviours when learning; they get good advice about relevant personal and social matters and feel they made the right choice following their chosen programme. The majority of the written comments were positive; the trainees and apprentices highlighted, in particular, the high levels of support and encouragement they receive from the tutors. A small number commented on the lack of access to IT resources, the lack of relaxation facilities, and the turnover in tutors.

Inspectors also met and spoke with 141 trainees and apprentices in focus groups across 14 offices. Almost all of the trainees and apprentices spoke highly of the support and respect they receive from the tutors. Most of them valued the opportunity to avail of the breakfast/snack facilities in their branch. They understand the need for rules around behaviour, enjoy their training, and are kept up to date about their progress. They feel safe and cared for in the organisation. A common theme they commented on was the lack of IT resources, such as interactive whiteboards and other technologies used in their lessons.

Inspectors spoke with a small number of parents from across four branches. They all talked passionately about the positive difference Rutledge has made to their son/daughter's lives. They could not speak highly enough of the support, care, and welcoming environment provided. They commented on how the previous statutory education system had not worked for their son/daughter, who often felt like a failure when they had not passed exams or enjoyed their previous learning experiences. Rutledge has provided a chance to be happy and successful in a career they never thought they could access. Their son/daughter's confidence has developed greatly, and for some, it has been "lifesaving and life-changing" for the whole family.

A majority (81, 52%) of the staff completed the online confidential questionnaire, with just over one-fifth providing written comments (17, 21%). Almost all of the staff indicated that: there are good channels of communication in the organisation, they receive accurate, timely updates and information about any changes; there is regular assessment for learners who are kept up to date with how they are progressing on their training programme; and overall, they are happy with their experiences working in the organisation. Almost all of the staff-written comments were positive about the support and guidance provided by the management in the organisation.

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.

Inspectors visited nearly all branches, addressing various P&T areas in the first week and focusing on CCLD, construction, and engineering in the second week.

Additionally, there was emphasis on essential skills and the learners' additional support needs throughout both weeks.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- Senior management is committed to achieving the organisation's vision "to empower learners of all ages by delivering high-quality, industry-relevant training that enhances employability, fosters lifelong learning, and contributes to the workforce development of Northern Ireland".
- A well-defined organisational structure, along with effective channels of communication, creates a well-co-ordinated and collaborative working environment with clear lines of accountability for staff that empowers and fosters a positive culture of self-evaluation and effective quality improvement planning.

- The organisation is aware of the risks and is addressing well the significant challenges associated with a high turnover of staff and the difficulties in recruiting appropriately qualified and experienced staff.
- The organisation's self-evaluation and quality improvement planning (QIP) processes identify clearly and appropriately the priority areas for development across the organisation, particularly the need for additional provision to meet more effectively the increasing number of learners enrolling with additional learning and support needs. There is a need to align more clearly the P&T and essential skills with the organisational QIP.
- Most of the lessons are well-planned, are set within a meaningful context, maintain good pace and use effective questioning techniques. They provide sufficient stretch and challenge, along with a range of purposeful activities that engage and enable successful learning.
- The quality of the learning environment is too variable across the branches; a significant minority of the classrooms are cramped and not sufficiently conducive to effective learning. Across the provision, the learners would benefit from better access to technology enhanced learning (TEL) and assistive learning technologies.
- The organisation offers a broad curriculum with a wide range of professional and technical areas across both programmes, providing learners with good opportunities to develop occupational skills and knowledge that are in demand within the local labour market.
- The provision of impactful health, wellbeing and keeping safe programmes is a key focus of the organisation. It fosters an inclusive and equitable learning environment through tailored learner support services and inclusive approaches to learning and teaching.
- The majority of trainees (63%) and apprentices (64%) completed and achieved their qualifications, which is above the sector average for AppsNI. Key areas for improvement include progression rates, with 45% of the SfLW trainees progressing to further education, training or employment and only 12% of the apprentices progressing from Level 2 to Level 3. Targeted improvement initiatives have been implemented, and early indications suggest these measures are driving positive change.
- The outcomes for the essential skills are high, over the past three years almost all (91%) of the trainees and apprentices achieved their targeted qualification in literacy, most (89%) achieved their targeted qualification in numeracy, and most (87%) achieved their targeted qualification in ICT.
- An extensive range of collaborative networks with employers, external agencies, and other key stakeholders has enhanced the learning experience for the trainees and apprentices.

Areas for action:

- align the P&T and essential skills with the organisational QIP and monitor closely the staffing challenges to maintain continuity of learning while adapting to the growing number of learners enrolling with additional learning and support needs;
- improve further the quality of the learning environment across the branches including access to TEL and assistive technologies; and
- improve the trainee and apprentice progression rates to higher level education and training from the Skills for Life and Work programme (45%) and ApprenticeshipsNI Level 2 programme (12%), respectively.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

Rutledge's vision is "to empower learners of all ages by delivering high-quality, industry-relevant training that enhances employability, fosters lifelong learning, and contributes to the workforce development of Northern Ireland". Senior management are committed to achieving this vision through the delivery of a growing and diverse portfolio of professional and technical occupational areas across its offices.

While the scale, scope and geographical spread of the provision presents a range of logistical challenges, management have demonstrated resilience, responsiveness and flexibility to enable staff to deliver well the wide range of provision on offer while remaining learner-centred in fulfilling their vision. The vision is informed appropriately by labour market intelligence and employer demand, along with learner and stakeholder feedback, and is well-aligned to the Department for the Economy's priorities of better jobs, regional balance, and increased productivity.

There is a well-defined organisational structure, along with effective channels of communication which create a well-coordinated and collaborative working environment with clear lines of accountability for staff that empowers and fosters a positive culture of self-evaluation and effective quality improvement planning. All members of the senior management team and a core team of staff have a long-established record and experience working within Rutledge. The organisation is aware of the risks, and is addressing well the significant challenges dealing with a high staff turnover and difficulties in recruiting appropriately qualified and experienced staff. In line with achieving the vision, senior managers have put a comprehensive action plan in place to address these issues through a wide range of targeted interventions which has resulted in early progress made towards its objectives.

The organisation's self-evaluation and QIP processes identify clearly the appropriate priority areas for development across the organisation, particularly the need for additional provision to meet more effectively the increasing number of learners enrolling with additional learning and support needs. The quality of the input to the

QIP processes by staff at operational level needs to be further strengthened. There is a need to align more clearly the P&T and essential skills with the organisational QIP and include more specific milestones and timeframes in order to monitor, review and evaluate the progress and impact of the actions.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

Most of the planning, teaching, training and assessment for successful learning is effective. The tutors foster positive, affirming relationships with the learners and have a good awareness and understanding of their barriers to learning. The learning support workers provide sensitive, intuitive guidance to small groups and on a one-to-one basis. Where learning is most effective the lessons are well-planned with: good pace; stretch and challenge; probing questions to extend oral responses; and differentiated activities that are linked explicitly to learning outcomes and take good account of individual needs. Learning is least effective where: the learners are passive; communication skills are not developed; and resources are not age and interest appropriate.

For the apprentices, the P&T training and essential skills classes are available both in the branches and in the workplace, which is meeting the needs of the apprentices and the employers. In the training for the P&T areas, there is an appropriate blend of theory and practical aspects of the curriculum and a good focus on professional competences and standards which are mostly good.

There is a cycle of monitoring and review of the effectiveness of the learning, teaching and training, this would be enhanced further by a programme of peer observations to support recently appointed staff develop further adaptive teaching strategies to meet more fully the diverse needs of the learners.

The quality of the learning environment is too variable across the branches: a significant minority of the classrooms are cramped and not sufficiently conducive to effective learning. Across the provision the learners would also benefit from better access to TEL and assistive technologies to increase engagement, provide instantaneous assessment opportunities and develop further their digital skills. The essential skills timetabling should be reviewed to improve the learning experiences and maximise the specialisms of the tutors, currently 13 of the 21 tutors are delivering all three of the essential skills and of those, nine are delivering all three to the same group(s) of learners.

Rutledge offers a broad curriculum with a wide range of professional and technical areas across both programmes to develop occupational skills and knowledge that are in demand within the local labour market. Over the last 12 months the registrations in both programmes have grown by almost two-fifths (39%). The introduction of the all-age apprenticeships in September 2023 has widened access to the programme; at the time of the inspection 69% (1181/1723) of the apprentices were over the age of 25. There are 864 learners on the level 2 programme, (over one-half of these are in H&SC), and 859 on the level 3 programme (over one-half in H&SC and around one-quarter in CCLD), with small numbers in most other areas. New curriculum areas introduced over the last year include the equine industry, and social media and digital marketing.

Trainees have access to the Career, Help, Information, Learning and Support (CHILS) curriculum. CHILS aims to provide non-accredited but structured careers help and guidance through a range of activities including: one-to one career coaching sessions, curriculum vitae (CV) and cover letter workshops, and interview preparation; the provision of relevant information on career pathways, industry trends and job opportunities including the use of industry visits and guest speakers; supporting the development of key employability and transversal skills; and underpinning the delivery of the preventative curriculum through supporting personal growth, resilience and independent learning. There is inconsistency in the CHILS provision offered across the offices visited, for example, in timetabling arrangements, staff delivering the provision, and the provision of industry visits.

During the inspection, the learners spoken to report that they are aware of the progression pathways available after they complete their programme and what they need to do in order to complete and progress. Just over one-half (54%) of the trainees were on a work placement; 39% of these learners with additional learning support needs were on a work placement.

The organisation has invested in a range of information and learning technology (ILT) to support tutors and learners over the past two years. Across the observed lessons, examples exist of learners using technology, including the use of laptops or their own personal mobile devices for internet research, the use of a range of application software to complete work, and uploading evidence and work to e-portfolios. Overall, however, the use of ILT to support learning, teaching and training by the tutors, and the development of digital skills by the learners as part of their training programme, is under-developed and is in need of improvement across the organisation.

The provision of impactful health, wellbeing and keeping safe programmes is a key focus of the organisation. There is a strong commitment to the learners' wellbeing at all levels across the organisation. While there are a range of examples of good quality practice in relation to the provision for personal, social and emotional support and a wider preventative curriculum for learners, there is a need for the organisation to provide consistency in their provision so that all learners, across all branches are better informed about contemporaneous issues to support further their health and well-being. This includes addressing variations in the CHILS curriculum, including appropriate health and wellbeing inputs, with specialist support from outside agencies (such as mental and sexual health) and in guest speakers and enrichment activities.

Rutledge is committed to the well-being of the staff, and some of the staff spoken to during the inspection benefit from flexible working arrangements. An online application to support health and wellbeing, including access to counselling services, has been accessed by over one-quarter of the staff across the organisation. Learners can also be given access to the counselling service if required.

A well-structured induction process is in place for new essential skill and vocational training staff where they are assigned a mentor, and their training needs are assessed and reviewed regularly as part of a structured targeted training plan. This plan identifies an appropriate range of skills and strategies to build their capacity.

The more recently recruited tutors speak highly of the induction process and value the support from more experienced tutors across all areas. As more than one-half of the tutors in the organisation have been in their post for less than 18 months, and with an ongoing recruitment process, there is a high level of continued need to provide support to staff.

A well-planned programme of formal and informal teaching and learning observations is carried out annually by the quality managers. To further strengthen learning and teaching, tutors across professional and technical areas, as well as the essential skills, were introduced to a peer observation programme last year in line with the quality improvement plan. An analysis of these observations is carried out annually to inform targeted professional development going forward.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

Rutledge fosters an inclusive and equitable learning environment through tailored support services and inclusive approaches to learning and teaching. Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) and Disability Support Services (DSS) staff provide targeted support for learners with special educational needs (SEN), English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), and additional needs. Although these structures create a solid foundation, there are disparities in accessibility and implementation across offices and branches.

Non-native speakers benefit from dedicated ESOL classes and the use of translation tools. Differentiated instruction, practical learning aids, and flexible work placements cater to the learners' diverse learning styles. Expanding ESOL provision and increasing access to assistive technology will further strengthen inclusivity and remove learning barriers.

Beyond the classroom, diversity events, student ambassadors, and community partnerships foster belonging and cultural awareness. Financial aid, workplace adjustments, and flexible learning pathways support learners facing socio-economic challenges.

Rutledge employs an organised approach to identifying and addressing learner needs, ensuring appropriate guidance for success. Initial assessments, ILPs, tutor observations, and employer feedback provide a comprehensive understanding of strengths and development areas. DSS staff deliver targeted support, while CHILS sessions taken by Student Advisers and pastoral care provision build confidence and employability skills.

The SEN/D policy reflects a strong commitment to early identification and intervention but requires clearer roles, responsibilities, and structured assessment procedures. A more defined monitoring system with review criteria and regular evaluations would enhance accountability at all levels and ensure a consistent approach to learner support.

Rutledge is addressing staffing challenges while adapting to the growing number of learners with special educational needs. The early implementation of ILPs is creating a more structured and personalised approach, though progress is still in its early stages. SEN training is being provided to upskill staff and strengthen their ability to support diverse learners, but ensuring consistency remains a challenge. At the same time, investment in assistive technologies is crucial to making them available across branches and enhancing learning accessibility. Sustained commitment and refinement will be essential to ensuring these initiatives achieve lasting impact.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

Over the three-year period from 2020/21-2022/23, the majority of trainees (63%) and apprentices (64%) completed and achieved their qualifications. Retention rates for both programmes were 69% for trainees and 67% for apprentices while achievement rates were 91% and 95% respectively. The outcomes are above the sector average, as published in the DfE [ApprenticeshipsNI Statistical Bulletin](#), October 2024. Key areas for improvement include progression rates, with 45% of learners advancing from the Skills for Life and Work programme to further education, training or employment and only 12% moving from Level 2 to Level 3 apprenticeships. Targeted improvement initiatives have been implemented, and early indications suggest these measures are driving positive change.

Achievement is high at level 2 literacy (89%), numeracy (87%), and ICT (87%).

Staff acknowledge the learners' individual efforts and achievements to boost their confidence, self-esteem, and motivation. As a result of these affirming approaches, most of the learners were well-engaged in their learning and their behaviour across the branches was good. The performance of the learners is celebrated through learner of the month, and branches recognise learners with high levels of attendance, attitude, and commitment to their programme. Those learners who have high attendance and are making sufficient progress in their programme are put forward to participate in the Turing exchange visits to European countries. It is excellent that, to date, 125 trainees have participated in the programme with two more exchange visits to take place over the next few months.

Each region also celebrates the success of the learners through graduation events presented at, for example, Stormont, and during enrichment events. Staff promote events with each other on a work management tool. The learners' success and skills development could be shared even more widely across the branches, through organisational wide celebration events and more widely through, social media platforms and other media outlets.

Effective feedback mechanisms have been implemented, supported by digital tools such as Learning Assistant and Internal Quality Systems (IQS), alongside employer engagement, learner voice surveys, and ILPs, to enhance learner progression. While these systems enable robust data collection and informed decision-making, consistent follow-through and coordinated action planning across all centres will be important for sustaining improvements in outcomes.

Rutledge acknowledges the success of work placements in providing real-world practical experience and instilling a work-ready attitude, which is especially valuable for learners with additional needs. While key data on retention, progression, and placements is closely monitored, a thorough evaluation of their quality and alignment with learners' needs is important to ensure these placements are meaningful and effectively support learners' progression.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

An extensive range of collaborative networks with employers, external agencies, and other key stakeholders has enhanced the learning experience for the trainees and apprentices. Most of the employers report the communication with and support provided by the organisation is effective. A minority of the employers visited or spoken to by telephone would like more regular contact with the organisation to review learner progress and to deal with any issues that arise.

Relationships between the staff and learners and amongst the learners are open and respectful. The staff are welcoming and the learner-centred ethos and relationships between them and learners are characterised by a shared understanding of their respective responsibilities for learning and teaching. Trainees are very positive about their learning experiences in Rutledge. They appreciate being treated as young adults and having their opinions listened to. They also feel safe, well cared for and supported.

A Student Forum is in place with a representative from each branch. Feedback from learners is mixed about their influence to make organisational or local decisions. Across the branches, learners can make suggestions to the staff about activities and events which the branches try to accommodate. Examples include the formal organised in one branch and the provision of the breakfast club in each branch. Increased collaboration amongst learners across the regions would provide them with a broader learning experience.

Effective learning and teaching resources are shared online across the organisation, and an online platform is in place to share relevant news and information, as well as encourage collaboration amongst the teaching staff. Ten staff are currently completing the Certificate in Teaching (CIT). A wide range of training is ongoing to build the capacity of the staff in supporting learners to achieve including for example attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) awareness, autism awareness, mentoring skills, handling difficult conversations and dyscalculia training. Most of the staff spoken to feel that they are being well supported to fulfil their teaching and mentoring roles.

The role of the Business Development Executives has been impactful in building links with the business community and relationships with employers through for example careers fairs, school visits and business networks including Chambers of Commerce events.

It has been observed by inspectors that on occasions employers are facing challenging staffing pressures in their own workplace settings, particularly in H&SC and CCLD, resulting in the inability to release apprentices from the workplace setting for training, or for a reduced period of time than had been planned by the tutors. Moving forward cognisance of these factors should be considered when recruiting a number of apprentices from one workplace. Careful planning and consideration need to be used to balance quality and quantity.

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 align to the current guidance.

4. GOING FORWARD

Senior management in Rutledge is committed to achieving the organisation's vision: "to empower learners of all ages by delivering high-quality, industry-relevant training that enhances employability, fosters lifelong learning, and contributes to the workforce development of Northern Ireland". A broad curriculum and a wide range of professional and technical areas across SfLW and AppsNI programmes are available. The organisation fosters an inclusive and equitable learning environment through tailored support and inclusive teaching. The outcomes for the essential skills are high over the past three years.

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

Inspectors identified an aspect of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely include:

- to date, 125 trainees have participated in the Turing exchange programme to European countries. The trainees get to experience a work placement over a three-week period. The benefits include the opportunity to develop employability and occupational skills, as well as increased confidence and motivation for learning and employment. The exchange visits also support well the scheme's key objectives of supporting social mobility and widening participation by disadvantaged learners.

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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