

# Quality Assurance

# National Thematic Report

# 2021-22

## Apprentice Progress Reviews

A report on the quality of *Apprentice Progress Reviews* within Modern Apprenticeships

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## Background

SDS introduced thematic quality reviews in 2021-22 which are short reviews and are not graded.

The key aim of this thematic review is to understand the contribution of the Apprentice Progress Review (APR) practice to quality indicator 1.3 (*Providers effectively deliver and manage work-based learning provision and ensure quality of delivery*) within our Quality Assurance and Improvement Framework, and provide a benchmark on the added value of this activity for key stakeholders (apprentices, employers, learning providers and SDS).

The key objectives of the review are to:

- identify the different models of APR practice across the Modern Apprenticeship provider network;
- identify APR practice which has a positive impact upon the progression of apprentices and adds value to their employers;
- identify what could be improved in relation to APR practice and make recommendations for providers; employers; SDS; or other stakeholders; and
- identify adaptations made to APR practice as a result of Covid-19 and the impact of these for apprentices and their employers.

30 providers were included in the review activity and a list is included in Appendix 1.

## Methodology

The review activity was carried out by a team of six SDS EFQM qualified Quality Assessors. The approach was one of sampling APRs and related documentation for selected apprentices and triangulating this evidence by interviewing apprentices (from this sample), employers, and provider staff.

The findings of each of the reviews have been brought together in this national report which is designed to inform relevant stakeholders about the quality of the apprentice progress review process and its associated outputs. The report should assist providers in developing quality improvement and enhancement activities and includes examples of effective practice identified during the review.

In total the review team:

- Spoke to 72 apprentices; 43 employers; 61 provider staff; and
- Reviewed approximately 600 APR documents

The report uses the following terms to describe numbers and proportions in relation to our sampling<sup>1</sup>:

|                |           |
|----------------|-----------|
| almost all     | over 90%  |
| most           | 75 – 90%  |
| majority       | 50 – 74%  |
| less than half | 15 – 49%  |
| few            | up to 15% |

<sup>1</sup> These proportions follow custom and practice utilised by recognised vocational education quality models

## Approach to facilitating APRs (including the impact of Covid)

- Most APRs are carried out by one of the apprentice's designated assessor. In a few providers, the reviews are carried out by other staff, and in some cases, there are dedicated teams who monitor apprentice progress and conduct the reviews.
- The majority of APR meetings are carried out between the provider and apprentice, with employers inputting to the process through interim and/or separate meetings.
- The [exemplar SDS APR template](#) is used by the majority of providers for their progress reviews. A few providers have adapted the SDS template or have developed their own documentation.
- Most APRs take place quarterly thereby meeting the minimum SDS requirements. In a few cases, providers conduct review meetings more frequently.
- As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, most providers adapted their processes and moved from carrying out progress reviews face-to-face to being carried out remotely, utilising telephone discussions or video calling. While remote delivery is continuing for most providers, in a few cases face-to-face meetings have re-started or there is a preference to return to these when possible.

## Added Value and Impact of APR Discussions

- Most apprentices value the progress review process and find it to be a positive experience which they can participate well in and reflect on their progress. **However**, in a few cases, apprentices did not see the value of the review process and perceived it to be a 'tick box' exercise.
- A number of apprentices interviewed commented that they valued having progress review discussions without their employer present due to feeling more comfortable discussing any workplace issues.
- Most employers feel they have a voice in the review process and can provide their feedback. They are positive about their engagement with the provider irrespective of whether they participate in a three-way conversation with the provider and apprentice. **However**, in a few cases, employers feel their engagement with the provider has declined during the pandemic or they were not being fully engaged in the progress review process.
- In a majority of cases, apprentices and employers are positive about using virtual technology, **however**, in a very small number of cases, there has been a decline in employer engagement as a result of meetings being held virtually.
- Over 600 apprentice review documents were reviewed, and the majority were completed to a good standard, with well-defined goals captured and detailed notes on progression. Feedback from apprentices and employers indicated that progress review documentation was made accessible to them and that it accurately represented the review discussions. **However**, in a few cases, progress review documentation was found to be lacking in sufficient detail. A few apprentices and employers did not have an opportunity to make comments or were unclear whether copies of completed APRs were made available to them.

## Effective Practice

The following effective provider practice was highlighted during the review:

- adapting/developing their APR paperwork to engage apprentices more in the process, including highlighting apprentice transferable skill development.
- staff sharing practice with their peers to improve standardisation and enhance the process for apprentices and employers.
- making good use of ICT and digital platforms to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the APRs and to optimise employer involvement.

Further detail on the effective practice exemplars is provided on pages 6-11.

## Recommendations

### Providers should:

- Continue to emphasise the benefits of the review process for apprentices to enable them to reflect and understand their learning.
- Continue to ensure employers understand their responsibilities and contribute effectively to APRs to optimise the quality of the apprentice's work-based experience
- Ensure staff carrying out APRs understand their responsibilities and can implement effective practice in carrying out the process
- Continue to undertake robust approaches to quality assuring APR arrangements including gathering apprentice and employer feedback, ensuring documentation contains sufficient detail to support the apprentice journey
- Ensure staff undertake relevant CPD to contribute to the continuous improvement of their apprentice progress review approach.

### SDS should:

- Continue to support providers to enhance the APR processes through sharing effective practice and providing CPD.

## Effective Practice Exemplars

**Aberlour Childcare Trust:** As a provider, Aberlour are very invested in the whole APR process and this is completed to an extremely high standard, with rich discussions being carried out and recorded in detail between apprentices and assessors.

Interviews carried out during the review indicate that the employer feels involved and that their contribution is heard and valued. As a result, any potential issues are quickly identified, and strategies are put in place to address them. Apprentices, the employer and assessors find the APR process extremely useful, and this contributes to their awareness of the apprentice progress, how much of their programme they have left, and the targets for the next review period.

In addition to recording progress towards core skills units, assessors actively encourage apprentices to reflect on how they use their core skills in their job role, and this is recorded well by apprentices on the APR documentation. Specific core skills are discussed during each review, and this is revisited during the subsequent review to assess whether there has been progress or whether they need to continue to work on these areas. This approach appears to have been effectively used during the Covid19 lockdown to help apprentices to develop their communication skills by using different forms of communication with parents of the children in the nursery than they would normally have used. This helps apprentices to consider how they plan to develop core skills in real situations and apprentices sampled felt that this helped them better understand how core skill application is used in the workplace.

**BT Group:** BT Group is invested in the APR process as a means of supporting and progressing apprentices through their training and evaluates its effectiveness as part of internal quality assurance and ongoing continuous improvement activities.

Standardisation sessions are held each month between Apprenticeship Development Managers across the four (UK) nations who sample completed review forms in terms of quality and compliance requirements. This enables the sharing of effective practice and is tracked by the Audit and Compliance Manager. Feedback from this sampling is shared with Apprentice Development Coaches (ADCs) and further levelling takes place within teams to ensure consistency. Delivery staff are appreciative of ongoing feedback to support their practice.

The provider's collaborative approach ensures that feedback gathered from apprentices, employers and delivery staff is taken into account. The provider has identified improvements to drive the learners' ownership of the APR process. This has led to a more focused and streamlined format which is currently being piloted and provides better opportunity for apprentices to provide their commentary in all key areas with additional free text required. ADC feedback indicated they were well supported to implement the new process, attending training sessions and being provided with clear and concise guidance.

**Dounreay Site Restoration Ltd:** Dounreay Site Restoration Ltd have developed and make good use of their own review form. This form is well designed to meet the specific requirements of the employer / provider, allowing the apprentice and head of department / supervisor and Apprentice Training Manager space to accurately and specifically track progress through college elements and SVQ units.

Tasks completed in the workplace are clearly documented so that these can then be reflected on by the apprentice and head of department / supervisor, and this also allows the employer / provider to ensure that apprentices have experienced all elements of the workplace areas during their apprenticeship, even if this is supplementary to their MA. The head of department / supervisor has space to score the apprentice on several competencies and performance criteria which are specifically targeted at the workplace and can be adapted to suit different work areas. This scoring mechanism is discussed during reviews and allows apprentices, the Apprentice Training Manager, and head of department / supervisors to track individual progress through their apprenticeship journey. This scoring system is also used by the Apprentice Training Manager to identify and target any areas where the apprentice may not be making progress as expected in order to put in place strategies to address this. The accuracy of the completing of the scoring system is viewed as important by the head of department / supervisor as this helps to ensure that the apprentice is fully competent to work alongside them once the apprenticeship is complete.

The APR process is well managed and delivered by the Apprentice Training Manager who has used their extensive knowledge and experience of the MA programme to good effect to create a well-designed form which meets the needs of both the employer / provider and SDS, thus contributing to the value that is placed on the APR process by apprentices and head of departments / supervisors alike.

**Esteem Training Limited:** Esteem Training has developed its own APR paperwork (approved for use by SDS) incorporating the mandatory elements as required by Skills Development Scotland and additional elements to measure apprentice and employer satisfaction levels. For the additional sections, each apprentice and employer representative is invited to answer three questions about the MA programme and score each out of ten, giving reasons for their score. These 4 questions seek feedback on the overall experience of the MA programme and the support offered by the provider staff. Where a score is seven or less, the provider contacts the respondent to discuss further and ascertain what improvements or changes could be implemented. This supports the provider to continuously improve their training delivery in response to direct feedback. Since feedback is gathered quarterly as part of the APR process, response rates are high and offer a regular flow of stakeholder feedback which the provider can analyse and compare trends both in year and year on year.

Esteem's APR process includes a Weekly Allocation Meeting (WAM) attended by the Candidate liaison co-ordinator and the Business Development Team staff who carry out the reviews. At this meeting, staff identify which reviews are due to be scheduled and which team member will take responsibility for each review. Staff highlight and discuss any specific areas of concern that may need additional support (e.g., where an apprentice is experiencing difficulties or challenges). This collaborative approach to scheduling is very effective and gives all staff involved in the process an opportunity to discuss areas of concern and share solutions and ideas. Staff interviewed confirmed they value this opportunity for discussion. It provides a clear mechanism for managing the review scheduling effectively and a forum for discussing appropriate interventions to keep apprentices on track to complete their programme.

Esteem has a Candidate Support Co-ordinator whose role is to be a liaison point between the provider staff teams and the learners and to offer additional support to individual apprentices where required. This might be where they are finding challenges at a personal level which is impacting on their learning; challenges in completing tasks for their portfolio or anything that is having a negative impact on their progress. Where apprentices are falling behind schedule, the Candidate Support Co-ordinator will attend the review meeting to understand the issues and offer support to get the apprentice back on track. This member of staff has regular discussions with the assessors and the reviewers and has a detailed knowledge of each apprentice and is therefore able to quickly respond to any additional needs or challenges as they arise. Feedback from apprentice interviews demonstrate this role is valued by them and they appreciate the additional support that is available.

**Glasgow City Council:** Glasgow City Council is invested in the APR process as a means of supporting and progressing apprentices through their training and evaluates its effectiveness as part of ongoing continuous improvement activities.

The provider's collaborative approach ensures that feedback gathered from apprentices, employers and delivery staff is taken into account. Having identified improvements to drive the learners' ownership of the APR process, the provider has introduced a more focused and streamlined format which provides better opportunity for apprentices to provide their commentary in all key areas with additional free text as required.

The support of line managers in the review meeting also demonstrates a more 'joined up' approach to apprentices. The Training Officer confirmed they were well supported to implement the new process, attending training sessions and being provided with clear and concise guidance in how to apply scoring.

**GP Strategies Training Limited:** Following the transition to virtual review meetings, the provider has introduced a dedicated email address in Microsoft Outlook for apprentices and employers to submit completed APR forms. The provider's staff team has access to this, and they manage the dedicated mailbox on a daily basis. This ensures efficient handling of the documents and streamlines the process for all parties.

**Ident Training Ltd:** Ident Training Ltd is invested in the APR process as a means of supporting and progressing apprentices through their training and evaluates its effectiveness as part of ongoing continuous improvement activities.

Delivery staff work well together to share their knowledge and ideas. Fortnightly team meetings provide an opportunity to reflect on individual apprentice progress, share soft information and identify those requiring additional support. This proactive approach ensures that this small but effective team are able to make early interventions and adjustments which allow apprentices to continue progressing and is welcomed by staff who feel their opinions are valued.

The provider makes effective use of group communication (WhatsApp) to drive connectivity across all parties – there are separate groups for staff, apprentices (on a class and cohort basis) and employers. This fosters the development of positive relationships between the provider and its key stakeholders, enabling sharing of news, e.g., notification of the upcoming review period to employers and encouraging them to look out for the forms to provide their apprentice with feedback. Staff are responsive to contact, including out with standard hours which is found to be helpful by apprentices and the forum also recognised as useful by encouraging peer support and a culture of ideas and suggestions.

A recent innovation to streamline the APR process has been the provider's investment in electronic sign-off of APRs (via Adobe Sign). This provides a full audit trail, requires comments to be added by all parties to the review and issues reminders if required. As a result, employers are making more effective contributions which is welcomed by the provider and motivational for apprentices.

**NHS Education for Scotland:** NHS Education for Scotland are very invested in the whole APR process and this is completed to a high standard. Interviews carried out during the review indicate that the employer/employer representative and apprentice feel involved in the process and this allows any potential issues to be quickly identified, and strategies are put in place by the assessor to address them. Assessors, apprentices, and the employer/employer representative value the opportunity to make good use of protected time to pause and reflect on the apprenticeship programme and this contributes to awareness of apprentice progress, how much of their programme they have left, and the targets for the next review period.

To ensure that apprentices and employers/employer representatives are informed about the APR process from the start of the MA programme, the provider has produced a useful, high quality video guide, which is part of a suite of video guides issued to apprentices and employers/employer representatives during induction. The APR video clearly explains the purpose of the APR process and takes the viewer through the different sections of the form in detail, giving comprehensive explanations about what should be considered when completing each section and the information that should be included in the different parts of the form. This video is a very good resource for apprentices and employers/employer representatives to help them to have an understanding of the review process prior to having their first review.

**Shetland Island Council (t/a Train Shetland):** To ensure that new apprentices are well supported at the start of their programme, the provider completes an initial APR around four weeks after their start date. This review focuses on ensuring that the apprentice is settling into the programme and their job well, and that they understand all of the documentation they have completed. The VTC is also able to answer any questions or queries that the apprentice may have. This initial review is particularly useful in supporting younger, less experienced, or less confident apprentices in their transition to work.

APRs are carried out approximately every six - ten weeks, with the period of time between reviews determined largely by the needs of the individual apprentice. The length of time between reviews can be shortened or extended by the VTC according to the progress that the apprentice is making and how much of their programme they have completed, with more intense support being available for apprentices who will benefit from it. The VTCs are empowered to use their knowledge of the frameworks, apprentices, and employers to determine the frequency that the reviews are carried out in order to use the APR process well to best support the apprentice.

Shetland Islands Council have a 'progress plan' system in place which they use effectively as part of the APR process, to support apprentices who are not progressing in line with their plan, to get back on track. The progress plan is implemented by the provider after they have tried to encourage progress through the usual review process. It involves the VTC, the apprentice and employer, who meet to discuss the situation, and a detailed record of this discussion is kept using a useful form that the provider has created. The VTC leads the discussion and notes the background of the situation, including specific information about what work has been missed or not completed and the strategies that have already been used to try to address this. During the meeting, required actions are discussed and allocated to the appropriate individual. Targets are broken down to small, manageable chunks and these are reviewed more regularly. As a minimum, apprentices who are on a progress plan have a formal APR every four weeks. This solutions-focussed approach helps to ensure that apprentices who have fallen behind are able to make up the work, and ultimately complete their programme.

## Appendix 1 – Provider Sample

The 30 providers included in the thematic review were:

- Aberlour Childcare Trust
- Alma Training Limited
- Bragd LLP
- BT Group plc
- Career Studio (Scotland) Ltd
- Coralshore Ltd
- Dingbro Limited
- Direct Partners Limited
- Dounreay Site Restoration Ltd
- East Scot Training Services (t/a Angus Training Group)
- Esteem Training Limited
- Genius People Limited
- Glasgow City Council
- GMD Community Services Ltd
- GP Strategies Training Limited
- HSC Futures Ltd
- Ident Ltd
- Love Learning Scotland SCIO
- M I Technologies Limited
- NHS Education for Scotland (NES)
- Pentland Assessment Centres Ltd
- REMIT Group Limited
- Rewards Training Recruitment Consultancy (Scotland) Limited
- Scotia Law Training Limited
- Scottish Water
- Shetland Islands Council (t/a Train Shetland)
- Sixth Sense Trading Limited
- SNIPEF Training Services Ltd
- The Tell Organisation Limited
- Treasure Island Nursery (t/a Step Up)