

Inspection of The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (Solace Group) Limited

Inspection dates:

22 to 24 February 2023

Overall effectiveness**Good**

The quality of education

Good

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Good

Apprenticeships

Good

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Not previously inspected

Information about this provider

The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (Solace Group) Limited is a representative body for senior managers who work in local government organisations. Solace Group started to deliver apprenticeships on behalf of levy-paying local authorities in May 2018. At the time of the inspection, 141 apprentices were studying the operations/departmental manager standard at level 5. A further 14 apprentices were studying the coaching professional standard at level 5. Almost all apprentices are employed by local authorities in London and Yorkshire.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Apprentices are highly motivated to learn, and value the skills and knowledge they gain that help them to drive change in their organisations. They learn how to communicate confidently with senior leaders, staff and external stakeholders, and how to manage the challenges of organisational change. As a result, apprentices become increasingly resilient to obstacles or setbacks.

Leaders, tutor assessors and facilitators weave equality, diversity and inclusion into the curriculum so that apprentices learn to respect and value the differing skills and experiences of their peers and colleagues. As a result, apprentices demonstrate the effective knowledge and professional behaviours that they need to counter discrimination and nurture talent in under-represented groups in their workplace contexts.

Apprentices understand the promotion opportunities and career prospects open to them with their own employers and, more widely, within local government organisations. They appreciate how leadership and coaching skills can impact on their careers and be used in more senior leadership roles.

A few apprentices do not attend sessions as frequently as they should. When apprentices miss sessions, staff provide resources and recordings of sessions to help them catch up.

Most apprentices receive sufficient time during working hours for their off-the-job training. However, a few apprentices struggle to balance the requirements of the apprenticeship alongside the demands of their job roles, particularly at peak times.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders and managers have an ambitious vision for the apprenticeship standards that they deliver. They provide high-quality training that addresses the need for a pipeline of talented leaders and professional coaches for the local government sector, and which encourages people from under-represented groups to strive for leadership positions. Leaders successfully support local government organisations to develop future talent and to plan for succession into leadership posts.

Leaders work well with employers to improve the quality of the programmes that they offer. Leaders, tutor assessors and facilitators customise and tailor programmes to meet employers' needs. For example, apprentices learn about the political skills needed for public sector work. In return, local government employers provide highly knowledgeable external speakers for the apprenticeship programme, on diverse topics including finance, accountability and legislation.

Leaders maintain effective oversight of the programmes they offer through effective quality assurance processes. Leaders and managers have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas that require improvement and have taken appropriate action

to tackle the few areas of the provision that do not meet their high expectations. For example, leaders recognised where the teaching of functional skills was weak and not sufficient to meet apprentices' needs. This held a few apprentices back from completing their apprenticeship on time. Leaders have recently improved the quality of functional skills teaching, with tuition now taking place earlier in apprentices' programmes. As a result, recently recruited apprentices are making good progress.

Leaders recruit well-qualified tutor assessors and workshop facilitators who have extensive subject expertise. Most have significant experience at senior level in local government. Leaders enhance the subject knowledge of their staff through frequent, professional updates. They are supportive of their staff and are mindful of workload. Staff feel well supported, and are positive about working for the provider.

Teaching staff carefully plan and logically sequence course content to support apprentices in developing their management skills. For example, tutor assessors teach apprentices about negotiation skills, and then about how these skills are used in finance and budgeting. Apprentices explore current challenges, such as inflation and reduction of budgets, and consider how they might use negotiation to manage such challenges in their workplaces.

Teaching staff make effective use of the information they have about apprentices' starting points to adapt lessons sensitively to ensure that apprentices make sense of challenging topics and situations. Tutor assessors and facilitators use a variety of teaching approaches, including peer working and independent research. They assess apprentices' understanding in sessions and tutorials to check that apprentices can remember and apply what they learn, ensuring that apprentices develop skills such as transactional analysis to help resolve conflict.

Governance is effective. Board members know the provider well and understand its strengths and weaknesses. They support and strengthen the provider's leadership and shape its strategic direction. For example, the board supports leaders very well in their strategic aim of addressing equality, diversity and inclusion issues through improving local government management.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders have established a culture of safeguarding. They have policies and procedures in place to keep staff and apprentices safe from harm.

Leaders and managers maintain clear oversight of safeguarding and ensure that all staff receive professional updates in safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty. The designated safeguarding lead (DSL) and deputy DSLs have appropriate and remit-specific training for the role.

Leaders use effective links with external agencies to provide support for apprentices, including support for those who may be at risk of mental health issues. Staff know how to identify, monitor and support any apprentices who appear vulnerable. Apprentices feel safe while attending their training and at work. They know whom to contact if they have issues or concerns.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- The provider should ensure that apprentices who need functional skills tuition receive it, so that they can complete their functional skills examinations in a timely manner.
- The provider should ensure that apprentices who struggle to balance the requirements of the apprenticeship alongside the demands of their job roles receive the support they need.
- The provider should ensure that all apprentices attend sessions frequently.

Provider details

Unique reference number	2510889
Address	33 George Street Wakefield WF1 1LX
Contact number	07789 997423
Website	www.solace.org.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Graeme McDonald
Provider type	Independent learning provider
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the director of learning, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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