

External review of Modern Apprenticeship delivery by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

A report by HM Inspectors

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CEO/Principal	Dolina Smith
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Provider type	Local Authority
Lead HMI	Stephen McGregor
Apprentice numbers	59

1. Background

External inspections of Modern Apprenticeship (MA) providers are planned collaboratively between the provider and HM Inspectors. Skills Development Scotland (SDS) provides information regarding provider performance including key data to support this process.

During the inspection, a team of HM Inspectors evaluated the quality of training provision and the experiences of apprentices and key stakeholders, including employers. During the visit, the team met with staff, apprentices, employers and other stakeholders and explored the quality of training delivery; how well the needs of apprentices are being met; and approaches to improve the quality of provision.

This report summarises the findings from the inspection, highlighting areas of positive practice and areas for development. The provider receives grades for three elements: leadership and management; quality of delivery, and progress and outcomes. The report also contains main points for action identified by HM Inspectors. The report will be shared with the provider, Scottish Government and SDS. For colleges, the report will also be shared with the Scottish Funding Council and the college Board of Management. A final summary report will be published on HMIE's website.

2. The provider and its context

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CNES) delivers a range of vocational training programmes such as Foundation Apprenticeships (FA) and Modern Apprenticeships (MA).

CNES currently supports 59 modern apprentices across 26 employers and 15 CNES departments primarily in Stornoway and Lionacleit but also supports apprentices located throughout the Western Isles.

3. Outcome of external review

The grades for each of the three elements are:

Leadership and Management	Excellent
Delivery of Training	Very Good
Progress and Outcomes	Very Good

4. Summary of review findings

A summary of the findings of HM Inspectors are set out below.

Element 1: Leadership and Management – Excellent

QI 9.1 Influential vision, values and aims

Areas of positive progress

- The Senior leadership team provides a strong vision for apprenticeship provision which directly supports the CNES core ambition to retain and grow the Western Isles population. Meaningful progression opportunities enable residents to gain qualifications and progress into employment. This builds on long-term economic stability, helping communities to remain viable and thrive.
- CNES leaders work effectively with local employers, CNES departments, and other community partners to develop meaningful pathway opportunities across a unique island context. These include FAs, MAs and GAs. Frameworks are offered in vocational sectors that align closely with regional skills needs, workforce priorities and future demand requirements.
- Leaders place a strong emphasis on sustaining Gaelic as a social, cultural and economic asset. Staff provide targeted support for Gaelic language use in workplaces to enable apprentices to work confidently in bilingual settings. CNES operates as a bilingual local authority and has established a dedicated team to lead and promote its 'Gaelic First' policy. All CNES-based apprentices are expected to develop Gaelic language skills as part of their apprenticeship experience through dedicated weekly learning time. Apprentices can attain Gaelic qualifications at National level 5.
- Leaders demonstrate a strong commitment to apprentice support and wellbeing. They have introduced island hubs which provide improved access to support services and vocational resources. This provision helps apprentices to stay on programme and attain their qualification.

- Leaders and Training Officers (TOs) communicate effectively with employers and partners. Through attendance at regional meetings and events they ensure that partners are informed of organisational priorities and programme developments. This promotes shared understanding and ensures apprenticeship programme delivery is aligned closely to policy and sector requirements.

Areas for development

- None identified

QI 9.4 Leadership for innovation and change

Areas of positive progress

- Leaders work proactively with key partners through the Local Employability Partnership, Community Planning Partnership, and DYW Board. This helps to ensure that MA programmes reflect sector developments, including changes in apprenticeship frameworks, emerging labour market pressures and regional and national skills priorities. Their engagement allows CNES to be responsive and maintain close alignment with local authority workforce needs, regional skills gaps, and the needs of small and microbusinesses across the islands.
- Leaders promote a culture in which staff feel confident to trial new approaches, adapt delivery models and make use of digital technology to help overcome the challenges associated with rurality and geographic isolation. This supports innovative practice in programme design, delivery of learning and assessment, and employer engagement.
- The collaborative approach between CNES and Accredited Training and Skills (ATS) is successfully delivering a work-based learning programme for young people who have become disengaged from school. These young people often do not have a plan in place for employment or further study and are at risk of not entering a positive destination on leaving school. The programme provides opportunities for many young people to progress to MAs and other employment opportunities.
- Leaders ensure MA programmes are flexible, employer focused and align closely with labour market needs and workforce development requirements. For example, CNES created a new qualification with the Harris Tweed Authority and Qualifications Scotland to support the sector to address the challenges of an aging workforce. In addition, they created an MA in Community Development for a local community trust and an MA in Spirit Operations for the growing distilling sector.
- Staff collaborate productively with employers to support apprentices who have become unemployed. For example, staff have successfully relocated unemployed apprentices to new employers in areas such as Health and Social Care. As a result, these apprentices have been able to achieve their programme and continue in employment.

Areas for development

- None identified.

QI 9.5 Securing improvement of quality and impact of training

Areas of positive progress

- Leaders make good use of performance measures and outcome indicators, including those drawn from CNES strategic frameworks. These measures are monitored regularly through corporate performance monitoring arrangements. Leaders make good use of this information to explore strategies to support improvement.
- Leaders support improvements to MA programmes using a range of approaches. These include informal reflection, self-evaluation, and continuous improvement cycles aligned to the corporate strategy. Through these arrangements leaders identify specific areas for improvement and monitor progress made on improvement actions.
- Leaders gather feedback regularly and effectively from employers through formal and informal surveys and follow-up discussions. This supports employers to contribute their views and play an active role in the apprenticeship programme.
- CNES responds well to private care sector employer requests for the standardisation of training to help candidates acquire the necessary Scottish Social Services Council registration to be employed in care homes. CNES assume responsibility for the delivery of these training programmes, ensuring continuity in employment for apprentices and meeting the needs of care home employers.

Areas for development

- None identified.

Element 2 Delivery of training - Very Good

QI 5.1 Design and delivery of training

Areas of positive progress

- Staff design a wide range of relevant and meaningful MA pathways. This results in high levels of employment for almost all apprentices across a range of employment sectors.
- TOs work well with employers and apprentices to identify training needs and select programmes and specific frameworks that align to business aims. This ensures training remains relevant, practical, and directly linked to the workplace.
- A few apprentices have been supported to complete their programme early, allowing them to progress quickly in their current roles and into new employment opportunities.

- All TOs deliver a highly individualised training offer to apprentices based on their individual needs. Relationships are positive between apprentices and staff. All apprentices report that they are supported well during both on and off-the-job training and know who to contact should any concerns arise.
- Staff ensure teaching sessions are planned effectively and are supported by appropriate industry standard resources. This helps apprentices to develop relevant vocational knowledge and technical skills and engage well in sessions. Apprentices articulate clearly how knowledge and skills support them in their work roles.
- All apprentices report feeling well supported throughout their programme and describe staff as approachable and responsive. They value the regular feedback and guidance provided, which helps them stay focused, understand their progress and remain on track to achieve their learning goals.
- All apprentices demonstrate a clear understanding of their progress and progression pathways. Regular reviews and constructive feedback support and reinforce their continued improvement and skill development.
- Almost all employers confirm apprenticeship programmes are flexible and that assessors actively encourage apprentices to take ownership of their own learning and progress at a pace that suits their circumstances and abilities. This flexible approach helps apprentices balance their work commitments and learning requirements effectively.
- Employers value the comprehensive support provided by CNES, including apprentice identification, coordination with training providers, and support for apprentices travelling out with the island. This helps to maintain trusted relationships with partners.

Areas for development

- Sub-contractor assessors do not always undertake a sufficient number of work-based visits with automotive apprentices and employers. As a result, a few apprentices are not progressing at an appropriate pace.
- Meta-skills are not sufficiently well understood by apprentices, employers or sub-contractor staff.

QI 5.4 Effectiveness of training

Areas of positive progress

- A strong collaborative approach between CNES, employers and apprentices underpin the value of MA programmes in building a competent workforce.
- All TOs and sub-contractor staff know their apprentices well. They use their relationships and knowledge to personalise learning at an individual level. As a result, apprentices are

comfortable within their learning and working environment. All apprentices appreciate greatly the support and expertise of their TOs and sub-contractor staff. They comment this has been important for their continued progression and attendance.

- All TOs and sub-contractor staff have appropriate qualifications and relevant workplace experience. This is well respected and helpful to apprentices. Apprentices benefit from having staff who know the industry well and can give useful guidance to support their learning and skill development.
- TOs conduct regular formal progress review meetings to discuss apprentice progress. This helps ensure apprentices and employers have a shared understanding of progress made towards the apprenticeship qualification.
- TOs and sub-contractor staff monitor closely apprentices' attendance and achievement. This ensures apprentices stay on track, and for those who may have fallen behind with their programme, receive the support required to achieve.
- TOs and sub-contractor staff use a range of learning and assessment approaches well to meet individual support and language needs. They adapt assessments appropriately, where required. This supports apprentices to achieve their qualifications.
- All TOs and sub-contractor staff plan learning and assessment activities well, with clear plans and effective preparation for assessment. This provides staff with a strong understanding of apprentices' progress, including clear awareness of competencies achieved and those still to be evidenced.
- All staff deliver both face-to-face and online sessions very well. They use relevant examples from apprentices' working experience, to ensure they comprehend concepts well, and stretch their current knowledge and understanding.
- TOs and sub-contractor staff use well considered questioning techniques to ensure apprentices are fully aware of their programme requirements. Staff make good use of praise, to encourage and support apprentices' understanding and to expand their knowledge within their relevant working context.
- Apprentices report that the hands-on learning approach to their MA programme is engaging and supports their career ambitions and aspirations.
- All apprentices, TOs and sub-contractors use e-portfolios effectively to monitor and track progression and to help promote achievement. This helps apprentices to gauge their progress and achievements well and encourages them to plan their learning effectively.
- Almost all automotive apprentices engage well in sub-contractor induction activities which prepare them effectively for their off-the-job training. Apprentices understand what is involved in their block release programme. This helps them settle into their studies and increases apprentices' self-confidence.

Areas for development

- Most automotive apprentices are not sufficiently aware of the range of support services available from the sub-contractor or how to access them when attending off-the-job training.
- Employers are not sufficiently aware of the off-the-job training programme delivery schedule. Employers would value access to this information to help them better align off-the-job learning and assessment to individual apprentices' work duties.

QI 8.1 Reflection on provision to improve training

Areas of positive progress

- All staff engage in regular formal team meetings and hold informal discussions to consider the quality of the MA programmes and to plan for improvement. During these meetings staff highlight and consider all relevant aspects concerning their programmes and put in place relevant improvement actions.
- All TOs work closely with employers and internal CNES departments. They reflect upon training delivery approaches and ensure close links with on-the-job activities help deepen apprentices' knowledge and understanding.
- Newly appointed TOs receive a comprehensive induction and benefit from working closely with an CNES mentor. They also shadow a more experienced TO, and this helps ensure a consistent approach to support and assessment practice.
- Almost all apprentices attend well-organised and personalised group inductions. These help identify individual learning needs and associated support plans which ensure candidates progress well during their studies.
- All TOs take great care in devising high-quality Individual learning plans, which focus on individual targets. Combined with the use of an e-portfolio, candidates reflect very well on their progress and make plans for future learning activities.
- All employers provide clear examples of the value of the support apprentices receive from TOs. For example, one employer stated the support from their TO was instrumental in the decision to recruit a second apprentice.

Areas for development

- CNES and sub-contractor self-evaluation arrangements are not sufficiently well aligned. As a result, approaches to self-evaluation are not consistent or comprehensive.

Element 3 Progress and Outcomes - Very Good

QI 1.1 Achieving and maintaining high levels of service delivery

Areas of positive progress

- The overall rate of apprenticeship achievement has improved significantly over the last three years. It is now closely aligned to the national average and above the SDS target achievement rate.
- The overall rate of apprenticeship achievement for 16- to 19-year-olds in 2024 and 2025, were at 78.9% and 76.5% respectively. These are above the SDS target achievement rate of 70%. The national achievement rates for this age group were 71.2% in 2024 and 75.9% in 2025.
- The overall rate of apprenticeship achievement for 20 years-old plus in 2024 and 2025, were at 83.3% and 81.5% respectively. These are above the SDS target achievement rate of 75%. The national achievement rates for this age group were 79.1% in 2024 and 82.2% in 2025.
- Overall rates of apprenticeship achievement in Automotive, Business Administration and Hospitality have been very high in the last two years.
- Recruitment of apprentices with a declared disability has increased recently and is now above the national average. Recruitment of female apprentices has been significantly above the national average rate for the last three years.

Areas for development

- The overall rate of apprenticeship achievement for Social Services (CYP) in 2025 was below SDS targets and national achievement rates.

QI 2.1 Apprentice progress and achievement of individual outcomes

Areas of positive progress

- Almost all apprentices gain relevant skills and competencies which prepare them well for progression opportunities in their chosen employment sector.
- Almost all employers are impressed with apprentices' development throughout their programme. They report significant improvement in apprentices' work-related performance both during and after completion of their programme.
- Almost all apprentices remain in employment upon completion of their programme. All employers speak highly of their purposeful relationships with CNES staff. They comment on how helpful input into reflections on training progress and how professional discussions underpin the high standard of vocational provision.

Areas for development

- None identified.

5. Main points for action

The following main points for action are identified:

- CNES should continue to improve rates of achievement for programmes where they are low.
- Staff should ensure meta-skills are clearly signposted and contextualised within all apprenticeship programmes.

6. Examples of highly effective practice

- The approach to sustaining Gaelic as a social, cultural and economic asset across Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, particularly for those apprentices working or aspiring to work in Gaelic medium or Gaelic supported sectors.
- Highly personalised and flexible learning and assessment approaches supporting apprentices to learn and achieve at a pace that suits their abilities and personal commitments.

7. What happens next?

HM Inspectors are confident that the provider has the capacity to continue to improve and we will make no further visits to the provider as a result of this review.

Stephen McGregor
HM Inspector

Appendix 1 Grades used in reporting

A common grading scale is used in making judgements for provider reviews:

- Grade 1 EXCELLENT – Outstanding and sector leading
- Grade 2 VERY GOOD – Major strengths
- Grade 3 GOOD – Important strengths with some areas for improvement
- Grade 4 SATISFACTORY – Strengths just outweigh weaknesses
- Grade 5 WEAK – Important weaknesses
- Grade 6 UNSATISFACTORY – Major weaknesses

Summary

- An evaluation of **excellent** applies to training which is of a very high quality. An evaluation of excellent represents an outstanding standard of training which exemplifies very best practice and is worth disseminating beyond the current provision. It implies that very high-levels of performance are sustainable and will be maintained.
- An evaluation of **very good** applies to training characterised by major strengths. There are very few areas for improvement and any that do exist do not significantly diminish apprentices' experiences. While an evaluation of very good represents a high standard of training, it is a standard that should be achievable by all. It implies that it is fully appropriate to continue to provide training without significant adjustment. However, there is an expectation that the provider will take opportunities to improve and strive to raise performance to excellent.
- An evaluation of **good** applies to training characterised by important strengths which, taken together, clearly outweigh any areas for improvement. An evaluation of good represents a standard of training in which the strengths have a significant positive impact. However, the quality of apprentices' experiences is diminished in some way by aspects in which improvement is required. It implies that the provider should seek to improve further the areas of important strength but take action to address the areas for improvement.
- An evaluation of **satisfactory** applies to training characterised by strengths which just outweigh weaknesses. An evaluation of satisfactory indicates that apprentices' have access to a basic level of training. It represents a standard where the strengths have a positive impact on apprentices' experiences. However, while the weaknesses will not be important enough to have a substantially adverse impact, they do constrain the overall quality of apprentices' experiences. It implies that the provider should take action to address areas of weakness while building on its strengths.



- An evaluation of **weak** applies to training which has some strengths, but where there are important weaknesses. In general, an evaluation of weak may be arrived at in a number of circumstances. While there may be some strengths, the important weaknesses will, either individually or collectively, be sufficient to diminish apprentices' experiences in substantial ways. It implies the need for prompt, structured and planned action on the part of the provider
- An evaluation of **unsatisfactory** applies when there are major weaknesses in training, requiring immediate remedial action. The training experience for apprentices is at risk in significant respects. In almost all cases, staff responsible for training evaluated as unsatisfactory will require support from senior managers in planning and carrying out the necessary actions to effect improvement. This may involve working alongside other staff or agencies in or beyond the immediate support given by the provider.

Appendix 2 Evaluative Terms

The following standard HMIE terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.