

Self-Assessment Report

2022

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Foreword

The purpose of this self-assessment report (SAR) is to identify and evidence Solace's key strengths and best practice; highlight priority areas for the year ahead and inform our Quality Improvement Plan (QIP).

Solace is the representative body for Chief Executives and Senior Managers working in the Public Sector in the UK. We are committed to promoting Public Sector excellence. Whilst the vast majority of our members work in local government, some occupy senior positions in health and social care organisations, police and fire authorities and central government departments. Working with Local Authorities across the UK, we deliver a wide range of Leadership Development programmes, either on a bespoke or national basis. We became a registered apprenticeship provider in May 2017.

The information in this report has been drawn from various sources, including feedback from stakeholders and our learner information records. The Management Team and the Board have approved this SAR and are supportive in driving the continual improvement of our Apprenticeship programmes, ensuring we continue to develop talent within the Local Authority sector.

Solace received our first Monitoring Visit by Ofsted in January 2020, where we were rated as making 'reasonable progress' across all areas. Since then, we have appointed a new role - *Quality and Compliance Lead*, who reports directly to the Director of Learning, and who is responsible for ensuring high quality provision across all our accredited programmes. The wider Learning team has also doubled in size, mirroring the growth across our Apprenticeship client base. In addition to our Designated Safeguarding Lead, we also have in place two Safeguarding Officers responsible across all our cohorts.

The co-ordination and delivery methods of the curriculum have changed as a result of Covid-19, moving from face-to-face to virtual or blended delivery. The quality has not been negatively impacted by this, in fact, it has enabled more learners from a wider pool of Local Authority's to access the training, network with each other and build relationships outside of their own organisation. In addition, learners have benefited from exposure to a greater number of subject matter expert guest speakers, as geography is no longer a barrier.

In June 2021, our 'whole' programme team had an away day as part of our ongoing continuous improvement strategy to review the programme in its entirety. As a result of this, we have re-ordered the sequencing of the Operational and Departmental Manager Apprenticeship, providing a more logical flow - each unit more naturally leads onto the next, optimising learners' development of knowledge, skills and behaviours throughout the apprenticeship, preparing them for EPA.

In summer 2021, Solace became a recognised provider of the Coaching Professional Apprenticeship Standard. To date, we are ready for delivery, and we are now in conversations with various clients who would like to undertake the qualification in 2022. We have a very experienced team of Level 7 qualified coaches who will deliver this Apprenticeship Standard.

Our overall Purpose remains:

To enable places to thrive by releasing the power and voice of the people working in local public services

by:

- *Set the standard for the learning and development of professional leaders and managers in UK local government*
- *Be the influential voice in the UK for professional local government*
- *Be the go-to service for local government's talent management and leadership solutions*



Trudy Birtwell, Director of Learning

Our Provision

Our Emerging Leaders apprenticeship programme is based on the Level 5 Operational / Departmental Manager Apprenticeship Trailblazer standard. The programme also provides an ILM Level 5 Diploma for Leaders and Managers and is the equivalent to a Foundation Level Degree. It is a National programme, based on the National Standards. However, our offer is bespoke to the Public Sector, with much of the content informed and underpinned by the 21st Century Public Servant Research. Solace predominantly deliver the programme on a regional basis, engaging aspiring future public sector leaders from different local authorities helping to support the talent deficit facing the sector.

Our Coaching Professional Apprenticeship is a relatively new programme that we have co designed with our team of experts and stakeholder groups. We plan to market this offer in Spring 2022.

Solace During Covid-19

The pandemic has inevitably impacted our apprenticeship provision, both positively and negatively. Within weeks' we successfully moved our face-to-face taught elements to online delivery enabling all students and colleagues to operate virtually, this ensured minimal disruption to their learning, and we continue to receive positive feedback on sessions and content. We engaged with all learners on an individual basis, checking their personal circumstances and well-being i.e home working, home schooling, work demands/ frontline service roles and where necessary, we moved learners to learner breaks, with agreed regular check ins. However, despite our best efforts we experienced much higher than anticipated attrition rates from learners who were already part way through their learning when the pandemic hit, directly attributed by the learner to the pandemic. Programme Managers worked in partnership with Organisation Client Managers to triangulate the support to learners of both existing and new cohorts. Following feedback from our learners and facilitators we introduced more frequent half day workshops instead of full days, this has continued across many of our programmes rather than reverting back to face-to-face which has been well received by our learners and our evaluations demonstrate it continues to enrich their learning.

We have now developed and perfected a hybrid delivery model, enabling our programmes to operate 100% virtual or with face-to-face elements if the cohort desires– in all client meetings Programme Managers explain the hybrid model and ensure the right one is picked for the cohort. The model is future proof against ongoing covid-19 restrictions.

Programme Data

Demographic Data

Data correct as of May 2022

All Apprenticeship Programmes

What is your sex? →	Female	Male	Total
What is your Ethnic Group? ↑	Record Count	Record Count	Record Count
White	57	28	85
Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups	6	0	6
Asian or Asian British	7	5	12
Black or Black British or Caribbean or African	23	11	34
Other Ethnic Group	2	1	3
Prefer not to say	2	0	2
Total	97	45	142

Ethnic Groups by region

Region	Yorkshire & Humber	London	Essex	Total
What is your Ethnic Group? ↑	Record Count	Record Count	Record Count	Record Count
White	32	40	13	85
Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups	2	4	0	6
Asian or Asian British	4	8	0	12
Black or Black British or Caribbean or African	3	31	0	34
Other Ethnic Group	0	3	0	3



Prefer not to say	1	1	0	2
Total	42	87	13	142

Retention Rates

Retention data will be trackable once current cohorts complete the programme

Gender	Category	2020/2021	2021/2022
Female	Leavers		
	Retention Rate		
	Pass Rate		
Male	Leavers		
	Retention Rate		
	Pass Rate		
All	Leavers		
	Retention Rate		
	Pass Rate		



Overall Grading

Key Area	Grade
Quality of Education	2
Behaviours & Attitudes	2
Personal Development	2
Leadership & Management	2
Overall Effectiveness	2

The Quality of Education


The quality of education is good

Key Strengths

Intent:

- Leaders have constructed a curriculum that is designed to support learners in securing in full the key knowledge, skills and behaviours associated with the apprentice standards and linked qualifications; the curriculum also includes direct teaching of specialised contextual knowledge in order to prepare learners for successful management roles within the public sector.
- Leaders have recently led a curriculum evaluation and review process in order to improve the sequencing of learning and ensure that it is equally ambitious for all groups of learners, including those with high needs and SEND. Learners now more effectively build on previous teaching and learning, and develop the new skills and knowledge they need.

- Leaders maintain a focus on monitoring and evaluating the curriculum for effectiveness and impact.
- The ambitious curriculum set by leaders now prepares learners for the next stage in their professional journey as managers through broadening their knowledge, skills and behaviours in areas such as wellbeing, equality, diversity and inclusion, managing change, recognition and challenge of bias, defining and enhancing personal brand, and conflict management. The impact of this is learners reporting increased self-awareness, more conscious decision making, and planning more effectively for personal and professional longer-term goals.
- Partnership working is a developing strength across the delivery team, leading to the effective linking on the content of context-based workshops to learning outcomes and assessment criteria, so ensuring continuity and relevance, and helping learners prepare for the assessment tasks for each unit.
- Partnership working has informed the review and improvement of assessment tasks and materials, particularly the simulation materials put in place to replicate the skills aspect of the finance unit; these are now more contextually relevant and as such, engaging for the learners.
- Learners have access to a blended curriculum, which includes opportunities to develop skills of self-direction as well as direct teaching and support. Learners have access to an online learning platform, self-directed reading and research, tutorial groups, one to one tutorial support, triage tutorials with line managers, collaborative group tasks and facilitated workshops per module. Further to this, tutors also provide ongoing reading materials and wider research to develop learner's knowledge of key theory and develop contextual insights as well as raise awareness of key issues occurring within the industry. Where possible, leaders seek to build learners connection with and understanding of local issues, and build their understanding of what it meant by place-based leadership.
- Leaders were quick to adapt provision during the Covid 19 period and move all learning over to a virtual model; the impact of this was little loss in learning. Where there have been learner based issues, such as wellbeing issues, illness as result of Covid, learners being pulled off role to take on a Covid related role, tutors, programmes manager and the wider team have provided bespoke support where required to enable learner to stay on course as much as possible.
- Leaders have designed a curriculum and an assessment strategy that helps prepare learners for end point assessment with respect to content and assessment methodology.
- Leaders have developed an Induction programme for new tutors and assessors, which sets clear expectations as to standards, provides support. materials and prepares an individual for full integration into the team.
- The organisation is currently working with Seashell, a Charity based in the Northwest of England, to support the delivery of a suite of level 3 apprenticeships and associated qualifications in Specialist Support in Teaching and learning, Lead Adult Care Worker and Business Administration; likewise, the organisation is also running a level 5 Coaching professional apprenticeship through Solace. The level 3 apprenticeships are funded by the Royal Mail apprenticeship levy and aim to provide a highly innovative delivery model, which links together learning through on central curriculum whilst also raising the profile of learning and development in the care



sector. Leaders have worked closely with the organisation to design and develop the programme. The programme launched in March 2022; to date, the impacts have been strong. Learners are meeting the off the job hours requirement and likewise, the standard of work being produced is high.

Implementation:

- Tutors, facilitators and assessors have expert knowledge in the core curriculum, the requirements of the qualification, the apprentice standards and the industry sector, leading to robust delivery of key knowledge.
- Tutors use formative feedback and promote active discussion to ensure all learners, including those with SEND, fully understand how to address gaps in skills portfolios and strengthen reflective narrative.
- Tutors use tutorials to clarify expectations and communicate key concepts in order to ensure learners have what they need to complete assessment tasks to a high standard.
- Assessment feedback is detailed, linked to criteria, development and clearly communicated; learners are provided with accurate information as to what they have achieved and what the next steps in learning look like regardless of ability.
- Where tutorial or assessment practice is not robust or of sufficient quality, this has been robustly challenged. Robust support processes are in place for new assessors, tutors and facilitators joining the team.
- Tutors are responsive to assessment outcomes; misconceptions are quickly identified and addressed through group or individual tutorials
- Tutors help learners understand where on the trajectory they are working towards with respect to EPA and likewise, how to secure or improve in order to achieve the distinction outcomes.
- Relationships with Organisational Development leads and Line managers is maintained throughout the programme to ensure the employer has a full understanding of the curriculum, expectations and how best to support the learner in context.

Impact:

- Numbers of learners remaining on course and on track is increasing over more recent cohorts.
- EPA outcomes are strong; there are good outcomes for all learners including those with some identified barriers to learning.
- In programme tracking shows some good evidence of learners responding well to intervention and support, and being able to catch up with peers.

- There are a range of case studies available to illustrate learners progressing onto next stages in career and development.

Priorities

- Leaders now need to fully implement a robust internal quality assurance strategy to ensure all aspects of teaching and learning support the delivery of ambitious curriculum in full. This has been developed and is in the early stages of implementation.
 - Data for all groups now needs to be much more robustly monitored and evaluated to ensure that the ambitious curriculum is impacting for all groups of learners. Data is being collated; next steps now include asking pertinent questions of it and identifying targeted interventions for specific groups and individuals.
 - Leaders need to do more to help employers understand the end point assessment process and likewise, their role in supporting the learner between gateway and EPA.
 - The strategy for the teaching and assessment of Functional skills is yet to be fully embedded
 - A strategy for monitoring accurately of the job learning hours has yet to be developed and implemented.
 - Some individual learners are not yet being sufficiently tracked and challenged, leading to consistent poor meeting of deadlines.
 - IQA and monitoring needs to ensure the quality of tutorial and facilitator provision is consistent across the entire team.
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- All key staff need to develop a robust and in-depth knowledge of the programme handbooks, apprentice standards and qualification specifications
 - The number of learners being placed on learner breaks or moving across cohorts needs to be reduced.

Behaviours and Attitudes

Behaviours and attitudes are good

Key Strengths

- Learners display a keen attitude to learning from the programme outset. Their understanding of their responsibilities become clearer as they progress through the first module and submit their first assignment.
- Learner attendance rates are generally good, however there are some pockets of poor attendance which are currently being monitored and actioned. Where there is variance, Programme Managers are quick to address this.

- For the most part, learners meet deadlines promptly and where this is not the case, Leaders follow this up and agree a new submission date.
- Feedback shows that learners develop positive relationships with their course tutors, workshop facilitators and the administration team. All staff members ensure that learners feel included, valued, and safe in a virtual space.
- As part of the taught curriculum learners are given tasks which explore topics such as unconscious bias, visions and values and teamwork and collaboration which helps build resilience and widens their knowledge and understanding beyond the academically taught curriculum.
- Any incidents of bullying, harassment or discrimination are taken very seriously and reported to the Programme Manager who will take swift appropriate action where required.
- Learner progress is monitored and shared with the organisation on a modular basis to address any participation issues, if such issues arise the Programme Manager liaises with the learner and the organisation to form an action plan and ensure that the learner is adequately supported.
- Leaders carry out a contracting session at the beginning of the programme to establish expectations. Contracts are revisited throughout the programme and re-contracting takes place if behaviours begin to slip.
- Learners are made aware of the critical success factors from the outset, this is to ensure that learners with the right behaviours and attitudes are recruited onto the programme. This includes an information session outlining course expectations, prerequisites and what the programme involves.
- Learners are encouraged to take pride in their achievements, feedback is shared, and success is celebrated at their 1:1s. [evidence: ILRs, assignment marksheets]
- Leaders closely monitor attendance rates and have begun to produce reports in order to observe patterns and trends and ensure that this is consistent across cohorts and regions.

Priorities

- Leaders will introduce topics such as resilience, health and wellbeing & diversity and inclusion to shape positive behaviours and attitudes further.
- Leaders will better develop and implement EDI across all programmes.
- A formal process will be developed for handling incidents of bullying, harassment, and discrimination in order to ensure that all members of the team are following a consistent approach to this.
- Leaders must increase the level of challenge around punctuality, and attendance, more recently there has been increase in behaviours such as leaving early and joining late (due to the offering moving to an online setting) this must be addressed immediately to avoid this being perceived as acceptable behaviour.
- Leaders must better monitor and increase the level of challenge around late submissions and develop a formal process to standardise this approach.
- Leaders must develop a learner code of conduct to establish a baseline of acceptable behaviours expected during their time on the programme and beyond EPA.

Personal Development

Personal development is good

Key Strengths

- All active programmes are run on regional basis; this means that learners are exposed to broader development opportunities. Learners value the opportunity to network with peers across different Local Authorities and disciplines. Hearing from guest speakers across the participating organisations greatly enhances the learning experience.
- Learners follow a programme structure that intentionally builds their self-awareness, resilience, and personal development planning, these aspects are woven throughout the programme. Module 1 is focused on personal development; Health & Wellbeing is covered in the induction and the first unit is deliberately Management of Self followed by Self Awareness which focuses on Emotional Intelligence.
- Learners receive pastoral care from their course tutors during their regular 1:1s. Any wellbeing issues are identified and are brought to the attention of the Programme Manager who will escalate where necessary.
- The programme prepares learners for the next steps in their career through its very nature as a broad Leadership and Development programme. Learners are exposed to guest speakers of a senior stature for aspirational purposes. Where there is opportunity, tutors will explore career aspirations of individual learner post programme completion during their 1:1s.
- In the initial learning planning process, tutors discuss career aspirations, short, medium, and long term.
- Learners with special development needs (SEND or high needs) are identified from the programme outset and offered the appropriate additional learning and development support.
- Able, gifted & talented (AG&T) learners are often identified as the programme progresses and are consequently stretched accordingly.
- The impact of the robust learning planning process leads to a reduction in barriers to learning and an acceleration in managing specific challenges within the workplace. Learners also feel more motivated and enthused and act as better role models.
- Line Manager Tutorials and their engagement helps the learners to identify opportunities back in the workplace where they can be stretched.
- Learners cover group tasks on British Values and Unconscious Bias in tutorials. The impact is that learners are giving feedback about the extent to which it is raising their awareness and opening up uncomfortable discussions and debate. They are then able to apply their thinking to their organisational context
- Learners are intentionally exposed to a diverse range of speakers, from diverse backgrounds, that better represents their communities. The impact of this has been really positively received and learners have felt empowered and inspired

Priorities

- More robust tracking of local placed based safeguarding and prevent issues must be embedded and leaders must share information with the wider facilitation team and the learners on a regular basis.
- More time needs to be dedicated to current live issues local to the area via the workshops. Programme Managers are working with the course tutors and guest speakers to bring these to life.
- More focus must be given to providing learners with support beyond the programme in terms of their future development. Leaders will introduce a wrap-up event inclusive of information on next steps and careers guidance.
- Leaders will more consciously interweave EDI into the programme content and tone. This will be through undertaking positive recruitment as the opportunity arises and ensuring the guest speakers are deliberately selected from a wider range of backgrounds to better represent the learner population on our programmes.
- Leaders are developing the delivery of a dedicated session on health and wellbeing to ensure that learners are supported to recognise how to keep themselves physically and mentally healthy.

Leadership and Management

Leadership and management is good

Key Strengths

We are working towards securing GOOD in this area whilst recognizing there are areas for improvement. Our rationale for this grading is based on:

- Leaders have high expectations and provision is developed and improved through open and developmental project group discussions between employers, the assessment team, the workshop delivery team and responsible Programme Managers.
- Leaders continue to plan provision to ensure that the learning is contextually focused and contributes to reducing skills shortages within the public sector.
- These ambitions are reflected in strategic business plans, values and service plans which are developed with the senior management team and overseen by the Group Board.
- Solace senior management team receive monthly performance reports and the board which is made up of serving LG senior leaders meet quarterly to receive feedback and provide guidance and support to the team. In March 2021 they received and welcomed a progress report on apprenticeship provision throughout the pandemic and agreed and supported the quality improvement plan. The use of guest speakers from the purchasing organisation

further supports this. The impact being that learners are motivated and inspired by listening to local leaders who are evidencing how theory translates into practice.

- Resources and capacity to deliver exceptional programmes is monitored on a regular basis and where gaps are identified, timely recruitment and development of the team is planned and implemented to ensure all are supported through safer appropriate recruitment, induction and ongoing CPD – the team has seen significant recruitment in the last 18 months in response to growth in provision and recognized areas for improvement (C and QA role, Functional Skills Tutor, additional facilitators and assessors, new EPA partner as examples). New Learner manager roles were created to support programme managers. The impact of this being the increased capacity to both better identify and support all learners including SEND and AG&T in a timely and positive manner.
- Where there have been issues with the quality of teaching and learning Leaders have been quick to respond and take action as appropriate.
- At the outbreak of the pandemic the organisation developed a contingency plan that was reviewed weekly for providing highly supportive provision for existing and new learners, many of whom were seconded to COVID response role at very short notice. This has been monitored closely throughout 2020/21 with and even closer scrutiny and response to individual needs working alongside employers.
- Learning and delivery were transferred to virtual delivery with no disruption to the timetable. This was accompanied by intensive support for the delivery team as well as guidance and support for learners on how to best engage with virtual learning. Delivery staff were trained in virtual delivery skills both technical and presence.
- As the team expanded, new members were mentored by more experienced members including opportunities for work shadowing and enhanced IQA activities. A lead tutor and workshop facilitator role were established.
- A team hub was established to house standard operating procedures and materials to standardize practice. Furthermore in June 2021 leaders brought the whole team together for a strategic away day to review curriculum, content and sequencing to further enhance learner experience and impact. This resulted in a new curriculum being released in August 2021 and the delivery team fully conversant and supportive of each other's role in the programme delivery. The impact of this is that learners are experiencing high quality learning and assessment and are able to apply that learning, for example drawing on problem solving and decision making techniques and tools.
- An activity log has been introduced which shows leaders at a glance workloads across the team and any potential pressure points before they emerge. These are in addition to the regular 1 to 1 and team meetings in place.
- Leaders have introduced more robust contracting processes and onboarding events to reduce the number of learners withdrawing early from the programme. Actions include:
 - setting out roles and responsibilities more clearly with the purchasing organisation.
 - A robust and upfront discussion with learners so they fully understand the commitment and requirements on them
 - Upfront awareness sessions and guidance for line managers on their role and understanding of the expectation on them and their learners
 - Clear trigger points established early on to avoid learners falling behind. As part of Course correction procedure
 - Individual support and use of learning breaks where learners are genuinely struggling

Safeguarding and EDI

- Senior leaders ensure there is an up-to-date policy on bullying and harassment and that all staff know about this and are supported to raise any concerns which will be responded to. Learners are made aware of policies in place to support them through ourselves and through their employers. We are currently developing a standard operating procedure on Harassment & Bullying
- On the recent curriculum review, attention was paid to ensuring EDI and safeguarding are threaded through the curriculum and not seen as stand alone content. The impact of this being that learners are trained in safeguarding and prevent at the start of their programme but then are regularly reminded of their importance to themselves and those around them and are able to work through emerging issues at workshops and tutorials as they arise.
- All team members are trained in Safeguarding and Prevent and are fully aware of how to report any issues or concerns. There is a designated DSL and two further deputy DSL roles have been established and trained in 2021. The DSL and deputies are also trained in safer recruitment and oversee recruitment practice within the team. The impact of this to date is that learners are experiencing high quality learning and assessment in a safe environment where they are encouraged and supported to raise any issues or concerns.

Priorities

- Solace Vision and Values is mainly understood across the team but we need to communicate these wider to learners through programme materials.
- The legacy of functional skills continues to hamper learners' progression from earlier programmes through to EPA. Although progress has been made including the introduction of a dedicated tutor, earlier delays, poor performance from the E and M test provider and the pandemic have continued to cause delays in progressing to EPA.
- Action point: A new FS strategy has been developed which now need to be embedded. This includes the recruitment of a permanent tutor to work with individuals and groups to complete their qualifications in good time ahead of EPA.
- Introduce more sophisticated tracking of different groups of learners both within and across programmes to identify and monitor any trends as part of a more robust approach to performance reporting. Groups to include: SEND, AGT, BAME and those from other wider protected characteristics groups. To also identify people who have gone on to better jobs and create case studies.
- Introduce a more robust system for capturing and monitoring QAR data.

- A new induction programme to be introduced as part of any growth strategy to ensure standardization of practice and that all feel supported and enabled to succeed in their role from the outset.
- Embed the newly developed IQA process, plan and activities from December 2021.

Overall Effectiveness

Overall Effectiveness is good

- Provision across all cohorts is consistent; there is a central model of delivery, which is subject to continuous improvement and discussed centrally in the IQA meetings to ensure that it is leading to best possible outcomes for all learners including those with SEND and those with particularly high ability.
- Bespoke support and challenge is put in place to tackle learners who are falling behind or whose work is not reaching the expected standard; this involves working in partnership with programme managers and the learners' own organisations.
- Leaders have been robust in monitoring the impacts of changes made to curriculum design and delivery, and actions taken to address to underperformance (see IQA meeting minutes). Where this is still to impact, there is evidence of progress towards improved outcomes.
- Safeguarding is effective.

