

Working Links

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Working Links is a national public-private partnership formed in 2000. Specialising in the delivery of Welfare to Work programmes, it contracts with the North East Skills Funding Agency (SFA) to provide employability skills programmes throughout the northeast. The provision is managed by a regional manager, an operations manager, and a partnership coordinator, along with four performance managers. They are supported by tutors, administrators and six centre managers in Middlesbrough, Bedlington, Darlington, Newcastle, Tyneside and Sunderland. A third of the provision is subcontracted to six other providers. Working Links offers qualifications at entry level to levels 1 and 2 in literacy, numeracy, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) employability award.

At the inspection in March 2009, the overall effectiveness of Working Links' provision was judged satisfactory. Outcomes for learners were satisfactory as were leadership and management. The quality of provision was satisfactory as was equality of opportunity. Working Links had satisfactory capacity to improve. The report focuses on the themes explored during the visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has Working Links made in embedding the self-assessment process and is it leading to continuous quality improvement planning?

Significant progress

Working Links has made significant progress in fully embedding the self-assessment process. It now provides a comprehensive overview of the provision. Working Links has clear systems to enable active involvement of all stakeholders in the process; this includes the use of informal customer feedback, customer satisfaction surveys, customer listening forums and a recently introduced employer surveys and testimonial gathering process. The procedures are inclusive and all staff teams are actively engaged in the process. Managers use data effectively to support and inform judgments made. Working Links has introduced a comprehensive quality improvement cycle which ensures that there is continuous focus on quality improvement. The quality improvement plan is detailed with clear timescales for achievement of outcomes. The plan is monitored monthly through meetings with centre managers, where progress is checked and actions taken to address issues identified.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving outcomes for learners?

Significant progress

Working Links has made significant progress in improving outcomes for learners. The previous inspection judged that outcomes for learners overall were satisfactory. Qualification success rates were satisfactory. They had risen from 42% in 2007/08 to 46% in 2008/09. Data for 2009/2010 indicates an improving trend with success rates rising from 65% to 75% for April 2010 to December 2010. Current learners are making good progress towards their qualification aims. Learners' job entry rates were low at the previous inspection. There has been a slight improvement in job outcomes for learners, however, these remain low. The previous inspection found that too many learners had insufficient opportunity to participate in work experience before moving to employment. This is no longer an issue and the programme is better matched with learners to meet their individual job aspirations.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in improving target setting for learners?

Reasonable progress

Target setting for individual learners has improved and is now satisfactory. Working Links has strengthened its arrangements for initial and diagnostic assessment. Tutors make satisfactory use of the results of these assessments to set targets for learners in individual learning plans (ILPs). However, in too many ILPs targets are the same for all learners. In a minority of cases, tutors write clear targets that are broken down into manageable steps, but Working Links does not always share this good practice effectively. However targets in progress reviews are clear, manageable and time-constrained. Learners have a better understanding of the targets they are working towards and of the progress they are making. Progress reviews contain clear records of learners' progress. Internal verifiers monitor the quality of targets in ILPs and in progress reviews regularly. Working Links' managers are aware that target setting remains weak and they have begun to implement actions to make improvements.

What progress has Working Links made in ensuring its quality arrangements are complete and effective?

Reasonable progress

Working Links has made several improvements to its quality arrangements. An overall structure and timescale for the quality cycle is now in place. The provider carefully aligns its quality cycle with the learners' journey from initial assessment through to course completion. Working Links effectively uses learner satisfaction surveys to make improvements to the provision. Internal verification arrangements are robust. Staff have an improved understanding of quality assurance and quality improvement. Working Links has produced a customer charter, which aims to

encourage staff to consider the customers' experience rather than to focus on contract compliance and on meeting funding targets. It is too early to assess the impact of this initiative. The observation of teaching and learning scheme continues to provide a clear focus on teaching and learning activities. Tutors receive clear guidance and advice on how they can improve their learning sessions. Managers link the observation of teaching scheme to tutors' annual personal performance and development review. Working Links uses the outcomes of teaching observations effectively to contribute to tutors' training and development. Firm plans to establish a clear moderation process for the observation of teaching are in place, but have not yet been fully implemented.

What progress has Working Links made in ensuring that its programmes better meet the needs of all its learners?

Reasonable progress

The extent to which programmes meet the needs and interests of learners remains satisfactory. Learners achieve skills that enhance their career prospects. The programme is responsive to learners' personal circumstances. It includes interesting topics to encourage learners to adopt safe practices and a healthy lifestyle. For example, learners have attended a National Health Service smoking cessation event and visited Tyne and Wear Fire Brigade to learn about home fire safety. Some 50 learners have attended short courses at a local further education college and gained qualifications in health and safety, manual handling, first aid and food hygiene. Learners have an opportunity to respond to questions and concerns about their programme at monthly customer forums. Working Links has made several improvements as a result of these forums.

Leadership and management

What progress has Working Links made in ensuring action planning to implement equality and diversity policies are complete and effective?

Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection Working Links' action planning to implement an equality and diversity policy was incomplete. Working Links has made reasonable progress in this area. Policies and procedures reflect recent legislation. The then recently formed 'dignity at work' working group is now well established and plays an active part in promoting equality and diversity across the organisation. This group now undertakes equality assessment of the company's policies and procedures. At the previous inspection learner achievement and success rates were not sufficiently monitored across different groups of learners. Working Links did not set targets for narrowing gaps in the performance of different groups. Although Working links now monitors learner achievement and success rates of different groups of learners effectively, it has yet to set clear targets for narrowing the performance gap of these groups.

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