

Starting Off (Northampton) Limited

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 57165

Name of lead inspector: Nigel Bragg HMI

Last day of inspection: 15 October 2010

Type of provider: Independent learning provider

Address: 3-5 Wood Hill
Northampton
NN1 2DA

Telephone number: 01604 622855

Information about the provider

1. Starting Off (Northampton) Limited (Starting Off) is a private limited recruitment and training company, which was formed in 1989. The company operates an employment agency for trainees, apprentices and graduates alongside a contract with the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) for apprenticeship and Train to Gain training. Eighty per cent of the company's turnover is from government-funded work with the other 20% from commercial activity.
2. A managing director owns and runs the company supported by a team of four managers and an accounts manager. Starting Off employs 12 staff who fulfil the role of tutor and/or assessor. Two members of staff are responsible for learner recruitment and three provide administrative support.
3. Starting Off has offices in Northampton and Kettering where the provider's tutors deliver off-the-job training. In addition, provider staff carry out all assessment. The company employs some external tutors to provide specialist input to one-day workshops. Learners work and train at employers' premises across Northamptonshire. All learners are in employment except for the four apprentices on programme led provision. The main focus of this inspection was the provider's work-based training for 104 accountancy and 62 business administration learners. The significantly smaller provision in customer service, information technology, team leader and management training was not subject to inspection.
4. The provider provides training on behalf of the following provider:
 - League Football Education

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2009/10
Employer provision:	
Train to Gain	48 learners
Apprenticeships	339 apprentices

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision		Grade 2
Capacity to improve		Grade 2
		Grade
Outcomes for learners		1
Quality of provision		2
Leadership and management		2
Safeguarding		2
Equality and diversity		3
Subject area		Grade
Business administration and law		2

Overall effectiveness

- The overall effectiveness of Starting Off's provision is good, as is its capacity to improve. Outcomes for learners are outstanding. Overall success rates and the proportion of those who achieve their qualifications within planned timescales are very high and well above the national average. Learners benefit from the development of very significant increases in their skills, knowledge and abilities whilst on programme. They make outstanding progress. Training during off-the-job training sessions is good. The provider offers a wide range of provision to meet learners' needs and interests. Starting Off supports learners well throughout their programme. Leadership and management of the provision are good as is the strategic and operational management. The company has very productive relationships with employers that it uses well to ensure learners are able to access employment with training. The company's safeguarding arrangements are good and protect learners effectively. It provides good value for money. Learning takes place in safe and welcoming environments. The provider satisfactorily promotes equality and diversity. However, it does not fully assess the impact of its initiatives to engage under-represented groups. The provider satisfactorily asks learners what they think about the quality of their programmes and uses the replies to implement improvements. However, it doesn't request feedback on all key aspects of the programme to inform quality improvement.

Main findings

- Success rates for all apprenticeship programmes are very high and improving. All rates are significantly and consistently above national averages. Accountancy success rates are particularly high. Learners produce work of a very high standard. Portfolios are of a good quality.
- Learners make very good progress in developing their skills, knowledge and confidence. This helps them to gain significant advancements in promotion or workplace responsibility. Progression to higher-level programmes is good.
- Learners feel safe and adopt safe working practices in the workplace. Starting Off deals very effectively with identified safety and welfare concerns. Learners' enjoy their learning. They receive good support from tutors and employers.
- Training and assessment is good. Tutors support learners well and effectively accommodate differences between learners needs. Tutors use training sessions particularly well to prepare learners for examinations. Learners' attendance at training sessions is good.
- Programmes meet the needs and interests of learners well. Learners enjoy significant improvements in workplace effectiveness as employees. Starting Off is good at offering off-the-job sessions at times that fit with learners' needs. Employers effectively support learners to succeed.
- Learners receive good personal and learning support. The provision of information, advice and guidance, initial assessment, induction and preparation for work and job interviews are good. The help available to develop learners' key skills and Skills for Life is good.
- Strategic and operational management are good. The company responds quickly and effectively to changes in local and national priorities. Starting Off has developed a culture that emphasises the achievement of high standards for its learners and employers. All staff have a sound appreciation of how their work role contributes to achieving organisational targets.
- Partnership links with employers and associated groups are particularly effective. The provider uses very productive relationships with employers to promote the benefits of accredited learning that effectively meets users' needs.
- Safeguarding arrangements are good and given a very high priority. The company implements timely and effective remedial action where learners or tutors raise concerns. The provider works very effectively with employers to raise their understanding of safeguarding. Learners feel safe and protected. Monitoring and promotion of safe working practices is good.
- Starting Off satisfactorily engages with users. However, the provider does not comprehensively gather feedback that captures learners' views effectively at all key points in their learning.
- Starting Off satisfactorily promotes equality and diversity. No significant achievement gap exists between different groups of learners. The provider appropriately protects learners and staff from harassment, bullying and discrimination. However, it has yet to evaluate fully the impact of actions to promote training to under-represented groups.

- Starting Off provides good value for money. Success rates for learners are very high and learners achieve outstanding outcomes. The provider manages resources efficiently and effectively to promote learning. Training centre facilities match the needs of users well. The provider quickly adjusts programme delivery to ensure all learners can participate fully.

What does Starting Off (Northampton) Limited need to do to improve further?

- Introduce a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of current work to promote training to under-represented groups that effectively leads to actions for improvement.
- Introduce feedback arrangements that effectively inform the programme planning, monitoring and improvement of all key activities of the learners' journey.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- the well-organised training sessions
- the opportunity to learn whilst earning a wage
- the support and guidance from tutors
- the help and support from employers
- being involved in learning that is enjoyable
- the chance to gain skills and knowledge that can lead to promotion or a better job
- the preparation they receive to start work.

What learners would like to see improved:

- no recommendations.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- the prompt and efficient service they receive when making enquiries
- the regular communication they receive on the learner's progress
- the high standard of training employees receive
- the rate at which employees develop useful workplace relevant skills.

What employers would like to see improved:

- no recommendations.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

6. Starting Off has a good capacity to improve and has effectively improved programme quality. Since the previous inspection, overall success rates and the proportion who achieve their qualifications within planned timescales have been significantly above national average and show an improving trend. Rates for the smaller number of Train to Gain learners are good and improving. The provider has implemented good improvements to the quality of training resources and facilities available to learners. All staff now receive an appropriate appraisal. Starting Off has maintained and further developed its very productive relationships with employers that benefit learners. Safeguarding of learners is good and a high priority for all staff. Resource management and monitoring is very effective. Strategic and operational management are good. The provider has a well-communicated mission that focuses effectively on the promotion of high standards throughout the company. Staff development and training is satisfactory. Starting Off has a well-established self-assessment process that is inclusive. The associated development plan is appropriately used to improve the quality of provision. Quality assurance arrangements satisfactorily contribute to sustained improvements.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 1

7. Success rates are very high across all apprenticeship programmes and show a steadily improving trend. All rates are significantly and consistently above national average. Accountancy success rates are particularly good and have risen from 66.7% in 2006/07 to 93.4% in the current year. The rates for learners who complete their apprenticeship programmes in accountancy within planned timescales show a similar profile. In 2009/10, at 87%, they were significantly above the national average. Business administration success rates are good and improving at 90% in the current year as compared to a national average of 74.3%. Success rates for learners completing within planned timescales are also high and well above the comparative national average.
8. Learners work is of a very high standard. Work completed by learners during off-the-job sessions is of a particularly good quality. All portfolios are well referenced and detailed. Learners significantly improve their skills, knowledge and confidence during their programmes. This is especially true for accountancy learners who form the majority of learners on programme. Many learners have progressed from level 2 programmes to level 4 accountancy apprenticeships. As a result of their significant improvements, many learners have advanced through promotion or gained greater responsibilities. Learners enjoy their learning and the good support they receive from tutors and work-based managers.

9. Learners feel safe and adopt safe working practices in the workplace. They also feel safe when attending off-the-job sessions. Staff address safety and welfare issues very effectively. Initial auditing and ongoing monitoring of health and safety practices in the workplace is robust.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

10. Training and assessment are good. Assessors are well qualified and very experienced. Tutors support learners well and effectively accommodate differences between learners' needs during off-the-job sessions. Little on-the-job assessment for accountancy programmes takes place as the majority of learners attend classes away from the workplace. Learners' attendance at training sessions is good. Tutors use sessions focusing on underpinning knowledge delivery followed by practice papers, to preparing learners particularly well for examinations. Internal verification is robust and is effective in raising the quality of assessment practice.
11. Learners are very motivated and programmes on offer meet their needs and interests well. Starting Off effectively assists learners to embark on an appropriate learning programme. As a result of the training and help they receive learners enjoy significant improvements in workplace effectiveness as employees. For example, learners' projects, carried out as part of business administration programmes, have helped to improve organisational efficiency and deliver financial savings. Starting Off offers off-the-job sessions at a variety of times during the year to meet the needs and interest of learners.
12. Employers support learners well and are fully involved in working with the provider to deliver a good quality learning experience. They are always involved effectively in progress reviews and receive detailed reports on learners' progress. The provider effectively forges links with external groups that benefit learners. For example, Starting Off recently ran a well-attended accountancy careers symposium. Presentations, given by a wide range of professional bodies and local university representatives, were very effective in raising the aspirations of many learners and promoting the benefits of work-based learning.
13. Starting Off provides good personal and learning support for learners. Arrangements to provide information, advice and guidance, initial assessment, induction and preparation for work and job interviews are good. They work well to prepare the learners for the next stage of their lives and very effectively inform the compilation of individual learning plan. Progress reviews are detailed and helpful in informing learners of their progress. Starting Off carefully monitors all learners' achievement. Learners are able to access good individual support where required. Staff make appropriate referral to specialist agencies to help remove barriers to learning. Support to develop learners' key skills and Skills for Life is good.

Leadership and management

Grade 2

14. Strategic and operational management are good and effectively supports both the improvement and development of the learners programme. The managing director has set a clear mission for the company that emphasises the achievement of high standards throughout the company. All staff have a sound appreciation of how their work role contributes to achieving set targets. Staff receive good support from managers. They share the provider's strategic aims and organisational values and contribute to a culture which has high expectations for its learners and employers. Starting Off responds quickly and effectively to the demands of changes in local and national priorities. It uses data appropriately to plan and review the provision. Both internal and external communications are good.
15. Starting Off's partnership links with employers and associated groups are very effective. The provider works hard to develop very productive relationships with employers that promote the benefits of accredited learning for employees. For example it has successfully used an internship programme to provide employment experience and work-based training for those aged 16 and 17 years who are unemployed. Starting Off is very effective in meeting the staffing and training needs of employers.
16. The provider's safeguarding arrangements are good and protect all learners who are aged 16 or 17 or are vulnerable adults. The company places a very high priority on safeguarding and rigorously ensures that all staff are subject to a regularly reviewed Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) disclosure. The company keeps and monitors a detailed central record of CRB checks. All staff have received relevant introductory or higher level safeguarding training. The provider works well with employers to raise their understanding of safeguarding. Learners feel safe and protected. Their understanding of their rights and responsibilities is at least satisfactory and often good. Staff are well trained in health and safety and visit employers to effectively promote and monitor the use of safe working practices.
17. Starting Off satisfactorily promotes equality and diversity. Managers analyse data appropriately to identify the performance of different groups. No significant achievement gap exists between diverse groups of learners. At the time of the inspection, the number of learners from the minority ethnic community reflected the proportion in the local area. However, the provider has identified that its recruitment patterns conform to gender stereotype. In response, it has carried out some useful research into selection processes and adjusted its recruitment practice to minimise the risk of discrimination. In addition, Starting Off engages in a range of activities to promote training to under-represented groups. However, it does not comprehensively evaluate the effects of current work to both identify its impact and as a tool to inform actions for improvement. All staff and learners have an adequate understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to equality and diversity. Where learners raise concerns the provider responds well and implements timely remedial action as required. The provider has satisfactory arrangements to

protect all learners and staff from harassment, bullying and discrimination. Starting Off uses an adequate range of links with specialist external organisations and community groups to support learners.

18. The provider has satisfactory arrangements to engage with users of its service to inform decision-making and quality improvement. Feedback return rates are generally good. The company analyses, evaluates and uses feedback appropriately as a quality improvement tool. However, it has yet to implement plans to introduce feedback arrangements that effectively capture users' views at all key points in the learning journey.
19. Starting Off makes satisfactory use of self-assessment to improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners. Staff are suitably involved in the compilation of the report and associated development plan. The self-assessment process contributes appropriately to quality improvement. The report was generally accurate and critical. Key judgements and grades broadly matched those of inspectors. However, some parts of the report were overly descriptive. Internal verification is good. Quality audit and assurance processes have improved since the previous inspection and are satisfactory. The provider has improved its use of quality monitoring through the use of observation. However, observations do not always focus sufficiently on learning during training.
20. Starting Off provides good value for money. Outcomes for learners are outstanding. The provider manages its resources very effectively to provide a good quality of learning experience. Training centre facilities match the needs of users well. Staff effectively adjust programme delivery to allow all learners to participate fully. Learners work in a safe and welcoming environment.

Information about the inspection

21. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector, assisted by the provider's managing director, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, the previous inspection report and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.
22. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails. They looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed on behalf of the provider. They also observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in the subject area the provider offered.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Starting Off (Northampton) Limited

Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; **16-18 Learner responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; **19+ responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses; **Employer responsive:** Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	Employer responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners		
Full-time learners	193	193
Part-time learners	0	0
Overall effectiveness	2	2
Capacity to improve	2	
Outcomes for learners	1	1
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	1	
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	1	
How well do learners progress?	1	
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	1	
How safe do learners feel?	2	
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	N/A	
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	N/A	
Quality of provision	2	2
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2	
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	2	
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	2	
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2	
Leadership and management	2	2
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2	
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	N/A	
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2	
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	3	
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	3	
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	3	
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2	

*where applicable to the type of provision

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It rates council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this report in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may copy all or parts of this document for non-commercial educational purposes, as long as you give details of the source and date of publication and do not alter the information in any way.

Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester, M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

© Crown copyright 2010