

Zodiac Training Limited

Focused monitoring visit report

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Last day of inspection: 5 October 2011

Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

Established in 1996, Zodiac Training Limited (Zodiac) is a private training provider with sites across the North East. Zodiac holds training contracts with the Skills Funding Agency and local schools, and provides bespoke training for employers. Training is offered in: health and social care; child development and well-being; engineering and manufacturing technologies; information and communication technologies; retail and commercial enterprise; education and training; and business, administration and law.

The provider was inspected in August 2010. The inspection judged overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, achievement and standards, quality of provision, leadership and management and equality of opportunity as good. Health and social care, child development and well-being, and retail and commercial enterprise were all judged as good. Business administration and law was judged satisfactory.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

<p>What progress has Zodiac made in improving quality assurance processes, particularly in the compiling and use of self-assessment and the use of development planning to improve provision?</p>	<p>Reasonable progress</p>
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Quality processes have improved and are starting to impact on practice. Teaching and learning observations have an increased learner focus. Better performance management and use of data have improved staff accountability. Staff are well informed, motivated and have a clear understanding of the importance of learners' achievement within planned timescales.

All staff contribute well to the self-assessment process and resulting quality improvement plan. Although self-assessment is more evaluative, judgements that detail areas for improvement remain insufficiently explicit. It is difficult to match all the development actions, within the more comprehensive quality improvement plan, to the self-assessment report. The use of the quality improvement plan is extensive with staff continually adding newly identified objectives throughout the year. It is owned by all staff and the progress made against improvement targets is monitored frequently at team meetings. The current 2009/10 self-assessment report was compiled immediately after inspection. The 2010/11 self-assessment will benefit from a range of comprehensive and additional management information reports to substantiate judgements.

Outcomes for learners

How effectively have Zodiac's improvement strategies improved performance and success rates?

Reasonable progress

The good progress of current learners at the last inspection did not consolidate into high end of year success rates for apprentices or Train to Gain learners. However, the changes identified by inspection to strengthen and further develop programme management and practice are starting to improve outcomes.

Learners have increased access to their assessors which is enhanced by frequent virtual contact through web-based electronic portfolios. Assessment planning is much improved. Assessors' feedback to learners' queries and submitted work is timelier. Newly recruited programme coordinators have well defined responsibilities linked to performance targets. Subject specialists are more involved in evaluating learners' aspirations, their current employment role and their employer's commitment to training. They use the information to help learners select the most appropriate qualification and mode of training. Assessors have greater technical support which includes access to prompt ongoing assistance.

Since the last inspection, success rates have improved substantially. At August 2011, compared to the same period the previous year, headline overall success rates and those within the planned timescale for apprentices improved by 18 and 24 percentage points respectively, bringing success rates in-line with national averages. Similarly Train to Gain learners' success rate increased from 61% to 80% over the same period.

Quality of provision

How has Zodiac improved learners' progress reviews to ensure learners are sufficiently informed of their progress and what still needs to be completed?

Reasonable progress

Learners' reviews at the last inspection failed to keep learners fully informed about their progress, progression targets were too general, monitoring arrangements were weak and reviews were often infrequent. Since the last inspection Zodiac has made reasonable progress in revising and improving its learner review arrangements. Staff training and new electronic monitoring now ensure that assessors and managers are fully aware of the progress each learner is making.

Learners now have a clearer understanding about their progress and what they still need to do to complete their qualification. The frequency of learners' reviews has increased and is closely monitored to ensure they occur when planned. Managers quality assure a sample of review records to gauge their effectiveness. The 10 weekly reviews provide learners and employers with invaluable information about progress and assessment requirements that effectively inform the setting of short and medium term progress targets. Zodiac has introduced a system of more frequent contacts and interventions where learners need additional support or help. These

occur in addition to the formal 10 weekly reviews and effectively allow agreed targets to be adjusted and additional support to be planned.

What progress has Zodiac made in improving their observation of teaching and learning to help staff provide a better learning experience, for learners?

Reasonable progress

Since the last inspection Zodiac has made suitable improvements to its observation of teaching and learning practices. Observations of staff have increased with the introduction of observations that are specifically focused on teaching and learning. These observations enhance Zodiac's existing observation processes. Staff development needs are now identified accurately and addressed through additional training or support. The observation process effectively informs self-assessment and development planning. Zodiac has implemented a number of improvements through its new processes. These include more realistic grades awarded to staff following an observation and more effective action planning and staff development where areas for improvement are identified. Zodiac is aware of the work still needed to gauge learning outcomes more effectively through the observation process. They are also in the initial stages of supporting all staff in achieving teaching qualifications above a preparatory skill level. Easy access to useful additional electronic learning materials for assessors and learners has improved, but not all learners have a direct electronic link to all Zodiac's e-learning material.

Leadership and management

What progress that has been made in reducing the number of assessor changes learners were experiencing?

Reasonable progress

At the last inspection, too many learners and employers were experiencing changes in their tutors and assessors. Managers now have accurate reports on assessors' caseloads. Managers use these effectively to ensure that their planned learner numbers are not exceeded as new learners are allocated. Too many new assessors left soon after recruitment. Zodiac has introduced a number of supportive initiatives such as reduced case loads, named mentors, frequent reviews and ongoing support. A range of initiatives are in place to help retain established staff. Staff loss has reduced by nine percentage points over the last year. Programme coordinators are making more frequent visits to employers in order to develop a good relationship with them and with learners in case they have to cover for assessors' illness.

What progress has Zodiac made in improving its use of management information to improve performance and keep staff well informed?

Significant progress

Zodiac has radically changed its reporting structures to better meet the needs of staff in helping learners achieve. Sufficiently challenging targets are established for all job roles and key aspects of provision. An extensive and purposeful range of

management reports support staff in evaluating performance and promoting learners' achievement within planned timescales. Zodiac's frequent monitoring of performance against targets is aided by easily understood graphs and charts that compare historical data, national averages, specific sector averages and internal performance targets against actual performance. Learners at risk of falling behind are quickly identified. All reports are clearly colour coded to identify any learners or aspects of provision that fall below Zodiac's minimum levels of performance.

The reports are accessible to all staff and are used extensively by directors, departments and teams to set and revise improvement targets as well as review team and individual performance. Staff are better informed and fully conversant with their targets and performance. A weekly staff briefing communicates any new initiatives, details the progress of departments against targets, and shares both good practice and news items. Project management is also significantly improved. Directors frequently monitor all projects against a set of agreed terms of reference that include the project's expected impact, milestone objectives, methods of implementation, resource implications and financial cost.

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