

Next Retail Limited

Re-inspection monitoring visit report

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Last day of inspection: 29 September 2015
Type of provider: Employer

Address: Desford Road
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Publication date: 23 October 2015

Inspection number: 10007622



Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

This is the first re-inspection monitoring visit to Next Retail Limited following publication of the inspection report on 14 August 2015 that found the provider to be inadequate overall. All aspects were judged as inadequate, including the sector areas of retailing and wholesaling and call centre operations.

Themes

What actions have been taken to improve the information, advice and guidance received by apprentices to ensure that they have a good understanding of their working environments and what they are required to do to achieve their apprenticeship?

At the previous inspection, the information, advice and guidance (IAG) did not ensure that apprentices fully understood the requirements and expectations of their training and the demands of a retail or contact centre workplace. Since then, managers have carried out a comprehensive and constructive critical assessment of the apprenticeship programme. They have transferred decisions on appointing an apprentice from individual stores to a central recruitment function that aims to provide apprentices with more consistent IAG relevant to their workplaces. Managers have redesigned the role of the newly appointed assessors to enable them to improve and maintain consistently high-quality guidance and support. However, it is too early to make a judgement on the impact of this and related initiatives to improve the effectiveness of the IAG received by apprentices.

Managers have based the improvement actions they have taken on feedback from apprentices. For example, they use countrywide focus groups of apprentices, supported by an external agency specialising in feedback techniques, to identify key areas for improvement. A new internet-based forum allows staff and apprentices to share ideas, raise concerns and respond to questions. This process has confirmed inconsistencies in the way apprenticeship programmes are provided in different stores.

Priorities for improvement

- Ensure that managers use feedback from focus groups, surveys and the internet-based forum to evaluate the success of actions to improve the quality of IAG, identify good practice and implement further improvement actions that they clearly explain to all stakeholders.
- Introduce and monitor effectively the actions to address inconsistencies in the way apprenticeship programmes are provided within stores. Through this process, ensure that all apprentices have a high-quality learning experience linked to effective IAG.

What actions have been taken to ensure apprentices at risk of leaving their programme before completion receive sufficient support and action planning pertinent to their identified needs, so that they remain on programme and make good progress?

At inspection, inspectors judged that apprentices at risk of leaving early received insufficient support and action planning pertinent to their needs and did not make good progress. Since then managers have introduced 'health checks' for apprentices carried out by assessors. As a result, managers have a clearer view of apprentices' progress; they are more aware of the degree of individual learners' commitment to learning and completing their programme. This awareness is helping staff to target support more effectively, to re-engage apprentices into learning and/or improve their progress and achievement.

The provider has introduced an electronic portfolio process, along with a recording and tracking system, that assessors are using to support apprentices in making better progress. Managers intend to introduce caseload reviews for assessors, linked to key performance indicators, in October 2015. In addition, the provider is currently testing an early leavers' identification and reporting process that will allow earlier interventions with apprentices who have expressed a wish to leave the programme before completion. However, it is too early to judge the impact of this and other improvement initiatives on current apprentices' progress, retention and achievement rates.

Priorities for improvement

- Ensure that 'health checks' clearly identify apprentices 'at risk' of not completing and that early and effective interventions and support are in place to enhance their success.

What actions have been taken to ensure that self-assessment and quality improvement arrangements are effective in securing improvements swiftly?

At the last inspection, inspectors judged that managers and staff had not used self-assessment and quality improvement planning effectively to evaluate and improve the provision. Managers have responded quickly to the findings and recommendations of the inspection report. A suitably ambitious post-inspection action plan and long-term action plan are in place; managers scrutinise these plans to tackle the weaker aspects of the provision identified at inspection. An internal board now provides oversight of the progress made in raising the quality and performance of the apprenticeships, and challenges managers to improve further.

Managers have revised the self-assessment process so that all staff, apprentices and other stakeholders are involved. They ensure that this process evaluates the themes identified by inspectors as requiring improvement. Managers have established new methods for managing and improving the standard of training and learning. Specific

managers now have a dedicated responsibility for the quality assurance of the work of assessors, for which they are accountable. However, it is too soon to judge the impact of the implemented initiatives on the quality of provision and learners' achievement.

Priorities for improvement

- Ensure that the internal board is equipped to hold the head of learning, development and apprenticeships to account for securing and sustaining improvement in the apprenticeship programme.
- Make extensive use of data to support judgements in the self-assessment report that are evaluative, self-critical and focused on improving quality.

What actions have been taken to identify and tackle the skills development needs of all apprentices in English and mathematics?

At the previous inspection, the initial assessment of apprentices' English and mathematical skills needs was not timely or comprehensive. In addition, the tuition and support provided to meet their identified needs were weak. Since then managers have carried out staff restructuring, and have replaced in-store assessors with better-qualified visiting assessors. Managers have clarified assessors' roles, with staff now clearly responsible for both teaching and assessing apprentices. All assessors have attended development training events that have included an appropriate focus on improving the standard of apprentices' English and mathematical skills. Managers now more effectively monitor assessors' work to check that apprentices receive frequent and productive workplace visits.

Until recently, a subcontractor was responsible for the initial assessment of apprentices' English and mathematical skills levels. The provider now undertakes this process. However, a significant number of initial assessment results were lost or deemed not reliable at the time of the subcontractor's contract termination. This has delayed the use of initial assessment results to inform the individualisation of learning for all apprentices. The provider is addressing the backlog of assessment thorough the use of appropriate initial and diagnostic testing of apprentices. However, this testing, and the use of effective procedures to support apprentices with specific learning needs, is at an early stage.

Apprentices who have exceeded their planned completion date receive more intense support from assessors to help them achieve quickly. All apprentices now have allocated time away from the shop floor for study purposes, which was not the case during the last inspection. Recent investment in information technology is now offering apprentices better opportunities to participate in effective independent learning. The provider continues to improve the range and availability of paper-based resources. A five-day development event has been organised for October 2015 at which apprentices will receive training on an individual and group-session basis to enhance their English and/or mathematical skills.

Assessors now encourage apprentices to undertake a qualification in English and/or mathematics at a higher level than that required by the apprenticeship framework. Data presented during the monitoring visit indicate that around a third of current apprentices have taken up this opportunity.

Priorities for improvement

- As a matter of urgency, complete the initial and diagnostic assessments of apprentices' English and mathematical skills and use them to individualise the planning of learning.
- Implement a strategy for the development of apprentices' English and mathematical skills to guide and develop assessors' professional practice, so all apprentices achieve to their full potential. Further challenge assessors by setting ambitious and measurable targets for effective performance management in this area.
- Ensure that the five-day development event includes the setting of challenging workplace-focused short-term targets for apprentices that raise standards, and result in completion by or before their planned completion date. In addition, check that all assessors and store managers have a full understanding of these targets and their role in supporting apprentices' achievement.
- Introduce a strategy and staff training for the successful use of additional learning support.

What actions have been taken to improve the use of data to ensure effective apprenticeship performance management?

At the inspection, managers did not collect, analyse and use data adequately as part of effective performance management. Very recently, senior managers have introduced an electronic portfolio for recording apprentices' progress that links with their wider management information system. The effective analysis and monitoring of key performance data from this initiative is at an early stage. Senior managers have commissioned the development of comprehensive and relevant data collection and analysis to improve the management of apprentices' performance. For example, a senior manager has commenced the use of data to monitor regional performance of apprentices linked to the work of individual assessors. However, this and other improvement initiatives are at an early stage.

Priorities for improvement

- Significantly accelerate the introduction and use of a comprehensive information system to support the management of staff and apprentice performance. Introduce a range of long-term and milestone targets to aid the monitoring of performance, to support improvement.

- Implement rigorous procedures to track apprentices' progression through their programmes, leading to an analysis of trends and identification of barriers to progress. Use this information to inform and implement an action plan leading to improvement.
- Introduce arrangements to monitor routinely the achievement of different groups and implement corrective action as required.

What actions have been taken to ensure that safeguarding arrangements are improved so that all apprentices are protected?

At inspection, inspectors judged that safeguarding arrangements were inadequate. Since then the provider has moved quickly to raise the priority given to safeguarding, for example at induction and through more effective in-store 'cause for concern' procedures and relevant review and monitoring by senior managers. Managers have implemented a wide range of appropriate training to raise staff awareness of safeguarding. This has included introductory training for all store managers with refresher sessions planned every two years. In addition, the human resources department and senior managers with specific responsibility for safeguarding have undertaken more advanced training appropriate to their roles.

An appropriate safeguarding policy is now in place, with implementation procedures that are subject to relevant review and evaluation. The recording and response to concerns raised by apprentices have significantly improved. Managers have started to address the key requirements of the 'Prevent' agenda. The provider is about to implement the role of 'safeguarding ambassador' within their stores to promote further the understanding of apprentices and other staff members of safety within their work and personal lives.

Priorities for improvement

- Quickly progress the plans to implement the provider's response to the 'Prevent' agenda.
- Improve the effectiveness of progress reviews in promoting and extending apprentices' understanding of safeguarding; monitor continually the impact of this process on apprentices' awareness.
- Clearly state the measurable outcomes of proposed and planned safeguarding training. Rigorously evaluate the achievement of outcomes and identify further actions to drive improvement.

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