

Next Retail Limited

Re-inspection monitoring visit report

Unique reference number: 59180
Name of lead inspector: Nigel Bragg HMI
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Address: Desford Road
Enderby
Leicester
LE19 4AT

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

This is the second follow-up 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. Inspectors judged all aspects as inadequate, including the sector areas of retail and wholesaling and call-centre operations. At the time of this monitoring visit, 71 apprentices were undertaking training.

Themes

What progress has the provider made in ensuring apprentices receive effective support and guidance that helps them achieve at a higher rate and attain their programme aims within the agreed timescale? **Reasonable progress**

Since the previous inspection, leaders and managers have changed the management of the apprenticeship programme so they are now the sole responsibility of a dedicated team based in the head office. The number of staff with an assessor role has reduced dramatically, from around 800 to nine. Management of this small team of assessors continues to improve. Managers make better use of performance management processes, linked to quality assurance procedures, to check the impact of assessment and learner support on the effective delivery of the apprenticeship programme. Improvements in the use of direct observations to evaluate the quality of teaching, learning and assessment have resulted in a more consistent approach to the identification of good practice and clearer action planning designed to raise standards. Managers have ensured that this work contributes to the better identification and delivery of support to apprentices that removes barriers to learning. In-year data shows the proportion of apprentices achieving within the planned timescale is improving but the rate is still too low.

Following the last inspection, leaders and managers established a monitored online forum, which along with extensive focused survey work, provides a high volume of apprentice feedback on a wide range of topics. Managers regularly evaluate the feedback to detect trends and individual concerns raised by apprentices. This results in swift identification and response by staff, who organise visits or meetings with individual and groups of apprentices to explore the reasons behind the stated adverse training experiences. The process effectively supplements the existing checks on apprentices who may be considering leaving their programme early and/or require extra help to achieve.

Recent management actions have led to the development of an internal careers guidance service to promote apprentices' awareness of available employment pathways and training opportunities. This is starting to ensure that apprentices are better informed about their future career plans. It is too soon to make an overall judgement on the direct impact of this initiative on how well apprentices progress and achieve within agreed timescales.

What progress has the provider made in improving the quality of training apprentices receive, in particular the effectiveness of assessment action planning, target-setting and recorded feedback?

Reasonable progress

The in-house management of the apprenticeship programme now provides a clearer focus on providing apprentices with effective assessment practice that supports their needs and preferences. For example, the development of electronic support in teaching and learning is available to apprentices, who also have the option of using a paper-based system. Since the last monitoring visit, managers have undertaken further actions to provide more consistent assessment practice. This is helping to ensure that apprentices have a clearer understanding of the progress they are making and what work they need to complete prior to the next assessor workplace visit. For example, call-centre operations apprentices have their submitted work returned promptly, with useful assessor feedback that ensures learners are fully aware of what they need to do to improve before another assessment. To aid apprentices' progress, assessors systematically provide helpful feedback on corrected written work that contains grammatical and/or spelling errors.

The use of digital recording technology during assessment is particularly useful for apprentices who require an oral record of their feedback. During the monitoring visit, feedback from retail and call-centre apprentices regarding the quality of their learning programmes was generally positive. Although target-setting for apprentices has improved since the last inspection, assessors do not consistently set detailed, short-term objectives to promote apprentices' skills development. As a result, apprentices and workplace supervisors are not always able to recognise future development needs and identify how to exploit shop-floor activities to develop further the learners' skills. Not all apprentices who work in a retail store that sells only household goods or clothes are able to gain experience of the alternative retailing environment. This limits apprentices' opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge of working with a wider range of merchandise.

What progress has the provider made in ensuring it develops self-assessment arrangements that deliver higher standards for all apprentices?

Significant progress

Senior leaders and managers have a very realistic understanding of the current provision's quality and continue to use the outcomes of self-assessment to inform improvements in how staff deliver apprenticeships. Managers have conducted a

comprehensive review of the self-assessment process, with the inclusion of senior staff, area managers, store managers and apprentices. The process has raised the profile and understanding of the apprenticeship programme within the company. Managers have based judgements in the current self-assessment report on extensive stakeholder evidence and feedback. The current self-assessment report is self-critical and an accurate representation of the strengths and weaknesses of the apprenticeship programme.

Managers effectively use the self-assessment report's associated and well-focused quality improvement plan to monitor the implementation and impact of actions to raise standards. More relevant and detailed data reports have enhanced managers' effectiveness in both checking the impact of actions and identifying future objectives and the necessary resources. The plan provides apprenticeship delivery staff with an up-to-date record of progress in implementing improvement actions, and future priorities to accelerate the pace of the provision's quality, which they understand well. This has ensured that staff have a clear understanding of how meeting their work objectives directly links to the completion of those in the improvement plan to improve apprentices' performance. To quicken further the rate of improvement, managers have prioritised the rectification of the significant areas for improvement noted at the previous inspection using targeted strategies implemented by external specialists. This has helped make some good gains in quality improvement from the very low levels found during inspection.

What progress has the provider made in meeting all apprentices' English and mathematics skills development needs? **Reasonable progress**

Managers recognise that previously, training to improve apprentices' English and mathematical skills had been left to an inappropriately late stage in their programme and slowed completion of the full apprenticeship framework. In response, managers have introduced a wider range of support and ensured that skills development commences much earlier in the learning programme. Apprentices now have access to web-based learning resources in the workplace. In addition, managers routinely schedule time during work hours for apprentices to undertake agreed study tasks. Monitoring of the availability and use of this time is thorough and effective. Since the previous visit, managers have appropriately dealt with the backlog of apprentices who had not received an initial and diagnostic assessment of English and mathematical skills levels. As recognised in the provider's quality improvement plan, the initial assessment and teaching of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) is underdeveloped.

Staff have received a good range of training to help them to improve their teaching and assessment practice. They now all hold qualifications in English and mathematics to at least a level 2 standard. Managers use quality assurance procedures, including observation of professional practice, to identify staff development needs. Targeted support using English and mathematics 'champions' is helping to improve both

assessors' and learners' skills. All but one assessor have an appropriate teaching qualification. Learning resources for staff and apprentices now include vocationally contextualised materials to enable better 'embedding' of English and mathematics within the apprenticeship programme.

Since our previous visit, 42 retail apprentices have participated in a five-day 'autumn school' designed to improve their English and mathematical skills. The success of this initiative has contributed to the subsequent high achievement of examination passes for this cohort. The overall apprentices' examinations pass rate at level 1 in English and mathematics has improved but requires further improvement. Apprentices are encouraged to study for a level of English and mathematics above that required by the apprenticeship framework. Comparable rates for level 2 have also improved, but remain very low.

What progress has the provider made in using data to secure effective governance and performance management that is delivering quality improvement?

Reasonable progress

The board of directors is now better engaged in the scrutiny of the provision using relevant data. Key apprentice success data, alongside the outcomes from the feedback forum, have allowed the board to engage in more effective performance management and to challenge progress made in addressing key areas for improvement.

Since December 2015, managers have established a data 'dashboard' that has contributed to improved monitoring of apprentices' achievements. Managers now undertake more detailed and up-to-date tracking of the progress of individual apprentices. They ensure that assessors' weekly feedback uses relevant data to evaluate how well apprentices are achieving key aspects of their programme against agreed targets. Managers correlate the validity and currency of tracking records with output from an electronic tracking system that results in a progress rating for each apprentice. Managers quickly instigate remedial action where they identify performance shortfalls for individual apprentices. This has contributed to the decline in the proportion of apprentices who are on a programme but have passed their planned completion date. In-year data provided by managers indicates an improving trend in the overall apprentice achievement rate, though they recognise that it is still too low. Data shows a strong correlation between job promotions at an early age for individuals who have successfully completed an apprenticeship, compared with those who have not undertaken similar training. Current tracking of learners' achievement does not fully utilise interim milestone targets to aid checking of progress towards attaining the targeted year-end achievement rate. Managers do not use sufficiently detailed data to identify emerging achievement gaps between different groups of apprentices. Use of data to monitor regional performance remains an area for further development.

What progress has the provider made in introducing arrangements to safeguard all apprentices that include protection from the risks of radicalisation and extremism?

Significant progress

Since the last monitoring visit, senior leaders and managers have given safeguarding and the Prevent duty a very high priority. This has contributed to the development of an organisational culture within which those apprentices interviewed during the monitoring visit stated that they felt safe and protected. Managers have ensured that company staff, including apprentices, have received detailed and relevant training to raise their awareness of safeguarding and the dangers of extremism and radicalisation. This has resulted in an increase in the number and variety of concerns identified by staff or raised by apprentices. Managers keep and review a detailed central record of causes for concern, where agreed actions are subject to regular and frequent review to ensure quick resolution. Support arrangements include both the use of in-house specialist and external organisations to provide individuals with help.

During their workplace visits, assessors follow a structured programme to test and routinely reinforce apprentices' understanding of safeguarding and the threat posed by extremism and radicalisation. They place an appropriate emphasis on promoting apprentices' wider well-being both while at work and in their personal lives. Each retail store has an allocated safeguarding 'ambassador', who acts as a point of reference to ensure all concerns raised are assessed and referred for further action. In discussion with inspectors during the monitoring visit, apprentices were able to demonstrate an effective understanding of personal safety, both in the workplace and in their home life. They have a good understanding of whom to contact, and how, for further confidential help and advice.

Senior leaders have established a safeguarding committee attended by appropriate senior managers and heads of relevant functional roles, which contributes well to improvements in the effectiveness of safeguarding and Prevent duty measures for all apprentices. For example, since the last visit, managers have reviewed and revised the guidance on the safe use of electronic communications. Managers recognise a need to strengthen how it addresses different aspects of extremism and radicalisation. Area managers and the health and safety team have helped in assessing the impact of safeguarding training in stores. Owing to their involvement, managers have identified additional, targeted safeguarding training for all staff. In discussion with inspectors, apprentices showed an appropriate appreciation of the safe use of the internet and other electronic communications. Managers have yet to complete an overall evaluation of the impact of safeguarding and Prevent duty training on apprentices' understanding and professional practice.

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Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

