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Ms E Clowes
Chief Executive
Children's Links
Holland House
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Dear Ms Clowes

Short inspection of Children's Links

Following the short inspection on 5 and 6 May 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The inspection was the first short inspection carried out since the provider was judged to be good in July 2012.

This provider continues to be good.

- The senior management team continues to provide a safe learning environment that supports apprentices' achievement very effectively. The training outcomes for the majority of apprentices are good, with high success rates on most advanced apprenticeship courses. A high proportion of apprentices progress on to further and higher levels of training as well as taking on more responsibilities in their workplace.
- Productive partnership working has ensured that you have responded effectively to regional and national initiatives and introduced new programmes to meet the needs of young people with significant barriers to their learning. For example, the introduction of traineeships has been successful and a small number of trainees progress on to apprenticeship training.
- Managers have maintained a clear focus on monitoring all aspects of training and driving improvement, including the extra demands of an increased proportion of subcontracted provision. Quality improvement arrangements have sustained high-quality teaching and learning which meets the needs of learners and employers.
- Staff at all levels have a sound understanding of your organisation, and the needs of learners and employers. This allows you to identify and plan appropriate actions to address areas for improvement.
- Governance arrangements are effective.

Safeguarding is effective.

- Leaders and managers have maintained the effective safeguarding arrangements identified at the previous inspection. They have created a supportive culture within which all staff fully understand their responsibilities.
- An appropriate range of relevant policies and procedures effectively promotes the protection and safety of learners. All staff have completed relevant update training. All staff, workplaces and training places are subject to thorough vetting, which contributes to learners feeling safe.
- Managers and staff maintain good links with the local safeguarding children's board and a wide range of national, regional and local agencies to better understand the needs of vulnerable learners. You work closely with support workers to provide very effective support for young people who are leaving the care of a local authority to ensure that they make a safe transition to independent living.
- Apprentices and trainees demonstrate a good understanding of how safeguarding applies to them at work and in the training centre. They are confident that staff will listen to them, take their concerns seriously and deal with them quickly.
- Leaders and managers ensure that training staff and apprentices have a growing awareness of the risks posed by radicalisation. The large majority of learners have an adequate understanding of British values and how these are relevant to their working lives. For example, childcare apprentices are able to discuss its relevance to their work in day-care nurseries.
- The impact of recent 'Prevent' duty training on the practice of training staff has not yet been evaluated and a small minority of learners are unclear about their responsibilities.

Inspection findings

- You have managed an increasing number of subcontractors to deliver training well. Performance management arrangements of staff and subcontractors are effective and well established. Managers make good use of relevant key indicators, both to manage performance and to plan improvements.
- Senior leaders and managers have maintained the good quality of teaching, learning and assessment since the previous inspection. The regular direct observation of teaching, learning and assessment, including subcontracted provision, correctly identifies key areas for improvement. However, records of completed observations do not sufficiently focus on the learning taking place and the progress made by learners in sessions.
- Managers have introduced a range of improved support arrangements to support apprentices' and trainees' development of English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) skills. Learners now use a combination of group off-the-job training sessions, individual coaching sessions and online learning resources. This approach has resulted in improved functional skills achievement rates. However, systems to monitor the use and effectiveness of these strategies to support all groups of learners are insufficient.

- Managers use a range of data to monitor outcomes for learners and contract performance. However, few improvement actions have specific, measurable success indicators to identify which are most effective in driving up outcomes for learners.
- Training officers are very skilled in engaging employers with training programmes. Employers are closely involved in apprenticeship progress reviews, understand the progress of apprentices very well and provide effective supervision, coaching and formal training in the work place. For example, apprentices working in schools attend a range of useful additional training that helps them to measure children's development.
- Apprentices and trainees feel safe and enjoy their learning.
- Individual learning objective setting in progress reviews is consistently good and ensures that the majority of apprentices make good progress.
- The quality of apprentices' completed work and portfolios is of a good standard and apprentices develop a wide range of useful work-related skills. For example, railway apprentices quickly improve their teamworking skills and manual dexterity to become increasingly effective employees. Trainees significantly improve their self-esteem and become more confident with their communication skills.
- Apprentices are developing their English and mathematics skills appropriately from their starting points. The success rates for English and mathematics qualifications have improved and apprentices use their new skills successfully in the workplace. For example, childcare apprentices use their confidence in writing to complete appropriate records in children's centres.
- Managers and training officers ensure the effective inclusion of English and ICT skills in apprenticeship programmes. However, the embedding and promotion of mathematics is insufficient. Exemplar calculations and workbook tasks are insufficiently linked to all learners' work experiences. A minority of apprentices do not fully understand the relevance of mathematics to their job role and their future employability.
- You have maintained your previously successful strategies to improve all learners' understanding of equality and diversity. These have given apprentices a good appreciation of relevant topics and how they can use this learning in their workplaces.
- Since the previous inspection managers have maintained the good success rates for the large majority of advanced apprentices. However, success rates on intermediate apprenticeships require improvement.
- The large majority of apprentices gain sustained employment. Many gain promotion and take on additional responsibilities in their workplace.
- The large majority of apprentices are enthusiastic and keen to progress in order to support their career aspirations. The proportion of apprentices who go on to higher levels of training, further or higher education, such as nursing degrees, is high.
- Training officers provide apprentices with adequate careers progression and further education advice and guidance linked to their current job roles. However, those apprentices aged 24 years and over receive insufficient impartial careers advice and guidance to plan the next steps in their personal development.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teaching, learning and assessment improve further by the accurate identification and sharing of good practice through robust observations of teaching, learning and assessment
- teaching staff include the delivery and promotion of mathematics skills development into all training sessions and progress reviews
- managers identify specific, measurable targets in action plans and analyse data more effectively to monitor the impact of improvement strategies, including the use of online resources and e-learning
- all learners receive timely, impartial careers advice and guidance
- senior managers investigate the reasons for the lower success rates on intermediate-level apprenticeship programmes and provide all learners with high-quality support that helps them to succeed
- tutors and assessors draw upon relevant and carefully selected resources to support discussions about the dangers of radicalisation and extremism so that all learners develop their understanding of these dangers and their ability to protect themselves and their colleagues improves.

I am copying this letter to the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Gerard McGrath

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the short inspection the training coordinator, as nominee, assisted us. Inspectors met with senior leaders, managers, staff, employers, apprentices and trainees, using both 'face-to-face' and telephone interviews. Key documents, including those related to self-assessment, performance and safeguarding, were reviewed. Inspectors visited a training centre and workplaces to discuss with learners their experience of the training they receive, assess their progress and scrutinise the quality of their completed work. In addition, we observed teaching, learning and assessment sessions.