

NC Training Ltd

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

This visit was undertaken as part of a series of monitoring visits to a sample of new apprenticeship training providers that are funded through the apprenticeship levy. Ofsted's intention to carry out monitoring visits to these new providers was first announced by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector in November 2017. The focus of these visits is on the three themes set out below.

NC Training Ltd (NCT) was established in February 2016 by the current managing director, who is the sole director. The company delivers training for apprenticeships, traineeships, professional qualifications and employability skills through eight separate subcontracting partnerships with prime providers. NCT became a direct levy-funded provider in July 2017, and it delivers currently levy-funded apprenticeship training to six employers.

At the time of the monitoring visit, NCT employed 44 staff, 16 of whom managed or worked directly on the levy-funded provision. There are currently 73 levy-funded apprentices enrolled on programmes in health and social care, business and administration, business management, and information and communication technology, 28 of whom are on frameworks. NCT offers apprenticeships currently at levels 2, 3, 4 and 5.

NCT does not subcontract any of its levy-funded provision.

Themes

How much progress have leaders made in ensuring that the provider is meeting all the requirements of successful apprenticeship provision?

Insufficient progress

Senior leaders do not have a sufficiently developed and ambitious strategic overview and vision for the levy-funded apprenticeship provision. Their expectations of staff, apprentices and employers are too low. The business strategy does not identify clearly the strategic direction and planned growth of the levy-funded provision. There is no rationale for the projected increase in numbers from 200 in 2018/19 to 300 in 2019/20 and 500 in 2020/21. Leaders do not take sufficient account of local and regional skills shortages in their planning.

Leaders and managers are not complying with the levy-funded apprenticeship requirements. Apprentices are not recruited routinely to apprenticeship programmes that help them to develop new knowledge, skills and behaviours, or support their career advancement. Too many apprentices reported to inspectors that they had

been in their job roles for a number of years and that they were not learning anything new.

Leaders recognise accurately that the recording of the off-the-job training, the arrangements for end-point assessments and the achievement of functional skills qualifications need improving. However, they have not implemented effective actions to ensure that these weaknesses are rectified swiftly.

Quality-improvement arrangements are poor and lack rigour. Leaders and managers have not implemented effective quality-monitoring processes to check that apprentices receive consistently high standards of training and that they are making sufficient progress. While leaders have identified correctly some of the weaknesses in the provision, the self-assessment process does not help them to bring about improvements quickly enough. Quality-improvement action plans do not contain any specific targets or milestones. As a result, improvements cannot be evaluated accurately and many of the deadlines pass without actions being completed.

The observation of teaching, learning and assessment is weak and does not identify sufficiently how trainers can improve their practices. Records show that observers focus too much on what the trainer does and not on the impact that training and/or assessment activities have on apprentices' learning and progress. Subsequent action plans for staff are incomplete and do not reflect accurately and routinely the improvements identified in the observation.

Performance-management processes lack rigour. While a few staff have left the company recently due to leaders' actions, processes do not bring about effective improvements in the performance of all staff swiftly enough. Appraisal and performance-monitoring documents are not completed in sufficient detail to help staff understand what they do successfully and how they can improve their performance.

Leaders and managers' auditing of apprentices' files lacks rigour. They have introduced an audit process to validate the quality of apprentices' learning files. However, where a file is identified as falling below expectations, they do not ensure that the member of staff responsible is held adequately to account. Consequently, omissions remain at the next audit activity. As a result, managers have not identified that most apprentices are making slower than expected progress or that trainers do not complete documentation at all, or to a good enough standard. For example, individual learning plans and off-the-job training logs are not completed or lack detail. Where missing paperwork was identified several months ago, managers have not ensured that it has been replaced and completed. In some cases, the dates that activities took place are inaccurate. For example, documentation states that apprentices were assessed for their English and mathematical knowledge and skills in November 2018. Records show that, following these assessments, apprentices did not receive any training on functional skills until four months later.

In April 2018, leaders undertook a staffing restructure, including investment in new staff, to address the quality issues that they had identified and to build capacity in

the senior-management team. While leaders are enthusiastic about the new structure and its potential for the company, they overestimate the current level of impact that this change is having on rectifying weaknesses in the provision.

Leaders are reducing the number of prime providers with whom they work to focus on ensuring that the quality of NCT's overall provision improves. Due to contractual arrangements, these contracts cannot be terminated until the end of the current academic year, and therefore any improvements will be severely delayed.

Staff are appropriately qualified in the vocational specialisms that they teach and at an appropriate level. All staff are qualified to teach in the further education and skills sector or are working towards a suitable teaching qualification.

Governance is ineffective. In January 2018, leaders recruited suitably skilled governors from local organisations. However, governors have only held two meetings since then: one in January and one in August. As a result, governors do not have an effective oversight of the quality of training, learning and assessment in the company or the progress that apprentices make. They are highly supportive of leaders and their work across all the provision. However, much of the governors' engagement is operational and does not challenge leaders effectively or strategically enough to help them improve the quality of the provision.

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that apprentices benefit from high-quality training that leads to positive outcomes for apprentices? Insufficient progress

Most apprentices make slow progress, particularly the most able. In some cases, this is due to staffing issues, to trainers not keeping their records up to date or because apprentices take breaks in learning.

While trainers complete a basic assessment of apprentices' initial starting points, they do not take these into account when planning individualised training programmes and delivering training.

Trainers do not provide apprentices routinely with good initial and ongoing information, advice and guidance. Too many apprentices are unaware of the content of their apprenticeship programme, including the requirements of the end-point assessment. In many cases, they are enrolled on inappropriate programmes. For example, apprentices have been in their existing role for several years or are completing a second apprenticeship at a lower level than the first. Consequently, they are not acquiring new knowledge, skills and behaviours and, as a result, the provider is not complying with apprenticeship requirements. Most apprentices do not receive their full entitlement to off-the-job training during working hours. In a few instances, they are unaware of what this element of their apprenticeship is or what is required.

While many apprentices log off-the-job training, most only record the number of hours they complete and not which new knowledge, skills and behaviours they gain as a result of it. Trainers do not check the validity of or assess any of the off-the-job training that apprentices complete. Often, apprentices record on-the-job training practical activities as off-the-job training. Many apprentices reported to inspectors that their off-the-job training amounts to self-study, including for English and mathematics qualifications, and that they do not receive sufficient support for off-the-job training from their trainer.

Employers are not routinely involved in planning apprentices' programmes and reviewing their progress. Progress reviews are cursory and too often do not include employers. There is too much focus on end-of-unit completion and not on what individual apprentices can achieve. Trainers often do not provide helpful feedback so that apprentices can improve their work and achieve a higher standard. Feedback is frequently limited to a few words such as 'well done'. A small number of apprentices reported to inspectors that their work was not checked by assessors regularly.

Trainers do not assess and record which new knowledge, skills and behaviours apprentices gain. They set targets that are not sufficiently challenging, and they do not address slow progress quickly enough. Trainers do not identify apprentices who are capable of achieving a merit or distinction grade at their end-point assessment. Trainers follow the same delivery and assessment approach for apprentices who are on framework apprenticeships as for those who are on new standards. As a result, apprentices' training, learning and assessment are not linked or mapped to the distinct requirements of the apprenticeship programme that they are following.

A small minority of apprentices record efficiently and evaluate effectively their off-the-job training and link it to the knowledge, skills and behaviours that they need for the workplace. For example, level 5 management apprentices are able to reflect on their own practice and consider how they can manage people more effectively.

The training that apprentices receive at a local care home employer is good. The employer plans a programme of study, including work shadowing, so that apprentices gain new knowledge, skills and behaviours. However, around a third of apprentices at the employer are currently taking a break in learning which is affecting their progress adversely.

How much progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that effective safeguarding arrangements are in place? Insufficient progress

Safeguarding is not sufficiently effective.

While safeguarding arrangements are in place, they lack rigour. For example, leaders and managers do not record consistently or formally actions taken to follow up referrals or disclosures. The small number of referrals and disclosures to date relate

to learners and apprentices in NCT's subcontractor partnerships with their prime providers. However, the same process is used for their own levy-funded apprentices.

The very newly appointed designated safeguarding officer has recognised quickly the need to implement more robust safeguarding arrangements, including improvements to the recording of referrals and disclosures. However, the new arrangements were in the planning stage during the monitoring visit and could not be evaluated.

Training for the new designated safeguarding officer was arranged after the provider had been notified of the monitoring visit and neither prior to nor immediately on her appointment.

Leaders follow most of the safer recruitment practices in respect of carrying out appropriate checks on staff. However, during the monitoring visit, a number of concerns were highlighted. These included, for example, the need to record more formally staff's 'right to work in the United Kingdom', training for the managing director as the deputy designated safeguarding officer on both safeguarding and safer recruitment practices, and the quality of safeguarding records. The single central record was updated quickly and appropriately during the monitoring visit to record formally staff's right to work in the United Kingdom.

Apprentices do not receive sufficient information so that they know how to keep themselves safe, including from radicalisation and extremism, and online. Leaders and managers do not understand fully the risks in the local area. Apprentices' progress-review records include cursory references to safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty. However, they do not demonstrate sufficiently apprentices' understanding of the risks that they may encounter or whether they have a concern about their own safety.

Staff have completed recently a qualification at level 2 in safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty. Leaders provide further updates during staff meetings and in newsletters. However, these staff-development activities are insufficiently reinforced to ensure that all staff promote safeguarding consistently to apprentices so that all apprentices understand fully how to keep themselves safe.

The business-development team carries out routinely appropriate risk assessments on apprentices' employers. At the time of the monitoring visit, no concerns had been identified about the safety of apprentices at work.

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