

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: Zodiac Training  
Date of visit: 13 August 2007

### Context

This monitoring visit follows the inspection in June 2006, at which Zodiac Training (Zodiac) was graded good for leadership and management, and satisfactory for its arrangements for quality improvement and equality of opportunity. Provision was judged to be satisfactory in both retail and commercial enterprise, and business administration and law. At the previous inspection, Zodiac held contracts with Tyne and Wear, Durham, Northumberland, Tees Valley and West Yorkshire Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) to provide apprenticeships and Train to Gain programmes. These contracts are still operating, and the company is now a prime contractor for the Department of Work and Pensions, delivering full-time education and training for adult learners. Zodiac also now holds an adult and community learning contract providing national vocational qualification (NVQ) training to employed learners in the workplace.

### Achievement and standards

What progress has been made to improving success rates?	Reasonable progress
---	---------------------

Zodiac has made reasonable progress to improve success rates. The company has introduced measures to increase the focus on timely achievement by training advisers, including a performance bonus scheme, enhanced support for advisers where targets are not met, and better access to data showing progress. Learners now receive better initial assessment, and new training materials and workbooks have been introduced. Monthly meetings are held to assess the progress of individual learners. These measures have particularly targeted timely success, enabling learners to make rapid progress towards their qualifications. Learners are visited frequently in the workplace and are set clear targets for work to be completed before the next visit. In 2006-07 success rates improved in all sector subject areas except retail and wholesaling where they remained the same, and education and training, where only two learners completed. Overall success rates for apprenticeships rose from 37% in 2005-06 to 52% in 2006-07. However, this is still below the national average of 58%. Timely completion rose from 27% to 47%, well above the national average of 39%. The company recognises that further improvements are possible and has recently restructured the management of its programmes to help to achieve this.

## Quality of Provision

How effective are improvements in the teaching and programme co-ordination of hairdressing and customer service?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

Zodiac has made reasonable progress in improving the teaching and programme co-ordination in hairdressing and customer service. In customer service, staff training to improve teaching and learning has a high priority. A thorough process for observing teaching and learning is linked directly to staff development. The recent restructuring has increased team-work and ownership by staff of programme targets. The new approach to apprenticeship planning now integrates delivery of the different components rather than delivering them separately. Learners have a good understanding of their own programme and their progress within it. Hairdressing provision is delivered by a subcontractor (Head Teacher). More staff have been employed to better meet learner needs. The manager of the subcontractor regularly observes teaching and learning and gives individual support to staff. Monthly meetings are used to improve the co-ordination between theory and practical sessions. A tutor conducts a monthly check of portfolios and individual learning plans to ensure timely progress. Zodiac staff visit monthly to monitor success rates. These show a steady increase from a very low base to 38% in the current year. Employers in both sector subject areas are insufficiently involved in planning of learning and do not always attend the reviews. The company recognises this area for improvement in its development plan.

Has standardisation of assessment procedures improved?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

At the previous inspection some assessment practice and planning of assessment activities were judged to be weak. Zodiac has made reasonable progress towards improving the standardisation of assessment procedures. The company has restructured to create a team of internal verifiers who work independently of programme managers. This aims to improve impartiality and the match of verification processes to the sector subject areas. Standardisation meetings take place monthly. The planning of assessment is now thorough: assessment plans are now satisfactory but learning plans place insufficient emphasis on the learning activities which prepare learners for assessment. Managers carry out quality monitoring visits, which are used well to observe and grade activities at each stage of the learner journey. The results are used to plan individual staff training and development. A specific session on target-setting has been given as a result of this process. The new arrangements are still being introduced and it is too early to judge their overall effectiveness. However, staff are very aware of the impact of assessment planning on their own targets for retention and success rates, and are enthusiastic about the improvements made.

## Leadership and management

How effectively are the self-assessment process and subsequent development plan addressing weaknesses and improving the quality of provision?	Reasonable progress
---	---------------------

At the previous inspection it was judged that the self-assessment report was insufficiently critical. Since then Zodiac has made reasonable improvements in the self-assessment process. Following the inspection, funding was obtained from the LSC to enable consultancy support in this area. All staff were trained in self-assessment, and staff teams were subsequently given critical feedback on their draft self-assessment reports. The internal verification team has been re-organised to take the lead role in developing self-assessments with the training adviser teams. A schedule has been drawn up, whereby course teams will report in October and the self-assessment report will be produced in December. Staff are very enthusiastic about the new process, and report that it has already raised a number of areas for improvement. For example, actions have been taken leading to improved resources, greater use of online materials, and increased sharing of good practice. A trend for certain employers to have higher early withdrawal rates has been identified and acted upon. Arrangements for moderation of the process by verifiers and programme managers are good. Feedback from learners and employers is sought through questionnaires; however, information gained is insufficiently detailed to give clear direction for quality improvement. Zodiac is aware of this and is carrying out pilot activity to improve the quality of this feedback.

What improvements have been made in quality monitoring and what actions taken as a result?	Significant progress
--	----------------------

At the previous inspection quality procedures were judged to be good, but were not fully implemented in all areas. Zodiac now has a comprehensive set of monitoring processes covering all aspects of the learners' journey. Each training adviser is observed annually at each stage, such as induction, training delivery, and review. Improvements to the accessibility of management information system reports have enabled staff to make better use of them for ongoing monitoring of their programmes. Learner feedback is collected regularly through telephone or postal questionnaires. The results of monitoring activity are collated and analysed by a senior manager in an annual key evaluation document which indicates the key themes and areas for development emerging from quality monitoring work. For example, it has been recognised that individual learning plans contain more information about assessment than learning processes. Training for training advisers has been scheduled for September to address this.

What arrangements are in place to ensure adequate induction, training, and updating for staff?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

Staff have good access to development opportunities. All are appraised annually, and their targets are reviewed after six months. Staff development needs are identified at these meetings and individuals can then apply to the company for support. Two managers are currently undertaking higher education qualifications, and most staff have, or are currently working towards, learning and development qualifications at levels 3 or 4. Where common themes emerge from appraisals, or from quality monitoring work, in-house staff development is arranged. For example, a recent development session covered the law relating to the employment of young people. New starters have a well planned induction and are provided with one-to-one support. At the end of their first month an individual development plan is drawn up to ensure that any outstanding training needs are covered.

What action has been taken to improve the promotion of equality of opportunity, and staff awareness of these issues?	Insufficient progress
--	-----------------------

Zodiac has taken insufficient action to improve the ongoing promotion and reinforcement of equality of opportunity and staff awareness of equality of opportunity issues. Following the inspection, the company employed a consultant to advise on planning of staff training on an ongoing basis. The quality improvement plan has actions related to equality and diversity, particularly regarding Zodiac's strengths in widening participation to under-represented groups. However, the quality improvement plan does not include an over-arching plan for whole organisation development, and the specific weakness about promotion and reinforcement of equality which was identified by inspection is not addressed. Training for staff has only recently started, almost a year after the inspection. Some information has been provided to staff via emails and newsletters from the human resources department, and equality of opportunity has been included in the agendas for staff meetings. However, there has been slow progress to improve the reinforcement of learners' knowledge in this area. Learners have insufficient recall of any input on equality and diversity. A new handbook and some specific materials on equality of opportunity have been produced but these are yet to have any impact.