

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: Strategic Training Solutions
Date of visit: 12 August 2008

Context

Strategic Training Solutions (Mansfield) Ltd (STS) is a private training provider. The head office and hairdressing training salon are in Mansfield town centre. It has two other sites in the Mansfield area for administrative staff, peripatetic assessors and horticulture training. STS offers training in horticulture, hairdressing, retail, warehousing and distribution, administration, customer service, management, information and communications technology, employability training and learning and development.

STS was founded in 1998 and became a limited company in 2002. It employs 30 staff. STS offers advanced apprenticeships and apprenticeships; Train to Gain, Entry to Employment (E2E) and Steps 2 Work programmes. STS provides training for approximately 100 pupils in Years 9 and 10 from local schools.

The last inspection of STS was in September 2006. Overall effectiveness, leadership and management, equality of opportunity, horticulture, hairdressing, employability training and administration were all satisfactory. Quality improvement was inadequate. The inspection team had some confidence in the reliability of the self-assessment process and judged STS to have sufficient capacity to improve.

Achievement and standards

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

Since the last inspection administration and customer service success rates have improved significantly. They are now good and are significantly above national averages. Current learners are making good progress towards completing their qualifications. They are well-motivated and complete assignments rapidly using the easily accessible and well-established e-NVQ portfolio development programme.

Horticulture learners continue to develop good self-confidence and practical skills, as identified at the last inspection. In 2007/08, school pupils on STS horticultural programmes had a 100% achievement rate and many progressed onto STS's apprenticeship programmes. Hairdressing and horticulture success rates have improved since the last inspection, but are still too low and remain below national averages. Recently STS has introduced changes aimed at supporting further improvement including revised recruitment processes, better initial assessment,

improved additional support arrangements, the introduction of key skills at the start of programmes and improved analysis of data about learners' progress.

E2E learners gain useful employability skills through a broad range of placements. Progression rates into education or training are broadly similar to the previous inspection at just over 50%. Progression into employment is too low. Achievement of qualifications in literacy and numeracy is low.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in providing structured support for learners' additional literacy and numeracy needs?	Reasonable progress
---	---------------------

Since the previous inspection, STS has revised its enrolment procedures and changed the format of the individual learning plan. The checking and recording of learners' prior achievements, experience and learning have improved. The initial and diagnostic assessments are now better. Staff are now able to identify learners' needs better and additional support is now targeted appropriately. Literacy and numeracy support is fully integrated with subject support. A few learners are referred to specialist external partners, for example for dyslexia and learners receive support both on- and off-the-job.

STS has made good use of external help to produce a Skills for Life (SfL) strategy. However, it focuses on strategic management, and does not focus sufficiently on the support that is provided to the learners. The self-assessment report makes insufficient reference to the implementation of the SfL strategy. However, the new SfL working group has representatives from across the organisation and quarterly meetings are used well by staff to share good practice and bring about improvements. The role of the SfL champions mentioned in the December 2007 self-assessment report is not yet fully developed.

What progress has been made in using external employment placements, especially on employment training and horticulture programmes?	Reasonable progress
---	---------------------

Since the last inspection, STS has broadened the variety and range of employers who provide work placements for E2E learners. Learners are now placed with the employers only after careful matching of learners' and employers' expectations and skills. Learners and employers are now much clearer about the purpose of the work placements and the outcomes expected. Learners are now developing good employability skills such as attendance, punctuality and customer service.

Horticulture learners continue to benefit from a variety of work on numerous STS projects in the community. These provide many different learning experiences. Since the last inspection, STS has acquired 14 allotments for use by learners. Here they produce organic vegetables and the thriving allotment group, involving the local

community are planning an on-site retail outlet for selling produce. STS are focusing on developing more work experience opportunities for their learners.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in using management information systems to plan improvements?	Significant progress
---	----------------------

Since the last inspection a new quality and data manager has been appointed to lead improvements with the collection, analysis, and use of data. Much improvement has taken place. Staff have a greater awareness of the use of data and management information. Staff have received training in the use of the management information system. Their knowledge of the variety of data reports available and how these can be used to monitor learners' success and evaluate actions for improvement has improved. Data is now regularly monitored and discussed at monthly staff meetings. Analysis and evaluation of data is now used well for quality improvement. For example, STS has recently changed its recruitment and marketing practices and the way initial assessment information is collected and recorded. STS has now addressed the areas for improvement in its latest self-assessment report related to the use of data for improvement and further actions are planned.

STS now uses available demographic data well to predict changes in learner recruitment and plan changes to its programmes. This research has emphasised the need for the revision of recruitment practices and improvements in monitoring learners' progress.

What progress has been made in the use of quality assurance arrangements for quality improvement?	Reasonable progress
---	---------------------

Since the last inspection, many improvements have taken place following the introduction of better quality assurance arrangements. These include procedures for checking the completion of documents at recruitment, initial assessment and progress reviews. Improvements have been made to the layout of the forms to give more space for recording, and useful prompts for staff to aid better completion and to encourage a higher level of detail. This has been particularly useful in helping staff to identify the levels of additional learning support required for individual learners. Following discussion with staff further improvements were implemented for use at recruitment in 2008/09. However, some documents do not include a version number or date to ensure that the correct version is being used. Observations of training are carried out by both STS's own staff and by external partners, such as staff's teacher-training tutors. Despite this, some trainers have not been observed in the last year. STS is currently reviewing its arrangements for carrying out observations of teaching and learning. STS identified in its most recent self-assessment report that too few staff have appropriate qualifications. This area for improvement remained from the inspection in 2006. Many staff have now been enrolled on courses due to start in September 2008.

What progress has been made in improving the self-assessment process and report?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

The quality improvement plan implemented after the last inspection is very detailed. Actions are well planned and improvements made are recorded clearly. STS has a systematic approach to updating the plan that is well understood by all staff. Staff make adjustments and add further action points immediately concerns are identified. The December 2007 self-assessment report is self-critical and evaluative.

The development plan and self-assessment report do not include the quality of teaching and learning. Arrangements for collecting and using feedback from learners, identified as an area for improvement, are being further developed. Staff contribute well to the self-assessment process and report through discussions at team meetings. However, since the last inspection there has been significant staff turnover and the impact on the learners has not been sufficiently evaluated.