

Working Links

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made on www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of the inspection, inspectors take account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body. Where appropriate, inspectors also consider the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk), reports from the inspectorates' monitoring visits, and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.

In addition to reporting on overall effectiveness of the organisation, its capacity to improve further, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management, this inspection focused on specialist provision in:

- Preparation for life and work

Working Links also provides employability programmes funded through the Department for Work and Pensions. This represents most of its government funded provision and was not part of the scope for this inspection.

Description of the provider

1. Working Links is a national public-private partnership that specialises in the delivery of Welfare to Work employability programmes. It contracts with the North East LSC to provide Employability Skills programmes throughout the north-east.
2. A head of skills, accreditation manager and operational manager are responsible for the provision. They are supported by tutors, administrators and six centre managers in Middlesbrough, Bedlington, Darlington, Newcastle, Tyneside and Sunderland. A team of staff, the employer solutions team, provides employment support. A third of the provision is subcontracted to six providers: Acumen; Bishop Auckland College; Derwentside Training; Hartlepool College of Further Education; New College Durham and Stockton Borough Council.
3. Working Links offers qualifications at entry level to level 1 and 2 in literacy, numeracy, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) employability award. It also provides jobsearch, additional qualifications and sessions in healthy living and personal hygiene. At the time of inspection 230 learners were on programmes of between 12 and 15 weeks' duration.
4. Unemployment in Middlesbrough, Darlington, Newcastle, Tyne and Wear and Sunderland is above the national average of 5%. The number of people in Middlesbrough without qualifications is 18%, higher than the national average of 13.8%. Sunderland, Tyne and Wear and Middlesbrough have above national average numbers of people claiming benefits. In the north-east, 97% of the population is White British.
5. The Employability Skills programme represents 2% of the provider's total government funded provision.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Capacity to improve	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Achievement and standards	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Quality of provision	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Leadership and management	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

Sector subject area

Preparation for life and work	Satisfactory: Grade 3
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Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Satisfactory: Grade 3

6. The overall effectiveness of the provision is satisfactory. Achievement and standards are satisfactory. Learners develop good personal and employability skills and the standard of portfolio work is good. Qualification success rates are satisfactory. Job entry rates are low but improving. The quality of provision is satisfactory. The range of programmes, additional qualifications and learning activities satisfactorily meet the needs of learners. Learners' access to work-placements is poor but improving. Learners are given particularly good support to remove barriers to learning. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Working Links has taken prompt action to integrate the Employment Skills programme into wider employment provision. Staff are well qualified and understand the strategic aims of the organisation. Quality improvement arrangements are improving but not yet complete. Equality and diversity and social inclusion are satisfactory. Equality and diversity is covered well in staff and learner inductions and training but policies are insufficiently promoted and reinforced.

Capacity to improve

Satisfactory: Grade 3

7. Working Links has demonstrated satisfactory capacity to improve. Senior staff manage change well and in a short space of time have implemented a number of key improvements to the programme. Tutors and centre managers are committed and enthusiastic about making changes and improvements. Early signs are that this is starting to have a positive impact on learners' experiences. Subcontractors are well managed. However, some quality systems are new and yet to provide sufficient impact on the quality of provision. Working Links makes insufficient use of learner data to support quality improvement. It does not evaluate the impact of its policies and procedures.
8. The self-assessment process is relatively new. The self-assessment report provided for inspection is the provider's first report. It includes the views of learners and staff but not those of employers and other stakeholders. It is reasonably evaluative. The grades awarded by inspectors matched those of Working Links for all aspects of the common inspection framework. It identified the same strengths identified by inspectors, but failed to identify some key areas for improvement.

Key strengths

- Good development of personal and employability skills
- Particularly good support for learners
- Good staff understanding of strategic aims and values
- Good management of change
- Good staff development and training
- Good use of learning champions to engage hard to reach learners

Key areas for improvement

- Low job entry rates
- Weak target-setting for learners
- Insufficient work-placement opportunities for learners
- Incomplete quality improvement arrangements
- Insufficient use of data as a quality improvement tool
- Incomplete action planning to implement equality and diversity policies

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Satisfactory: Grade 3

9. Achievements and standards are satisfactory, as recognised in the self-assessment report. Learners develop good personal and employability skills. This was also recognised in the self-assessment report. They gain sufficient confidence to enable them to clarify their employment goals. For example, one learner, a plumber, is now considering work in youth offending after gaining a level 2 numeracy qualification. Learners develop good reflective skills, jobsearch skills and improve their curriculum vitae. Their team working skills improve so that they are able to work more effectively and cooperatively with peers. They gain confidence in job interviews and feel positive about their progress. Learners successfully adapt their behaviour and dress code to suit the work environment. Portfolios of learners' work are of a good standard.
10. Qualification success rates are satisfactory. They have risen from 42% in 2007/08 to 59% in 2008/09. Many learners progress to higher level qualifications in literacy and numeracy.
11. Job entry rates are low. Working Links has identified the need to increase the rate at which learners enter employment. Early evidence of data for 2008/09 shows the numbers of learners gaining jobs is improving. Many learners progress to further training and volunteer work. The numbers of learners on work-placements is also low but improving.

Quality of provision

Satisfactory: Grade 3

12. The quality of provision is satisfactory, as recognised in the self-assessment report. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Most classes are well planned and achieve their learning aims. In the better sessions, tutors make effective use of a variety of learning activities. Good use is made of small group and pair work to encourage independent learning. Tutors use ICT particularly well in inductions and many classes. Relevant wall displays reinforce learning and employment skills. Literacy and numeracy are incorporated well in classes such as those on healthy living. In employability classes, tutors are effective in encouraging learners to develop their numeracy skills. In the weaker sessions the pace of learning is too slow, there are too few activities to meet the needs of the number and range of learners present, and tutors do not have access to ICT. Resources are satisfactory. However, a few rooms are cramped and noisy and learning materials do not sufficiently reflect diversity among the population. There is insufficient planning for different levels of ability in ESOL classes.
13. Assessment arrangements are satisfactory. Initial assessment and diagnostic assessment are carried out at the beginning of the course. Tutors make satisfactory use of further assessments to prepare learners for accreditation.

Internal verifiers give detailed feedback to assessors. They make good use of sampling documents to follow up assessors' actions for improvement.

14. Target-setting for individual learners is weak. This was recognised in the self-assessment report. Some targets are too complex and not sufficiently clear or specific. Many learners have their qualification aim as the target. This is not broken down into smaller achievable steps to help them progress. Many learners are not aware of their targets or the progress they make. Learners' progress reviews do not make reference to aims on their individual learning plans. Initial assessment and diagnostic assessment is not used effectively to help prepare learners individual learning plans.
15. The extent to which programmes meet the needs and interests of learners is satisfactory. It enables learners to achieve skills and qualifications that enhance their career prospects. The programme is responsive to learners' personal circumstances. It includes interesting topics to encourage learners to adopt safe practices and a healthy lifestyle. Learner champions from different backgrounds are successfully employed as positive role models to engage new learners from marginalised communities. Some learners attend additional courses on topics such as food hygiene, health and safety, first aid and personal finance. However, these are not available at all centres. Many learners do not have sufficient access to work-placements and employment.
16. Guidance and support for learners are particularly good. This helps to overcome barriers to their learning. Learners appreciate the help they receive and the positive impact it has on their confidence, self-esteem and work readiness. Centres provide a welcoming environment for all learners. New learners receive a thorough induction over three days. It includes health and safety, equality and diversity, an overview of the programme and rights and responsibilities on work-placements. Interesting practical activities are used to illustrate health and safety hazards. Tutors give clear feedback to learners after their initial and diagnostic assessments. Centres' links with specialist agencies are effective. Learners are referred to external agencies for practical assistance with problems such as drugs, domestic violence, housing and financial difficulties. Centres make good use of adaptive technology to support learners with disabilities.
17. Arrangements for information, advice and guidance are satisfactory. All staff help learners with queries and tutors give learners effective information and advice during their course. Specialist staff work with learners and help them research jobs and work-placements. For more detailed careers advice, learners are referred to nextstep services.

Leadership and management

Satisfactory: Grade 3

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

18. Leadership and management are satisfactory, as identified in the self-assessment report. Staff have a good understanding of the company's aim to work with disadvantaged and marginalised groups to combat poverty, unemployment and social exclusion. Managers consult staff regularly about future company direction. The company makes particularly good use of meetings, email and the intranet to keep staff informed. A recently appointed skills leader provides strong leadership and clear strategic direction and recognises the need to clarify newly developed team roles and responsibilities.
19. The company's management of change is good. New staff have recently been appointed to key roles and responsibilities and are rapidly improving the programme. Many new systems are now in place which has improved management of the programme. The skills leader has a sound understanding of the changes required to make the employment skills team more effective within the wider company. The skills team has improved the sharing of information, collection and use of learner data and financial accountability. The new operational manager works sensitively with staff to sustain motivation and morale during these changes. Recently introduced performance management arrangements are carefully monitored. Regular meetings facilitate improved staff communication, particularly on the progress and achievement of learners. Staff are enthusiastic and committed to improvement and change. Senior management provide encouragement and support and an open and consultative management style.
20. Staff at Working Links are well qualified and have good development and training in providing support to help learners' overcome barriers to learning. Most learners have no qualifications and a very low skills base. All skills staff have a teaching qualification and are encouraged to achieve a specialist qualification at level 5. One centre manager has a diversity qualification at level 5 and has used this well to challenge gender discrimination and provide training for learners. Four tutors have a literacy qualification at level 5. All staff complete mandatory training in equality and diversity and conflict management. Supporting staff are trained in alcohol awareness and drug misuse. Tutors have awarding body inductions. Working Links makes good use of an intranet programme to plan and monitor professional development and to share experience and solve problems. Appraisals are thorough and identify staff development needs to support both learners' and business needs.
21. Working Links' subcontracted provision is well managed. Contractual arrangements are clearly defined and include targets for learner participation, achievement and success rates. Monitoring visits are particularly thorough and check all aspects of learners' progress, safety and welfare.

22. Internal verification is satisfactory. Actions from the external verifier are dealt with promptly and all staff, including subcontractor staff, are involved. Standardisation meetings are regular, thorough and effective in sharing good practice.
23. Working Links' other quality arrangements are incomplete. This was not recognised in the self-assessment report. Revised quality policies and procedures were introduced in August 2008 but an overall structure and timescale for the quality cycle is not yet in place. An overall structure and timescale for the quality cycle is not yet in place. Staff do not have sufficient understanding of their specific roles and responsibilities in carrying out quality activities. Arrangements lack procedures for monitoring and evaluating consistency in quality of provision across direct delivery and subcontractors. An improved process for teaching and learning was implemented in January 2009 and is providing a clearer focus on teaching and learning activities. However, Working Links has not yet established a systematic process for the moderation of grades awarded to these observations.
24. Too many learners have insufficient opportunity to participate in work experience before moving to employment. This is recognised by Working Links. The operational manager is now encouraging staff to focus more closely on employability outcomes. Links with the team that finds work-placements and job opportunities are developing although not all centres are yet involved. In centres that receive the team's support the number of work-placements and of learners into jobs has increased.
25. Working Links has taken recent action to provide a system for storing and retrieving learner data. This is effective in supporting a performance management system which monitors centres' contract compliance. However, Working Links makes insufficient use of data for quality improvement purposes. This was not recognised in the self-assessment report. It does not make systematic use of data reports to identify areas of underperformance or under-recruitment. It sets targets which are monitored on a monthly basis by the operations manager. However, most of these are for contract compliance, rather than to raise standards or rectify areas for improvement. Working Links makes insufficient use of external measures or comparisons to monitor the quality of provision. Action plans contain very few statistics to monitor progress or improvement.
26. Equality and diversity are satisfactory. Working Links makes good use of learning champions to engage hard to reach learners. This is recognised in the self-assessment report. Learning champions are employed by the company to attract learners from marginalised groups and communities. They act as positive role models in the community and make good use of their own experience of overcoming barriers to learning to support other learners. They provide learners with appropriate and accessible advice and guidance and mentor support throughout the referral process. This builds learners' confidence and makes it a positive experience. Learning champions enhance their own employability skills as this contributes to their work experience, and development of their curricula vitae. The number of learners participating has doubled in the past year.

27. Equality and diversity training is satisfactory. Staff and learners have a detailed and thorough equality and diversity induction but this is insufficiently reinforced during learners' programmes. Prompt action is taken in some centres to challenge inappropriate behaviour and to deal with discrimination but this good practice is insufficiently promoted across the provision. Learners have a satisfactory understanding of the appeals and complaints procedure.
28. Action planning to implement an equality and diversity policy is incomplete. Policies and procedures reflect recent legislation and Working Links has a recently formed 'dignity at work' working group. However, it does not yet have an equality scheme or action plan to implement its policies and does not systematically evaluate or assess the impact of its policies in practice. Learner achievement and success rates are not sufficiently monitored across different groups of learners. Working Links does not set targets for narrowing gaps in the performance of different groups. It recognises the need to improve its use of equality data.
29. The procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements. Criminal Records Bureau checks are carried out on all new staff and existing staff have enhanced disclosure checks. A single record is maintained within the human resource centre. All staff working on the Employment Services programme have undergone awareness training in the Protection of Vulnerable Adults scheme and company policies and procedures are being finalised at a national level.

What learners like:

- The confidence they gain
- 'I've started to believe in myself'
- The welcoming centre and the friendly staff
- 'I've widened my horizons'
- Gaining numeracy and literacy certificates
- The group work, team building and confidence building activities
- The opportunity to meet new people
- 'My friend recommended Working Links'

What learners think could improve:

- 'More time in classes'
- The opportunity to achieve more certificates, for example first aid
- The opportunity to get a level 2 certificate
- The numbers of learners and levels of ability in the class, there are too many for one teacher
- 'I haven't learnt anything new today'
- 'An opportunity to practise our speaking more'
- 'I haven't been able to get a job'
- The numbers of computers for jobsearch