

Children's Links

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Voluntary Organisation

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Children's Links is a voluntary organisation, limited by guarantee, with charitable trust status. Training is managed through the company's office in Horncastle, Lincolnshire. A managing director is head of the management team and reports to a board of trustees. Since the previous inspection the provider has merged with the Sadeh Lok Housing Group. The provider has been restructured to reflect the needs of the new organisation

The scope of provision has reduced since the previous inspection. The company provides training for NVQs through a consortium led by Boston College and apprenticeships funded by a national Learning and Skills Council (LSC) contract. Additional support for literacy and numeracy skills is provided through a subcontract with Skills Links. The Adult Learning Account (ALA) pilot programme through a subcontract with Skegness College is now complete, as is the employability programme funded by the DWP through a sub-contract with A4e.

Children's Links was inspected in March 2008. The overall effectiveness and main aspects of the provision were judged to be satisfactory, as was the provision in child development and well-being and teaching and lecturing.

This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit, which include the two mandatory themes of outcomes for learners and self-assessment and improvement planning. In particular, inspectors explored outcomes for learners on apprenticeships and on Train to Gain programmes.

Themes

Outcomes for learners

What progress has Children's Links made in improving the success rates and outcomes for learners?	Reasonable progress
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Overall success rates at the time of the previous inspection had improved and were satisfactory. Children's Links have made reasonable progress in improving further the outcomes for learners. Apprenticeship success rates have improved steadily since 2005/06. Overall success rates for apprentices in 2007/08 were 64% and have risen to 80% by August 2009, which is above the national average. Success rates on advanced apprenticeships have also improved from 20% in 2007/08 to 73% by August 2009.

Success rates for Train to Gain learners were also satisfactory at 73% at the time of the previous inspection; these have risen to above the national average and remain satisfactory at 83%. At the time of the previous inspection, 80% of those learners on Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) funded employability programmes completed their qualification successfully.

Timely success rates for apprenticeships have risen more slowly to 57% overall, which is still higher than the national average.

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How effective is the self assessment process and post inspection planning?

Reasonable progress

Inspectors judged the self-assessment report as satisfactory at the previous inspection. Inspectors agreed with some of the judgements and the overall grades but a number of strengths were no more than normal practice and the report was overly descriptive. The review and action planning process is now more systematic. The self-assessment report is much improved. It is self-critical and contains a good range of evaluative statements. It provides grades for all aspects of the common inspection framework and includes the views of learners and employers. Staff have good involvement in self assessment and quality improvement planning.

The provider has used the post inspection action plan effectively to carry out improvements. The action plan is used as a working document by the training team. Better use of management information, improved tracking of learner progress and higher quality teaching and learning have supported improved outcomes for learners. However, the impact of actions is not evaluated systematically. Many targets and expected outcomes are too general and it is unclear how improvement is measured.

Quality of provision

What progress has Children's Links made in improving provision to meet the literacy and numeracy development needs of learners on Train to Gain programmes?

Insufficient progress

At the previous inspection the arrangements for literacy, numeracy and language support for learners on Train to Gain programmes were inadequate. Children's Links have made insufficient progress in improving the take up of literacy and numeracy support by learners.

All learners undertake an initial assessment of their literacy and numeracy skills. Where learners have an identified additional learning support need they are referred to another provider; Skills links. Overall, however, there is insufficient assessment of literacy and numeracy skills and promotion of additional learning support in the induction programme provided by Children's Links. Further, the results of initial assessments are not always recorded on individual learning plans. Most learners rely on the informal support for literacy and numeracy development from their assessors, who do not hold sufficient, appropriate qualifications. The take up of additional learning support by Train to Gain learners remains very low. Of the current 79 learners, 34 have identified additional support needs; but only one is receiving

support. Of those learners who are making slower than expected progress, half have identified additional support needs.

Quality of provision

How have Children's Links improved the effectiveness of formal progress reviews? Insufficient progress

At the time of the previous inspection formal progress reviews were weak; involvement of employers was insufficient as was the use of long term target setting. Some improvements have been made. Progress reviews are held at regular intervals and provide useful feedback to learners on progress made in gathering evidence for their portfolios, key skills development and technical certificate success.

The expectation of direct involvement of employers in progress reviews is clearly stated in the learning contract. However, too many employers are still not routinely present at progress reviews.

Short term target setting in assessment plans is effective but there are few medium and long term targets agreed in progress reviews. Learners are insufficiently aware of how much work remains and how it will be achieved. Employers are not well informed about how they can support the planned learning.

Leadership and management

What action has Children's Links taken to ensure better use is made of management information? significant progress

The previous inspection reported that the provider made insufficient use of management information. Available data were not analysed to monitor learner outcomes and staff performance. Performance management has improved. Monitoring arrangements are effective and appropriate support and action is taken on underperformance.

Staff at all levels now use data on a regular basis. All staff are more aware of learner progress and outcomes. Monthly reports on equality and diversity, learner destinations, and individual learner progress against their planned end date are discussed at training officer's meetings. Learners at risk of not completing in the expected time are identified and prompt action taken. The business development manager and training coordinators monitor individual training officers' performance at quarterly reviews. Senior management monitor key performance indicators monthly.

The workforce and skills work plan for 2009/10 includes objectives set by reviewing and analysing available data as well as staff and learner programme feedback. Learner participation and performance data are collected across different groups of learners but these are not yet used effectively to identify all barriers to learning.

However, an analysis of gender differences has resulted in challenging targets to improve the participation of male learners.

Leadership and management

How has Children's Links improved the use of target setting to drive improvements	Insufficient progress
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At the previous inspection target setting for improvements was weak. Some improvements have been made as staff performance targets have now been identified and agreed through the staff appraisal system. However, these targets are too general; they refer to overall programme success rates and do not reflect the different success rates for different courses and groups of learners.

Too many targets relate to meeting contractual arrangements rather than to raise standards or improve the quality of provision. Targets in the business and workforce development plan are insufficiently challenging and recently agreed internal key performance indicators [KPI] are lower than the current success rates for learners.

Leadership and management

What progress has the provider made in implementing more systematic observation of work based training?	Significant progress
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At the previous inspection Children's Links had a clear programme of improvement activities but these were not implemented systematically. The criteria for measuring the quality of teaching and learning were limited and the observation process did not cover all key aspects of the provision. The observation process has improved significantly following effective use of external consultancy, motivational leadership and support of a newly trained subject learning coach. Assessors are provided with good advice and guidance on the observation process. Outcomes of observations are discussed during staff appraisals. Feedback is used well to support improvements and all assessors have improved their observation profile in the last year.

The subject learning coach has been appointed recently as quality coordinator and ensures good practice is shared at team meetings. There are regular opportunities for work-shadowing and involvement in projects to develop activities and resources to support learning. Observations now take place across all key aspects of the training programmes including sub contracted provision. The workforce team recognise the need to review the observation form to focus more on learning outcomes and the recording of action plans.

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