

Mercia Partnership (UK) Ltd.

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Mercia Partnership (UK) Ltd (Mercia) is an independent training provider located in Merseyside. Mercia has contracts with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) for employer and learner responsiveness provision. It offers apprenticeships in information technology, education and training, literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision to adults, as well as, more recently, an employability programme for unemployed adults. Most of the training takes place in employer and community settings.

Since the inspection, in 2008, Mercia has withdrawn from Offender Learning and Skills (OLAS) provision. The number of provider sites has decreased from four to two. Total staffing has reduced from approximately 140 to 26, with a management team restructure from 16 down to 7 managers. At the inspection in January 2008, the overall effectiveness, capacity to improve and all aspects of the provision were judged to be satisfactory, while equality of opportunity was graded as good. 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.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has Mercia made in implementing the improvement plan and in improving the rigour of self-assessment?

Reasonable progress

Mercia has made reasonable progress in strengthening the self-assessment process. Good links with external agencies support the review and development of Mercia's quality improvement processes and add rigour to self-assessment. The recent self-assessment report follows the structure of the revised 2009 Common Inspection Framework and grades all aspects. In some areas the evidence on which judgements are based is limited. The report is overly descriptive of the quality assurance activities with insufficient attention on evaluation of outcomes.

The use of data is now much improved. All data are now held centrally with regular checks to ensure that it is accurate and up-to-date. Increased confidence in the data has led to it being used more robustly to monitor the success of courses against agreed improvement targets and in managing the performance of staff.

A planned review of the systems and processes has led to much rationalisation, for example, a more straightforward enrolment form is now in place instead of the eleven documents used previously. The regular meetings structure promotes good

communications about improvement priorities and allows discussions and sharing of good practice to take place.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving success rates and promoting economic and social well-being? Reasonable progress

Mercia has improved the strategy and systems for monitoring learner progress; good use of data enhances this process. Overall success rates on apprenticeship programmes have improved and are now high; rates increased from 62.5% in 2007/08 to 88.6% in 2008/09, which is above the national rate of 70.9%. The proportion of learners who complete their programmes within agreed timescales has also improved and is high; rates improved from 58.8% to 88.6% in the same period, which is significantly above the national rate. Train to Gain success rates rose by 40 percentage points to 68.6% in the same period but remain slightly below the national rate.

Mercia has rationalised its Skills for Life provision and numbers are significantly smaller than at the inspection in 2008. Provider data indicate that in the current year, learners on Skills for Life short courses are making good progress, while retention on the Skills for Life long courses is good. Since the last inspection, Mercia has introduced a response to redundancy programme in the centre of Liverpool. It provides a three-day employability programme followed by specific individual training. Learners are highly positive that the programme with its specific training increases their confidence, communication and employability skills and promotes their economic and social well-being.

Quality of provision Reasonable progress

What progress has Mercia made in improving the planning of assessment and the monitoring of learners' progress in the education and training provision?

At the previous inspection, arrangements to monitor learners' progress in the education and training provision were insufficient. A more rigorous structure is now in place to monitor progress, supported by improved data. An initial assessment of learners' experience and skills now helps to identify the appropriate level of course for each learner. The recording of learner progress in review documents is now more detailed and recent targets are more measurable and specific, although some inconsistencies remain. Learners now receive copies of their progress reviews which they keep in their portfolios. Feedback to learners following assessment is now comprehensive. Employers receive detailed information on learners' progress.

At the inspection in 2008, school mentors had insufficient involvement in planning teacher assistant training. Schools now appoint a member of staff to support these learners in the schools and to help in the choice of optional units. Current learners on the teaching assistants' course are making good progress and portfolios are of a high standard.

Leadership and management

What progress has Mercia made to strengthen management processes following the restructure of its provision? Reasonable progress

Mercia has made reasonable progress in strengthening management processes since its restructure in summer 2009. Following Mercia's withdrawal from the OLAS provision in August 2009, the management restructure was effective and timely. The significant reduction in the size of the company from around 140 to 26 staff was managed well and involved no compulsory redundancies. The restructured management team, decreased from 16 to 7 managers, has an improved focus on individual responsibilities and accountabilities. The managing director is now more directly involved in quality assurance, including monitoring staff performance as well as the strategy to improve outcomes for learners. Managers provide good support to staff.

All staff work from the main office in Prescott each Monday morning to review any issues and to share good practice. The regular meetings structure and company newsletters have led to much improved communications. Partnership links are well developed and communication with learners and employers is good.

How much progress has Mercia made in establishing arrangements to safeguard learners? Reasonable progress

Mercia has made reasonable progress in establishing its arrangements to safeguard learners. Satisfactory revised policies for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults are now in place. A senior manager is responsible for safeguarding, with an additional named person taking responsibility in her absence. The health and safety committee oversees this area. The procedure for dealing with safeguarding issues is clear and specific. All relevant staff have Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks; a recent policy decision means that all staff are in the process of having enhanced CRB checks. Strong links are now in place with Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council to provide level 1 safeguarding training at the end of January for key staff, but awareness raising training has not taken place for all staff. Learners receive satisfactory information on safeguarding through the revised and detailed induction handbook. The provider has a good focus on learner safety. The learner induction includes information on health and safety, as well as harassment, bullying and discrimination and provides clear guidance on reporting such issues.

What progress has been made in improving the promotion of equality and diversity? Reasonable progress

The managing director now has overall responsibility for this area. Following a review in 2009, an equality and diversity committee is now in place. A recent equality and diversity overview for 2009/10 and action plan updates the company's equality and diversity strategy. The action plan outlines specific actions to enhance the promotion of equality and diversity to staff and learners. However, it is too early to judge their full impact. Plans are in place for further equality and diversity and disability

awareness training for all staff in February 2010. The reviewed and updated policy is satisfactory.

Mercia now uses its more accurate data satisfactorily to monitor the performance of different groups of learners. Analysis of data identified underperformance by learners of black and minority ethnic heritage and Mercia took appropriate actions to increase support for this group. Mercia has a clear focus on inclusion and now offers an increased range of provision to underrepresented learners. This includes Skills for Life programmes for those with learning difficulties and for residents in a women's hostel. While the induction booklet provides clear and specific information on equality and diversity issues, the focus on equality and diversity during learners' reviews is insufficient.

What progress has Mercia made in developing its strategy to engage with users to support and promote improvement? Reasonable progress

Mercia has made reasonable progress in developing its strategy to engage with learners and employers. The provider uses a wide range of mechanisms to gather their views. An appropriate learner engagement strategy is now in place. Regular surveys take place at the end of every course and half way through National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) programmes. The use of learners' views is now part of the lesson observation process but it is too soon to judge the impact of this.

A number of changes have occurred as a result of learner feedback, including a revised induction programme and handbook as well as changes to the employability programme, which now better meets the needs of learners. Employers comment that Mercia is flexible in the delivery of its training, provides good support to learners and keeps them well informed about employees' progress. The provider uses employer feedback effectively to contribute to the development of programmes and to meet employers' training needs.

What progress has Mercia made in developing its arrangements for quality improvement, including observation of teaching and learning? Reasonable progress

The provider has made reasonable progress in strengthening its quality improvement arrangements. The revised procedures for monitoring the performance of trainers and assessors include a monthly individual meeting with their line manager. Use of improved data now enhances discussion about learners' progress. It helps to identify those at risk and to provide additional support for both learners and, as appropriate, staff. However, no formal record is made of the agreed outcomes and actions from these monthly sessions.

The managing director now oversees the evaluation of Mercia's provision and reviews all observation records. The lesson observation process more recently includes quarterly unannounced observations. Observation records indicate a high standard of learner training; findings contribute to trainers' appraisals. Observation records reviewed during the visit contain a detailed description of the activities and

most indicate good planning and use of an effective range of learning materials. However, it is not always possible to link the identified area for development to the record of observation. Mercia does not summarise the outcomes from lesson observations to inform self-assessment or to influence the quality improvement strategy.

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