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9 February 2010

Ms S Woodward
Finance Director
Weir Training Ltd
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Dear Ms Woodward

Ofsted 2009-10 survey inspection programme: good practice in apprenticeship training

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and learners, during my visit on 18 January 2010 to look at work in retail apprenticeship training.

The visit provided valuable information that will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included interviews with staff, learners and employers, scrutiny of relevant documentation and analysis of learners' work.

Features of good practice

- Comprehensive and particularly well-structured review procedures that promote good work-based learning and timely success of learners.

Weir Training has given a great deal of thought to what needs to be discussed with learners and their employers during each workplace visit. Training paperwork has been designed to capture discussions and targets are set extremely well. Every time an assessor visits a learner, which is often fortnightly but at least monthly, a single-page learner assessment review is completed. This details learners' exact progress on all aspects of their framework, including an overall percentage progress mark. It judges this progress against statements that indicate if the learner is in danger of slipping behind target as well as assessing the contribution of the learner to their training. Clear targets are set for the next visit and all parties involved in delivering training are aware of them. Learners refer to the document regularly, sometimes on a daily basis. A more lengthy and detailed learner

progress summary is completed every three months during formal reviews, including detailed contributions from the employer.

- Good employer engagement promotes delivery of training as an effective partnership benefiting learners.

Significant effort is made to ensure that all new companies are well informed about the value of apprenticeships. Employers are identified through dedicated sales team specialists who have a good knowledge of the training offered. Senior managers liaise with employers on a regular basis. Employers speak highly of the emphasis placed on meeting their needs. In one example, where assessments needed to be completed during night shifts, and learners had English as a second language, a night shift assessor was employed and workbooks were translated into Polish. Employers take an active part in all aspects of training including planning and reviews.

- Very effective programme management promotes high overall and timely success rates.

Individual assessor performance is tightly managed with fortnightly reviews of the work of each assessor. This includes the numbers of learners in their caseload, any early unsuccessful leavers and success in meeting target dates such as completion of National Vocational Qualification units, key skills qualifications and technical certificates. A wall chart shows how each assessor is performing on these criteria and this encourages friendly competition among assessors. New targets are set at these fortnightly meetings. The frequent monitoring of these targets helps assessors to keep their learners on track to complete in a timely manner.

- Good awareness of equality of opportunity by learners that is applied in the workplace.

Good attention is given to raising learners' awareness of equality of opportunity, starting at induction and reinforced during training and reviews. Learners speak highly of the two workbooks they complete which help to increase their knowledge of equality and diversity. They also gain a good understanding of the relevant legislation and the impact of this in the workplace. Extra information is accessed by learners from the Weir Training website to supplement the workbooks. Understanding is reinforced by asking questions at reviews that test understanding of different equality scenarios that are relevant to the workplace. Equality and diversity also form part of the delivery of the main training programme. Learners stated that their knowledge in this area improved their working practices and helped them to prepare for advancement at work to managerial roles.

- Good support and use of individual learning plans enable individual learners' needs to be met.

Individual learning plans (ILPs) are designed particularly well and used to capture the previous experience of learners, the needs of employers and the results of initial assessment to plan individual delivery of programmes. Planning of learning is particularly thorough and well focused on the requirements of learners and employers. Learners set career objectives, and

record the difference gaining qualifications will make, as part of the ILP. Employers set three performance objectives for their learners, such as setting up a staff newsletter. Initial screening of learners, to determine skill levels and identify possible literacy and numeracy support needs, is effective. Additional individual support is given by assessors where required and a specialist support tutor is available. Employers assign their learners to a mentor. Dictaphones are used well to provide assessment evidence for learners with dyslexia or for whom English is a second language. Assessors are skilled at using the dictaphones and capture authentic evidence, such as dealing with customers in the workplace or answering questions. Learners have a card with details of a confidential email address if they require any support and are able to contact their assessors in between planned visits by telephone or text message.

■ Very effective delivery of the technical certificate using workshops.

Learners attend a well-planned interesting workshop that is available every month to prepare them for their technical certificates. Learners enjoy this and speak highly of both the content and delivery. The workshop allows learners to exchange experiences of retail with different employers. The opportunity to take mock examinations as part of the day prepares learners well and success rates for technical certificates are high.

■ Good leadership and strategic management with a strong focus on improving provision and learner success.

Weir Training has a well-experienced strategic management team with a clear vision for the company to be an outstanding provider. In November 2008, the company was the first in the country to gain the Training Quality Standard with excellence in retail. Weir Training is a company where staff enjoy working, with little turnover of staff and a shared ethos of continual quality improvement. There is a good focus on staff development, with industrial placements to update vocational knowledge and skills. Team meetings include examples of regular sharing of best practice. Partnerships with external organisations are good and help in further improving provision. The gap between high overall and timely success is now in single figures.

Areas for development

■ No significant areas for development were identified during the visit.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop apprenticeship training in your organisation.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Phil Hatton
Her Majesty's Inspector