

The Via Partnership Limited

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates	20–23 October 2015
Overall effectiveness	Inadequate
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Inadequate
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Inadequate
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Inadequate
Outcomes for learners	Inadequate
Apprenticeships	Inadequate
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings

This is an inadequate provider

- Too many apprentices do not complete their qualifications successfully and only a small minority complete in the planned time.
- The proportion of apprentices that achieve their functional skills qualifications is very low.
- Too few learners on the traineeships programme progress to an apprenticeship, further education or relevant employment.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is weak; trainers do not deliver sufficient training to apprentices, many of whom are experienced and have been in their job roles a long time. Consequently apprentices do not develop new job-related skills or improve their use of English and mathematics.
- Trainers mostly assess apprentices' existing skills or the skills they develop through training with their employers.
- Trainers do not provide useful written feedback to help apprentices produce a high standard of work.
- Trainers do not regularly review apprentices' work or engage their employers in such reviews to progress the training at an adequate pace.
- Leaders and senior managers have not implemented effective quality improvement actions to halt the decline in all aspects of the provision since the last inspection.
- The board of directors and senior managers have focused on increasing the number of apprentices and have not set high ambitions for apprentices' achievement and the quality of the provision.

The provider has the following strengths

- Managers and staff have worked hard to sustain the viability of the business in difficult financial circumstances.

Full report

Information about the provider

- The Via Partnership Limited (Via) is a social enterprise business that is governed by a board of directors. The board members are appointed by the company's shareholders: Lancashire County Council, Blackburn with Darwen Council and Blackpool Council. Each shareholder appoints up to two directors from their employees. The Via Chief Executive is also a director of the company. A vacancy exists for a director's post to be nominated by Lancashire County Council and this has been unfilled since 23 March 2015.
- Approximately 13% of the company's turnover is funded by the Skills Funding Agency. The company through this contract delivers apprenticeship programmes in health and social care, child development and well-being, and business administration. In 2014/15, the provider delivered traineeships to a small number of learners and intends to offer this provision in the future; there were no learners on programme at the time of the inspection. Via subcontracts around a third of its provision to two subcontractors: one provider in Cheshire and since September 2015 a provider in Cumbria.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that the board of directors and senior managers focus their priorities on achieving high expectations for apprentices' outcomes and they hold managers and trainers to account for delivering high-quality training programmes.
- Increase the proportion of trainees and apprentices successfully completing their programme on time by ensuring trainers conduct detailed reviews, tackle late progress and promote good employer involvement. Ensure trainers set clear and detailed learning targets for apprentices, review their progress against these targets and record the outcomes clearly. Ensure employers always contribute and commit to the agreed actions during review meetings.
- Ensure trainers provide good or better off-the-job training that extends apprentices' job-related skills beyond those they already have and supports them in the development of their English and mathematics skills so they achieve their qualifications.
- Make certain that trainers provide apprentices with good learning resources, useful individualised learning plans, detailed written feedback and clear career guidance to enable apprentices to produce a high standard of work and ensure they are motivated.
- Ensure trainers use the electronic portfolio system well and coherently, so that apprentices can reliably access all the information relating to their training, such as their detailed individual learning plans and progress reviews. Ensure all apprentices who are registered to use the electronic portfolio system have the skill to use it well and access it regularly.
- Rapidly improve the effectiveness of the quality system by ensuring that all aspects of training and assessment, including the use of the electronic portfolio system, are systematically monitored and improved. Ensure managers use data well to identify performance issues and bring about fast improvements.
- Ensure apprentices receive good-quality advice and guidance about their career and qualification options so they can achieve their potential.
- Review and improve the self-assessment process so that the board of directors, senior managers, managers and trainers have an accurate view of the quality of provision and can develop a robust improvement action plan.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is inadequate

- Senior and middle managers have increased the number of apprentices and expanded the use of subcontractors to manage the business during financially turbulent times. However, they have failed to ensure a high standard of apprenticeship training, resulting in all aspects of the provision declining since the last inspection.
- The management of the subcontracted provision is weak. Managers have not been quick enough to ensure that the quality of subcontracted apprentice training is systematically monitored for good performance.
- The quality improvement systems are weak. Managers have identified a number of significant issues, for example the poor quality of progress reviews and target setting, but have not rectified them. Arrangements to monitor the quality of material on the company's electronic portfolio system are inadequate; many documents are missing or are of poor quality.
- The observation of training and learning is not effective as it does not focus on the impact of off-the-job training on the apprentices' new skill development and progress. Despite some recent improvements, managers have not ensured apprentices develop their English and mathematics skills well enough.
- The self-assessment process has significantly overestimated the quality of all aspects of the provision. Managers do not use data adequately to identify issues and take effective actions. For example, data show that only a small proportion of apprentices successfully complete their functional skills qualifications, but managers have failed to put in place adequate arrangements to support apprentices' development of these skills.
- The apprenticeship programmes are not an effective response to what apprentices or employers require. The large majority of apprentices, approximately three quarters, are aged 19 and over, and many have significant experience of working in health and social care settings. These apprentices gain little from the programme.
- Despite the company's capacity and experience in offering advice and career guidance as a part of its broader business, managers have not ensured apprentices receive good advice and guidance about how to progress to other qualifications or improve their further employment prospects.
- Managers have analysed the performance gap between men and women apprentices and are investigating the reason behind this; as yet they have not identified and implemented a strategy to close this performance gap. Managers have not ensured that trainers are sufficiently well equipped with the skills to both promote and develop apprentices' understanding of fundamental British values.
- **The governance of the provider**
 - The board of directors focuses mainly on the financial growth of the company and has supported senior managers to increase the number of apprentices without adequate oversight to ensure the quality of apprenticeship training is good or better. As a result too many apprentices do not benefit sufficiently from their training.
 - Managers provide the board of directors with information about all aspects of the company's performance, including the apprenticeship programmes. However, directors have little insightful discussion about the apprenticeship programme and its contribution to the local economy. For example, since the last inspection the company has subcontracted provision to providers in Cheshire and Cumbria merely as a strategy for growth rather than meeting the objectives of the organisation and local needs.
 - The board of directors have not set high expectations for apprentices' success; they merely monitor the proportion of apprentices who succeed against minimum funding targets. The directors have not challenged the accuracy of the company's self-assessment report sufficiently.
- **The arrangements for safeguarding are effective**
 - The company carries out appropriate checks in relation to safeguarding issues before recruiting staff and maintains a record of this process. It meets its statutory requirements for safeguarding apprentices.
 - Managers have developed an extensive range of safeguarding policies and procedures, for example about how to use the internet and digital devices safely. Staff have received safeguarding training and information about different types of safeguarding issues is included in the apprentices' handbook. The handbook includes information about who the apprentices should contact if they have any concerns but they have not been issued with a named contact or a telephone number.

- Managers have effective links with the Local Safeguarding Board. All managers and trainers have recently received training on the 'Prevent' agenda to identify signs of radicalisation and extremism. Trainers do not check, expand or record apprentices' understanding of safeguarding matters during progress reviews.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is inadequate

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is inadequate across all apprenticeship programmes, levels and age groups. The quality of training in one subcontractor is very poor, and in the new subcontractor it requires improvement.
- Trainers have a detailed knowledge of apprentices' abilities and experience at the start of their programmes. However, they provide little training to ensure all apprentices are suitably challenged to extend their knowledge and develop new skills. In completing their written work, apprentices rely extensively on searching the internet or asking work colleagues as they do not receive adequate training resources or guidance from their trainers.
- Trainers' planning for individual learning fails to help apprentices to achieve their learning goals. Apprentices' short- and longer-term learning targets are weak; they are not sufficiently detailed to ensure apprentices know what they need to do next or how their progress is measured. Learning targets are frequently limited to listing the qualification unit number to be achieved by the next visit.
- During the progress review meetings, trainers do not adequately monitor their apprentices' progress and agree actions to improve. Too often, when apprentices make slow progress, trainers do not investigate the reasons behind this and identify how barriers to slow progress can be removed. Employers do not always contribute to the review of apprentices' progress or provide support to improve apprentices' progress. These weak practices have resulted in a high proportion of apprentices making insufficient progress.
- Trainers do not use the electronic portfolio system in a coherent way. Some of the critical documents, such as apprentices' individual learning plans and progress reviews, are in paper form, some are in digital format and some are scanned and uploaded. As a result, too many apprentices cannot access and use these documents reliably to improve their learning and develop independent learning skills. Apprentices who do not have sufficient skills in using information and communication technology are not supported to develop these skills and they rely on trainers to upload their work to the system.
- Trainers offer apprentices good verbal feedback on their work. However, the written feedback which they provide in the electronic portfolio system is not useful for apprentices' subsequent assignments. In too many cases, their comments do not explain how apprentices can improve their work or advance their depth of understanding. Trainers do not always identify and comment on grammatical errors; consequently apprentices frequently repeat the same mistakes.
- All apprentices are assessed for their use of English and mathematics. However, trainers do not plan and develop these skills adequately. As a result, apprentices do not acquire the skills to pass their functional skills qualifications.
- The assessment practices are weak. Trainers plan the assessment of apprentices' competencies without planning, identifying or offering feedback on how the apprentice can develop these competencies. They often only assess the apprentices' existing skills, or the skills which they develop from their on-the-job training or the skills they gain from training with their employer.
- Apprentices are not offered sufficient advice and guidance about their options to make informed decisions about the next stage in their career development or additional courses. When apprentices receive this guidance, it is poorly documented and therefore unhelpful to them when they need to refer back to or review it.
- The promotion of apprentices' understanding of fair treatment and different preferences requires improvement. Most apprentices have an appropriate level of knowledge and understanding of fair treatment in their job roles and workplaces. However, trainers fail to check and broaden apprentices' understanding of these areas during their reviews, especially within the context of their job roles in health and social care or childcare settings.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

is inadequate

- Apprentices struggle to explain how their apprenticeships have given them new skills or a deeper understanding of how to develop in their job role to maximise their chances of successful career prospects. As a result too many apprentices are demotivated.
- Not all apprentices take pride in their work because trainers do not set high expectations. Too many apprentices are not confident about their apprenticeship training. Many have insecurities about their ability to progress on their programme and many fail to develop their skills in English and mathematics.
- Apprentices benefit from a wide range of additional courses offered by their employers, such as 'person centred assessment', 'physical activity and mobility for older people', health and safety and epilepsy awareness. However, trainers do not build on these courses or link these to apprentices' on- and off-the job training so that they can extend their knowledge and become more effective employees.
- The standard of apprentices' written work is too often poor and many are not prepared well for the next stage of their progress.
- Generally apprentices have a good awareness of health and safety, particularly in relation to their own roles and responsibilities regarding safeguarding. They have a reasonable understanding of internet safety and risks associated with social media. Apprentices say they feel safe.
- Apprentices' depth of understanding of fair treatment and their respect for an individual's preferences is appropriate. However, trainers do little to promote the apprentices' understanding of these issues further or to discuss topics that relate to fundamental British values.

Outcomes for learners

are inadequate

- Apprentices' progress is slow and a significant minority are substantially behind with their scheduled assessments. The progress of apprentices in one of the subcontractors is particularly poor.
- Too many apprentices do not achieve, despite improvements in the proportion of apprentices who were successful in 2013/14 and indications of further improvements in 2014/15. The small number of apprentices aged 19 to 23 succeed well. However, the large majority of apprentices aged over 24 and 16 to 18 did not complete successfully.
- In 2013/14, the intermediate apprentices achieved well. However, only around a third of advanced apprentices gained their apprenticeship framework. A slightly higher proportion of apprentices on health and social care were successful than apprentices on child development and well-being. The achievement of business administration apprentices is very poor and none of the advanced apprentices gained their qualification last year.
- In 2013/14, only one in five apprentices completed in the planned time. A very small minority of apprentices aged over 24 and 16 to 18 completed as planned. Male apprentices were more successful than females.
- In 2013/14, around a third of apprentices successfully completed their functional skills qualifications. The proportion of apprentices aged 24 and over who completed their functional qualifications is particularly poor. The progress of a significant minority of current apprentices in completing their functional skills qualifications is slow, delaying their framework achievements.
- In 2014/15, a minority of learners started on traineeship and progressed to positive destinations, such as employment or further education. Around half of these learners improved their English and mathematics by one level.
- Based on the company's 2014/15 data, around three quarters of apprentices who completed successfully remain in employment and almost half progressed to jobs with more responsibility. However, very few progressed to higher-level qualifications.

Provider details

Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	160
Principal/CEO	Karen O'Donoghue
Website address	http://www.via-uk.com/

Provider information at the time of the inspection

Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 and above	
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	30	37	7	46			28	
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
	N/A		N/A		N/A			
Number of learners aged 14-16								
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ CAN training ■ Stone Eden Training 							

Information about this inspection

Inspection team

Shahram Safavi, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Karen Tucker	Ofsted Inspector
Steven Ingle	Ofsted Inspector

The above team was assisted by the Director of Operations, as nominee, and carried out the inspection at short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of students and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

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