

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: The Chamber
Date of visit: 9 December 2008

Context

The Chamber is based in Luton and was established in 1984. It delivers apprenticeship and advanced apprenticeship programmes. At the time of the visit there were 17 business administration, 14 customer service and two team leading learners and one in warehousing and distribution. In addition The Chamber is supporting 18 hairdressing learners finishing their programmes as part of the 2007/08 subcontracted hairdressing apprentice programme to Hair Train, an organisation based in Milton Keynes.

The work-based learning department consists of a team leader, centre coordinator, two scheme and placement coordinators and four assessors. Training and assessment is carried out in the workplace by visiting assessors. The majority of learners are based in Luton. All are in employment.

According to the 2001 census, the proportion of people from minority ethnic groups is 28.1%. At the time of the visit 14% of learners were from minority ethnic groups and The Chamber had 21% male learners.

The last inspection of The Chamber was in October 2007. Overall effectiveness, leadership and management, equality of opportunity and the two sector subject areas of business administration and retail and commercial enterprise were all graded satisfactory. The inspection team judged the self-assessment process to be satisfactory and judged The Chamber as having sufficient capacity to improve.

Achievement and standards

What progress have learners made in improving achievement and standards?	Reasonable progress
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Since the previous inspection, business administration success rates have improved to 88% overall and 73% for those learners achieving in their target-set time. Hairdressing learners success rates have significantly improved, despite still being below national rates at 36% overall framework success rates and 29% for achieving within target-set time. Customer service success rates have declined to 25% overall and 8% for those achieving in target-set time. The Chamber has identified that in

2007/08 the key skills achievement rate of 54% was due to others leaving before their full apprentice frameworks were completed.

For 2008/09, achievement of technical certificates and key skills by business administration and customer service apprenticeships are high at 100% and 95% respectively. There is good recognition of learners' improved self-confidence in their work roles, by their increased NVQ knowledge and skills.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in improving target-setting with business administration and customer service learners?	Significant progress
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Since the previous inspection, there has been much improved information used in initial target-setting in individual learning plans. They use better initial assessment information and greater employer/mentor involvement in the identification of job roles and their links to choices of NVQ units. Work-place mentors have been given role training, an induction checklist to ensure understanding of their role and there has been greater employer/workplace involvement in learners' programmes.

Learners' prior work experience and achievements, such as technical certificates, have been used more effectively in deciding individual short and medium targets for their NVQ units. The targets dates are clearly differentiated to meet individual learners' needs. Progress is effectively monitored at progress reviews. Learners' targets are adjusted either way to meet individual needs, therefore, accommodating delays through pregnancy or faster evidence gathering speeding up progress. This makes them much more tailored to individual learning and circumstances.

Leadership and Management

What progress has been made in management action to support improvements in learners' success rates?	Significant progress
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Since the previous inspection, there has been a significant staff development programme to support the much changed staff team. These have included, teacher-training courses, assessor training, information, advice and guidance training and personal skills development such as drugs awareness.

Managers now systematically monitor progress against targets. They compare data against the same month from previous years and decide action for improvement if required. There is a strong focus in team meetings on data analysis and action to support learners and improve success rates. Regular individual assessor meetings take place with managers, to discuss their learner case-loads and to focus on individual support needs. National success rates are used more realistically to compare, evaluate and action plan.

There have been strong actions to implement work-place mentor roles, including improving their input into learners' NVQ unit choices to ensure they link to work roles and more effective reviewing of learner progress. Assessors visit learners in their work-places three to four times in between each of the 12-week reviews.

The hairdressing subcontractor is involved in focused monthly meetings with The Chamber and by attending The Chamber's work-based learning team meetings. They have received support for hairdressing assessors and attended key skills and literacy and numeracy workshops.

What progress has been made in recruiting increased numbers of male learners and learners from minority ethnic groups?	Significant progress
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Since the previous inspection, The Chamber has significantly increased recruitment of learners from minority ethnic groups. It exceeded the target it was set by the local Learning and Skills Council. It now has seven learners from Black-Caribbean/Asian backgrounds, which is 14% of The Chamber learners. In addition The Chamber has significantly increased its number of male learners to 11, which is 21% of the total. The Chamber has worked closely with Connexions for recruitment and ensuring prospective employers interview a good selection of learners. There is good monitoring of applications and curriculum vitae sent by prospective learners by ethnic group, age and gender to monitor recruitment against applications. Data is also monitored well to monitor learners' progress and success rates by gender, disability and ethnic group.

The Chamber's self-assessment report includes a very detailed equality of opportunity section. It outlines the good action taken to improve participation by under-represented groups. Good visual images are used in marketing materials. These provide a good balance across gender, age and different ethnic groups.

What progress has been made in using self-assessment and quality improvement planning?	Reasonable progress
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The Chamber's self-assessment report was produced in September 2008 and refers to the August 2007 to July 2008 period. It is very detailed and useful. It contains measured, evaluative, clear, self-critical detail and has clearly supported improvements since its production. It uses data well to inform judgements in subject sector areas. Overall self-assessment report judgements do not reflect the disaggregated data and identify the significant differences between business administration and customer service success rates. Self-assessment is a fully inclusive process and includes learners, employers and the hairdressing subcontractor's views. In addition, it uses a very clear seven-code system to prioritise action points against each judgement.

What progress has been made in using quality improvement arrangements?	Significant progress
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Since the previous inspection, The Chamber has made very good use of staff development and external consultancy support. It has effectively piloted new practices, which have informed the review and revision of new systems and documentation, for example, individual learning plans and progress reviews before their implementation in August 2008.

There has been good use of systematic, regular data analysis to inform further action. This takes place regularly on a monthly basis, focusing on NVQ unit achievement. There has been good development of a peer support network across other Chambers, sharing good practice. Learner and employer feedback and evaluations are used very effectively and have led to greater mentor involvement in work-places effectively supporting learners.

Internal verification processes are satisfactory. They include good information about improving assessor practise. External verification reports show actions have been effectively followed-up and led to improvements, such as the introduction of an internal verification checklist for portfolio contents and a skills checklist.

Quality assurance of documentation is not yet identifying where some action is required, such as following-up of missing signatures or empty sections. The good communication with employers reporting learners' progress by email is not systematically kept up-to-date in learner review records.