

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of provider: Pfl Limited
Date of visit: 23 June 2009

Context

Partnership for Learning limited (Pfl) is a registered charity and a private company located in Speke, Merseyside. Pfl was created to provide a shared training facility that responded to local needs and to help attract more businesses to the Merseyside region. It contracts with Merseyside Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to provide work-based learning, Train to Gain and learndirect provision across Merseyside.

Pfl is managed by a Chief Executive who reports to a board and a charity board. The Chief Executive is supported by three managers (one post is vacant). Pfl employs 35 staff, of whom 11 are directly involved in the training and assessment of work-based learners. Pfl has four work-based learning assessors in engineering, three of whom are also internal verifiers. Most engineering apprentices spend their first year attending off-the-job training which is subcontracted to St Helens College. Subsequent years on programme are spent in workplaces locally.

Pfl has around 75 advanced apprentices and 23 apprentices, all of whom are employed across the engineering, business administration, information technology and electro-technical sectors. Of these, 60 are engineering advanced apprentices and 19 are engineering apprentices. Pfl also has 171 learners on Train to Gain programmes and 419 learners accessing 509 learndirect courses. In addition, Pfl delivers training direct to employers on a commercial basis. Approximately 40% of Pfl's business is government-funded training.

At the previous inspection, Pfl achieved satisfactory grades for overall effectiveness, achievement and standards, quality of provision, leadership and management and engineering. Equality of opportunity was inadequate.

Since the previous inspection, Pfl has not offered new apprenticeships in business administration, information technology and has significantly decreased its Train to Gain provision.

Achievement and standards

What progress has been made to improve overall success rates, especially on apprenticeship programmes?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

Pfl has made reasonable progress in improving success rates. Advanced apprenticeship overall success rates were good at the previous inspection but low on the apprenticeship programme. Published LSC data for 2007/08 shows that all

apprenticeship success rates improved slightly, but were still below the national average. Timely success rates for advanced apprentices and apprentices remained low at 33% and 27%. Provider data for 2008/09 shows a significant improvement that, if maintained, will raise apprenticeship success rates to above national rates for the first time. To date in 2008/09, overall success rates for apprenticeships are 71%, and 89% for advanced apprenticeships. Both are over 25 percentage points above 2007/08 national rates. Train to Gain success rates have been maintained.

PfL has introduced various strategies to improve the retention of learners and success rates since the previous inspection. Records of learners' attendance at off-the-job training are now scrutinised more thoroughly. The progress of individual learners is more closely monitored. Provider data for 2008/09 indicates that PfL has significantly improved its retention of learners across all programmes and nearly all learners are on target to complete their programmes by their planned end date.

What progress has been made to improve assessment practices?	Reasonable progress
--	---------------------

Assessment practices in the workplace have been strengthened since the previous inspection. Workplace supervisors continue to be used to provide testimonies that work has been completed to an agreed standard. However, this form of assessment is relied on less than previously; assessors now make more frequent visits to the workplace, and these are documented clearly. An increased range of checks, including discussions, direct observations, questioning and answering and written reports are used to assess learners work. Internal verification procedures have improved to ensure that sampling of portfolios takes place at regular intervals throughout learners' programmes. This enables any concerns about assessment practice to be rectified at an early stage.

What progress has been made to widen participation?	Insufficient progress
---	-----------------------

PfL has made insufficient progress to widen participation. At the previous inspection PfL was not taking effective action to widen participation of learners from under-represented groups. PfL has an equality and diversity policy. Senior staff are committed to developing a five-year strategy that will enable them to widen participation and raise awareness of equality of opportunity in the workplace. Following the previous inspection, the need for staff training in equality and diversity issues was identified as a priority. However, staffing changes and restructuring, which took place at the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009, have delayed completion of this training. PfL is currently working with St Helens College to offer an online training package to raise staff awareness of equality, diversity and inclusion. In addition, PfL has planned further training to help staff identify equality of opportunity concerns in the workplace and to help reach groups that have thus far been under-represented, especially in engineering. However, so far, these actions have had a negligible effect on learners.

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made to develop quality assurance systems?	Reasonable progress
---	---------------------

PfL has made reasonable progress in reviewing and improving its quality assurance arrangements. At the time of the previous inspection, the new quality manager had introduced a range of quality improvement arrangements. These are now well established in the quality process. Standard operating procedures are now formally recorded and standard documentation clearly identified. The training and development team leader has regular meetings with individual assessors to identify learners at risk of falling behind in their training. Learners at risk are followed up rapidly and effectively. The training and development team leader discusses target-setting with the assessors and scrutinises learners' progress. These new monitoring arrangements have had a significant effect on learners' success and timely progress towards completing the full framework.

PfL has recently introduced improvements to its internal verification system. A new internal verification strategy is in place. Assessors are observed assessing in the workplace. Observations are recorded formally on PfL documentation and action is taken to develop assessors and promote the sharing of good practice.

Management information has improved significantly since the previous inspection. A management information system has been installed and now provides managers with key management reports, particularly relating to learners' success rates.

What progress has been made to improve self-assessment?	Reasonable progress
---	---------------------

PfL has made reasonable progress in improving its self-assessment. At the previous inspection, PfL had overstated the value to learners of some of its strengths. The last self-assessment report was produced in December 2008 and is to be reviewed every six months. The report is now more evaluative. However, it is repetitive and areas for improvement are too general and do not focus sufficiently on the particular aspect of provision under discussion. The post-inspection development plan includes all the areas for improvement identified at the inspection and the actions to be taken. However, the progress towards, and completion of, these actions are not recorded.