

Commercial in Confidence



Assessment Report

For

**NOVA TRAINING
(FOUNDATION LEARNING AND APPRENTICESHIPS)**

On behalf of



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1. Key Information

Assessment Type	ACCREDITATION REVIEW
Assessor's Decision	STANDARD MET
Assessor's Name	BARRY KINSELLA
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2. Organisation – Information, Introduction and Overview

In 2012 Nova Training (Nova) celebrated 20 years of continuous training delivery in the West Midlands but has, in recent years, expanded its service into adjacent counties. The company now has 15 centres located across the Central Midlands region, where it has concentrated its delivery model on the engagement of young people, NEETS, unemployed people, those who are disadvantaged and/or disengaged and hard to reach groups. More recently Nova has become involved in the delivery of work based learning (WBL) and apprenticeships form approximately one third of its overall delivery with a two thirds concentration remaining in Foundation Learning (FL) to young people. Apprenticeships are funded by the Skills Funding Agency (The Agency) and FL is funded via the Educational Funding Agency (EFA)

The business is privately owned and is a division of Staff Select Ltd with operations based in Willenhall, West Midlands. Nova is led by the Operations Director who is supported by four senior managers, centre managers and the remaining complement of staff exceeds 70. Service delivery is strongly focussed on vocational skills and at all levels of delivery these embrace; motor vehicle, plumbing, bricklaying, painting and decorating, carpentry, plastering, hair and beauty, customer service, retail, business administration, warehousing, sales and hospitality. Linked to these subjects is a an embedded thread of functional skills proficiency and for those farthest from the workplace, there is close attention to individual employability awareness, interpersonal skills, CV preparation, job application procedures and interviewing protocols.

Nova states its vision, values and mission as follows;

OUR VISION

Through a socially inclusive approach we will stimulate demand for learning from employers, young people and adults, improve literacy, numeracy, language and ICT skills so that individuals have the skills for employment and further skill development.

VALUES

Maximising learner/customer success and achievement through innovative delivery to improve individual's life chances and/or employment opportunities, in a safe, secure and nurturing environment underpinned by our specific values of;
Respect, Honesty, Trust, Openness, Equality of Opportunity for all.

MISSION STATEMENT

To create and sustain an environment where staff can deliver an innovative, challenging, quality, exciting and inspiring learning experience that meets the needs of learners, non-learners and employers in the local community.

Nova are graded 2 – Good by Ofsted, have achieved Gold Status for Investors in People and sought a successful **matrix** Accreditation Review to ensure continued contractual compliance, assure stakeholders of its quality assurance in delivery and to meet a recognised national quality framework.

3. Added Value

Nova, firstly requested opinion on the improvements made to its website and secondly of how it was adapting to the use of social media.

On the first point and in reviewing the newly launched website; the revamped offering was found to be; welcoming and user-friendly, comprehensive in content, highly informative, offered good links to other partners and progression options and was easily navigable. The intention of encouraging more online enquiries has proven to be effective with over 25% of 155 hits being converted into course enrolments against a nil recording with the previous website. Secondly, and in response to the request for opinion on the developing use of social media by Nova; then it was noted that whilst Twitter and Facebook accounts are set up, there would seem to be some way to go in encouraging the wider use of these media by both learners and staff. Notwithstanding this comment, it was appreciated that training is in the process of currently being rolled out for all staff.

4. Areas of Particular Strength

Staff at Nova are encouraged to develop their progression opportunities, both within the organisation and for the betterment of their future careers. A rigorous quarterly review process is in place that allows for two-way exchange and is designed to align individual achievement with organisational performance and its overall aims and objectives. Staff were complimentary of the opportunities afforded them and commented that they were able to request access to specific training and development outside of the formal quarterly process and were confident in approaching line management at any time. (2.3, 2.4 & 4.6)

Nova has developed an extensive network of partnerships with employers whereby realistic work experience opportunities and openings for the undertaking of apprenticeships have been developed. The organisation is further, actively involved with colleges local to its areas of delivery and where appropriate, are able to encourage and facilitate progression on to FE options and/or specialism studies. (1.8 & 3.6)

Staff were able express a solid commitment, without exception, to the learners attending Nova and examples of them; quite literally 'going the extra mile' were expressed on a number of occasions and exemplified the organisation's recognition of the importance of the safeguarding and support of learners, even outside of the environs of Nova. These actions demonstrated the dedication to retaining individuals, effectively delivering on its promises to learners and in offering exemplary support to ensure that the aspirations of each learner are fully met, despite any setbacks. (3.1, 3.4 & 3.5)

Nova has precise and exact processes in place to measure its performance on a continual basis. Staff are made absolutely clear of their own expected contribution and similarly of those in relation to meeting overall organisational aims and objectives. Communication of performance, updating of data and systems to address shortfalls are firmly embedded into

day-to-day operations and all staff were able to articulate their responsibilities in the successful delivery of Nova's services. (4.1 & 4.2)

5. Areas for Continuous Improvement

Nova may benefit from updating its policy of Equality of Opportunity to include all nine protected characteristics as defined by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). It may also be considered that the accuracy and currency of policies and procedures are confirmed with the dating of all revisions to documents and with the endorsement of a responsible executive. (1.3 & 2.2)

Under organisational responsibilities to its personnel, as expressed in Health & Safety legislation, Nova could consider raising awareness of its lone working policy, procedures and protocols to all staff through refresher training sessions. (1.4)

Nova may wish to consider more robust evaluation of the performance of its partners to ensure that when learners are directed to them, they are effective in their dealings with them and have appropriate quality assurance measures in place to ensure conformity and two-way quality improvements. (4.4)

6. Methodology

The Registered **matrix** Assessor used a range of methods to gather evidence against the **matrix** Standard;

Site visits (2; Centres located in Willenhall and Oldbury, West Midlands)

One to one interviews (11; Operations Director, managers, delivery staff, partner)

Group interviews (8; staff {6} learners {16})

Telephone interviews (4; partners, learners)

Observation (Premises, delivery areas)

Naturally occurring evidence; (Website, promotional literature, policies, procedures, performance monitoring, reports, planning, feedback and analysis, meeting minutes)

7. Findings Against the matrix Standard

1. Leadership and Management

The way in which the organisation is led and managed to develop an effective service

For more than 20 years Nova has maintained an ethos of helping those in society who are marginalised for a variety of reasons. This ethos remains as the mainstay of the organisation and has enabled it to grow its provision across the Central Midlands region. Largely driven by contractual expectation, Nova has very clear aims and objectives for its service performance; not only in meeting prescribed hard targets, but also in helping its learners to move closer to the workplace and/or become more skilled in their workplace environment. Key Performance Indicators (KPI) are applied to all contracts held and typically these will relate to; sufficiency of engagement, retention, timely completion of programmes and successful progression on to further studies and ultimately into sustainable work opportunities, or simply to enable continuity of employment through recognised qualifications.

Starting originally as a family business, Nova retains much of its founding core values and the leadership of the business is retained within the family who are 'hands on' on a daily basis. A strong senior management team (SMT) were seen to be involved in all aspects of daily operations and staff reported upon having an excellent rapport with line managers and of having good, transparent communications.

Nova has a comprehensive suite of policy documentation which is articulated to learners, as appropriate, are integrated into documented individual learning plans (ILP) and are also available for scrutiny at each centre, with high priority paid in respect of Equality & Diversity. Policies were seen to be updated annually and staff were familiar with their content. Beyond attention on long-standing legislative practice, new focus on the safeguarding of learners is meticulously adhered to and Nova were seen to be exemplars in handling sensitive and confidential matters on serious issues concerning young people and in acting swiftly and appropriately within agreed escalation protocols. Similarly, Nova has embraced and is compliant with the newly introduced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) protocols to replace CRB checks.

The monitoring of learner outcomes is critical in the evaluation of performance at Nova and the service is subject to monthly quarterly and annual quality reviews which not only report on outcomes, but also on the effectiveness of delivery and performance by staff. The current aim for FL is for 70% of young learners to progress on to further study or work and for 20% of that number to be introduced to an apprenticeship programme, whilst for standalone apprenticeships an expectation of 90% of learners successfully completing their programme is set and with 86% of those being 'timely'. For the current contract year Nova reports that it is on course to exceed target expectations comfortably.

Nova's services are widely publicised in each local area of operation and further promotion is effected with the marketing of its services to schools, Connexions, Youth Offending teams and employers. The recently revamped website offers an easy overview of what the service offers and particularly in the case of young people, every encouragement for parents/guardians to participate in the selection of options is offered.

Staff were able to explain that they were actively involved in the development of the service and that; via team, group and whole-company meetings, freedom of expression was clearly encouraged and had helped to more closely define boundaries, job roles, standardisation of delivery, reductions in written content of reports and reviews, more 1:1 time with identified learners and improved environments for learners. Learners themselves have regular interactions with tutors/assessors and stated that they were happy with the amount of interest taken in them and that their opinions were taken seriously.

"If something isn't right you only have to speak to the tutor and it gets sorted" (Young learner)

Separately, learners from each centre are encouraged to contribute to 'Learner Voice' sessions, both at local and companywide levels. These sessions have proved to be well received by learners and have become a permanent feature on the Nova events calendar. Review of meeting minutes and comments received indicated that as result of 'Learner Voice' sessions, the following are examples of how the company has listened and responded to requests and suggestions from learners; sand buckets introduced in smoking areas, attendance rewards and 'Learner of the Month' introduced, recycling bins provided, breakout facilities created, tuck shop introduced, improvements to the décor and comfort of an private interview room and additionally Nova is in the process of expanding its usage of social media applications following demand from learners.

Nova benefits from 20 years of successful operation and is fully attuned to the social and economic status of the people in the areas it serves. This involvement in communities has also enabled the company to forge good links with other providers, schools, colleges and

employers, all of which provides access to new learners and also allows for the creation of progression opportunities for its learners. Partners spoken to were complimentary of Nova's performance and of the integrity with which it conducts its business.

"I am impressed with Nova; they are flexible and considerate to our business. The assessor understands how we work; he doesn't get in the way and the apprentices really like the support they get" (Employer)

2. Resources

The assets invested and applied in providing an effective service

Nova has developed its provision and service judiciously and in line with the contractual offerings from The Agency and the EFA. Premises have been acquired as appropriate to business opportunity and similarly human capital has been grown to meet the expansion of the service. Premises viewed and verbal confirmation from managers of other centres; indicated a high level of provision in respect of equipment and furnishing that provided a comfortable, yet business-like environment for those attending each centre. ICT is a common feature at all centres and a range of vocational training areas are offered at a selection of suitable locations. Nova has its own minibus vehicles to transport learners between vocational training sites according to demand.

At enrolment all learners are taken through an induction process which is designed to impart a full understanding of what their course/programme will be and to ensure that all pertinent legislative documentation is shared with the new learner and employer/parents/guardians, as appropriate. Course/programme documentation will be specific to the learning being undertaken and as such, will be defined by external bodies and/or funding partners. For procedures and processes under the control of Nova, then learners are provided with documentary and verbal information to assist in overall understanding of what is to be embarked upon and of how progression will be supported and encouraged. Senior; sector, quality and HR personnel are retained to ensure the updating, accuracy and currency of information resources in accordance with each specific delivery contract area.

Staff at Nova are encouraged to express their opinion on personal development through weekly 'buzz' meetings, monthly target meetings, quarterly performance reviews and at company 'Away Days'. Examples were offered by all staff interviewed of how they had been encouraged to progress their careers and where feasible, divert interests into emerging facets of developmental activity that would benefit both, learners, the service's impact and their own careers in the future. Equally, the definition of skills, knowledge and qualifications are frequently identified by funding partners, Awarding Bodies and the overall aims and objectives of the organisation to facilitate learner outcomes. Specific examples related to; training for the introduction and facilitation of the 'Learner Voice', instruction in the usage of social media, sales and marketing qualifications, Advice & Guidance awards and advanced tutor qualifications.

"You can request training in anything providing it will benefit the learner and the business" (Staff member)

"We are encouraged to research and source training opportunities relevant to our roles; if it's feasible, Nova will fund it" (Staff member)

Nova actually wants you to develop your career; compared to the attitude of other employers that is very refreshing" (Staff member)

Nova, having significantly grown its capacity in the last three years has taken on a number of new staff. All new staff members spoken to were able to express that they had received a fulsome induction to the company, whereby they were introduced to managers and colleagues, given a full briefing on the company and its procedures, ICT training and were offered time to acclimatise to new roles and environments. In all cases a clear understanding of expected performance levels were communicated to ensure that organisational aims and objectives were consistently met.

3. Service Delivery

The way in which the service is delivered effectively

Service provision by Nova is defined and in direct relation to funding agreements under contractual compliance. Approximately two thirds of overall contract value is with the EFA for FL and its derivatives and the remainder of provision is dedicated to apprenticeships via funding from The Agency. Clarification of provision is available to both Young People on FL and for those in work based learning (WBL), on apprenticeships. For FL learners, initial engagement may be whilst they are still at school and/or attending a Nova centre on a day-release basis or, if excluded from school, on a more regular schedule. These early involvements often lead to continued attendance after school leaving age has been reached and without exception, will involve inclusion in decision making by parents/guardians. For apprenticeships, decision making will invariably be for the individual to make in conjunction with their employers requirements, although parents/guardians may also be party to the process. In all cases, expected outcomes are agreed at the outset and all actions and decisions once agreed are fully documented in confidential and detailed individual learner files. These files further form the basis for recording progression and achievements throughout the learner journey. All learners are subject to an initial assessment to establish levels in English, maths and ICT and which invariably, will provide a datum point from which staff can inform on immediate needs and indicate longer-term potential to assist in the decision making of all stakeholders.

KPI are firmly set for each delivery contract and meticulous monitoring is in place at Nova to ensure that KPI are being fully met. Performance is recorded, monitored and analysed at every stage of delivery and whilst learners and if involved, employers and parents/guardians, are kept fully informed of progression, staff are left in no uncertainty on their part in successful outcomes. Monthly reviews are carried out with each staff member and whilst learner progression is a key priority, the performance of staff is seen to be critical in achieving individual learner and organisational success. Nova is currently performing to plan and expects to meet targets of 70% progression for FL and 90% success rates with apprenticeships. In business planning terms these figures represent an overall 10% planned increase on the previous year's performance and the organisation plans a 10% annual performance increment until 2015.

Nova is firmly of the belief that they should provide 'what is best for the learner' and this was echoed in staff interviews whereby learners were clearly at the forefront of consideration in all aspects of the service. This was further embodied in the understanding that learners may be better catered for under other provision and true impartiality saw that every learner was offered the best Advice & Guidance throughout their engagement to ensure that alternatives could be offered when the limitations of Nova were reached or compromised.

"We will explore every option before signposting a learner and only then, if it is going to be best for them" (Staff member)

Young People form the largest cohort of learners at Nova and present numerous challenges, primarily as a result of their prior educational experiences which have often led to marginalisation and/or exclusion from mainstream education. Much of the work done by Nova is therefore directed at getting individuals to explore future educational and employment opportunities, which in turn will direct their course of study and development whilst at Nova. Staff are fully conversant with their roles in developing and shaping the direction of each learner, but equally, stressed that they were there to encourage positive individual thinking and to create an empowered mind-set in each learner.

"We can set them up for success, but it is for them to explore, assess and make the best decisions for themselves and we encourage that from the beginning" (Staff member)

Whilst apprentices were, in general, more focussed and decisive about their career development, it still remained that final choices on the exact apprenticeship to follow would be for them, in conjunction with their employer's needs, to make the ultimate decisions.

Many learners interviewed were open and honest about their poor literacy, numeracy and ICT skills and that they understood this to be a major hurdle in achieving their aspirations. None the less there were many appreciative comments from learners who had faced up to these hurdles and were enthused by the recognition and support they had received from tutors and support staff. Similarly apprentices were complimentary of the support they had received in the workplace to raise their core skills levels and of the discreet and unobtrusive manner in which tuition had taken place.

"I have received so much support from my assessor and tutor; I couldn't have got through it without them" (Level 2 apprentice, now planning to do a Level 3)

I hated maths and English at school, but they have made it really easy for me to understand since coming here" (FL learner)

"I hadn't got a clue about IT, but I am much better now - the tutor has been brilliant" (FL learner)

"I was struggling with a personal matter and they picked up on it straight away; they spent all day sorting things out for me; I can't thank them enough - it would never have been that way if I was still at College" (FL Learner awaiting an apprenticeship placement)

Whilst apprentices by default need to be employed to undertake their awards and many are already employed before they approach Nova, the organisation is proactive in finding work placements to progress learners wherever possible. Often opportunities have been created within Nova itself and existing links with employers are frequently called upon when opportunities arise. Notwithstanding these scenarios, Nova has taken steps towards improved employer liaison and has recently employed a number of Placement and Progression Officers to more rigorously engage with employers and promote the services of Nova. This role was previously undertaken by Recruitment Officers and produced patchy results. The new role is seen to be more directly effective and although in its early stages has seen an 8% increase in placements in a month at one centre alone. Evidence of successful signposting and referral is further endorsed with the increased progression of FL learners from globally, circa 52% to a current level of 70%.

4. Continuous Quality Improvement

The way in which the service provided is reviewed and improved on an ongoing basis

The processes in place for performance management are strictly adhered to and the monthly, quarterly and annual cycle of review is rigorously applied to all areas of service delivery. Astute monitoring of recent performances has identified the need to implement closer attention to;

- Improved observation of teaching and learning practices resulting in the introduction of 'Active Learning' principles and increased performance levels rated at 80% compliancy in 2011/12 against 58% in 2010/11
- More involvement of learners in offering opinion on service delivery which has effected a number of changes to; operational, pastoral and environmental aspects of the service, as earlier noted
- The identification of low take-up by certain ethnic minority groups has been instrumental in direct action by Recruitment Officers in engaging with those hard to reach groups at local community levels

Similarly with analysis of learner outcomes the following has been implemented;

- Identification of the need to raise employer engagement has been addressed with the appointment of Placement and Progression Officers

- More robust measures have been introduced to ensure engagement, retention and successful, timely completions of courses and programmes are recorded and measures indicate that an annual 10% growth plan across all KPI is being observed

Feedback from learners on the quality of service provision, in particular those received at 'Learner Voice' sessions has been according to staff a "*revelation as to how people are thinking about us*". It was further expressed that it had made Nova more aware of the need to pay attention to detail in learner care and also of the need for continuous feedback engagement to ensure that issues arising were aired with impunity.

Controllable partnerships, specifically those with employers, were identified as a key link to the progression of learners, both for those on FL and importantly for apprentices. Whilst Nova is reliant on good relationships with employers, it is recognised that the best interests of learners was paramount in introductions to employment progression routes and careful monitoring of all aspects of Health & Safety and Equality of Opportunity were found to be in place for learners progressing on to employment opportunities, along with regular feedback from assessing staff on the quality of safeguarding and the level of support with opportunistic learning experiences.

Overall, the quality assurance of provision at Nova is prescribed by the guidelines of funding partners and the organisation is meticulous in adherence to stated directives. Internally, quality assurance procedures cover the effectiveness of teaching and learning, timely achievement of accredited awards, standardisation of delivery and the successful progression of learners onto preferred options. Regular quality assurance and performance meetings are in place and the natural occurring incidence of performance reviews, feedback processes and staff monitoring form a comprehensive procedure for identifying continuous quality improvement.

Staff performance is consistently under review and quarterly reviews are designed to ensure that staff are meeting targeted performance consistently, this review is also the opportunity to evaluate individual performance and staff are now graded according their proficiency in designated job roles. It was noted that improving observation of teaching and learning had been instrumental in improved retention and increases in timely successes.

Technology has become a key component in the day-to-day operation of business at Nova. An improved database has been installed and now offers a central information resource for staff and learners alike. The Nova website has been revamped to present a more professional image and now provides for better access to enrolment, is more informative and has good links to alternative support mechanisms. Social media is increasingly becoming used at Nova and provides a better platform to reach Young People in particular.

A strict monitoring procedure which is conducted monthly, quarterly and annually has become the key component in continuous evaluation of performance at Nova and this procedure linked to the introduction of the 'Learner Voice' has enabled the organisation to; ensure that aims and objectives are fully met, to grow and expand its service provision and to position itself as a respected provider in the Central Midlands region. Plans are in place to extend the service into additional locations within the region, in a controlled and viable manner.

8. The matrix Standard Evidence Grid

Criteria	Met	Not Met	Strength	AfCI
1.1	✓			
1.2	✓			
1.3	✓			✓
1.4	✓			✓
1.5	✓			
1.6	✓			
1.7	✓			
1.8	✓		✓	
2.1	✓			
2.2	✓			✓
2.3	✓		✓	
2.4	✓		✓	
2.5	✓			
3.1	✓		✓	
3.2	✓			
3.3	✓			
3.4	✓		✓	
3.5	✓		✓	
3.6	✓		✓	
4.1	✓		✓	
4.2	✓		✓	
4.3	✓			
4.4	✓			✓
4.5	✓			
4.6	✓		✓	
4.7	✓			
4.8	✓			

9. Conclusion

Nova Training has established an enviable record of successful engagement with disadvantaged and hard to reach groups within the communities that it operates. Adaption to ever-changing funding streams and priorities, linked to sustained performance in meeting and exceeding targets has enabled Nova to maintain a respected profile in what, is a sector of fluctuating fortunes.

Careful monitoring of the economic environment, political direction and human influence are strong points in the development of Nova's strategy and direction, yet the organisation remains astutely focussed on the plight of young people who are; currently farthest from the workplace, often through no fault of their own.

In meeting the **matrix** Standard, Nova met its own objectives and it is expected that in annual continuous improvement checks (CIC) areas identified for continuous improvement (AfCI) will have been fully addressed.