

# NORTHERN LEARNING TRUST



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## Assessment Information

<b>Assessment Type</b>	Accreditation Review
<b>Assessor's Decision</b>	Standard Met
<b>Assessor's Name</b>	Steve Jackson
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<b>Accreditation Review onsite visit to be conducted by</b>	04/03/2023

## Organisation – Introduction, Aims, Objectives and Outcomes

Northern Learning Trust (hereafter NLT) is a third sector organisation that delivers training in the North East region, focusing on Newcastle on Tyne, Northumberland, and Durham. NLT operates as a charitable trust and delivers education and training projects and programmes through housing associations and community organisations, providing learners with information, advice, and guidance (IAG). NLT's programmes are focused on giving vulnerable people the skills and confidence to be able to take some control in their lives. Poor self-esteem and low level skills are often the characteristics encountered in learners, so life skills, job seeking skills, and English, and Maths are the main activities provided alongside IAG which runs throughout NLT's activities. In-depth IAG is delivered by sub-contract with the local National Careers Service (NCS) contractor, EDT, and an IAG Adviser (employed by NLT) provides the Careers IAG Service three days a week.

Courses are designed and delivered (pre-lockdowns) to be provided in community settings and particularly NLT's centres called Learning Hives of which there are now eight. These are based in Bedlington, Newbiggin, Newsham, Walker, Newbiggin Hall, Ashington, Berwick, and Durham which are regarded as being key sites for the establishment of Learning Hives that add value to support services and act as a focus for support. During lockdowns NLT has provided online learning through MS Teams and IAG support by email, MS Teams, and phone. Feedback from learners and partners interviewed was very positive about this provision. All learners interviewed had experienced online learning and had no concerns. Trust and cooperation were evidenced widely.

NLT aims to improve the potential and raise the aspiration of people through learning. The IAG Service is described in the IAG Policy and objectives are set for individuals to identify the steps they need to take to improve their skills, to function on a daily basis and to move more effectively into work. The majority of the delivery is funded through ESF with clearly defined targets and goals. These include: 'moving into employment, training and further education, and economically inactive learners into job-searching'. Learning outcomes for learners are used to measure success of IAG services and re derived from project objectives that are reflected in individual targets and goals. These include: 'achieving qualifications, economically inactive learners job seeking, progression to further learning and/or training, employment, or voluntary work.' More personal targets are agreed between the learner and the tutors, Careers Advisor and project staff and are recorded using action plans or Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) depending on funders specifications. Learners interviewed confirmed ILPs are useful to remind them what they are aiming for, and crucially how far they have come. Softer outcomes such as confidence, and self-esteem were mentioned by all the learners interviewed. Tutors and the Careers Adviser all stated the need to ensure support for learners to make choices that confirmed NLT's aim to help learners' 'to improve their ability to become resilient, financially and emotionally, and to progress towards the world of work and financial wellbeing.'

Throughout NLT's delivery it was reassuring to see IAG and progression feature strongly and IAG is integral to all the activities. The importance of social contact cannot be underestimated and learners interviewed said that lockdowns had been difficult without the Learning Hives to go to (they have been closed since the first lockdown) and learners were eagerly awaiting their re-opening.

NLT managers support tutors to manage targets and outcomes. Tutors and the Careers Adviser ensure IAG is provided that will help NLT learners better access other opportunities and aid progression which is a principal objective. All learners receive initial IAG to ensure they are aware of the provision and the progression opportunities. Course aspirations are determined and agreement is reached on learners' objectives to ensure clarity about personal and clear goals. Learners are reviewed regularly and when courses finish learners are surveyed to determine satisfaction and what had gone well. Learners interviewed appeared to be extremely satisfied.

Comments made by learners interviewed included:

*'I would not have made it through this last lockdown without knowing I can go back to the Hive. I've been going there for two years before lockdown and the tutor has been great at encouraging me to take courses that are helping me to apply for jobs. I've got a good CV and she has talked to me about volunteering so I must be more positive than I was. The Hive is a godsend for the area – there is nothing else for local people.'* (Bedlington learner)

*'I've got a place on a counselling course at Newcastle College which is what I wanted to do. I've also got a part time job so suddenly everything is coming right. I couldn't have done this without my tutor. The course had everything I needed to help me with my CV and looking for jobs. I was even loaned a laptop. Meeting other learners online was a big help. The tutor is just amazing.'* (Berwick learner)

*'My tutor has made a huge difference to me – she is really great. I've never felt so good about my job prospects and I feel ready to go on learning now. She was always there to help me especially with my dyslexia and give me reassurance. I've done maths and English. At the beginning of my course I was really nervous about being online but now I am confident thanks to the help I've had from my tutor. I'm going to be a volunteer when the hive re-opens, which is brilliant'* (Berwick learner)

*'I've had so much help from my tutor – nothing was too much trouble. I have some learning difficulties and she has helped me talk more confidently to strangers. I'm also a full time carer for my parents. I was made redundant after twenty years in a job and I've found it hard to feel I'd ever get anything. But I signed up for a hospitality course and updated my CV so I'm going to start applying for jobs. The 1-2-1s I've had every fortnight with my tutor helped me massively. NLT are great!* (Ashington Learner)

And comments from partners interviewed:

*'I am so impressed by NLT. They have made impact in the Hives so well and we use them as a referral point for our families and individuals who are struggling. It's part of our strategy for managing arrears but we do recognise the difference made in life skills too which hopefully feeds through into how they can handle budgeting better and respect their property. Fantastic organisation!* (Housing Association representative)

*'NLT are great at challenging us on behalf of their learners. They are not averse to telling us if we are getting something wrong and their points are based on reality on the ground. We need that. The impact NLT makes is fantastic. They add huge value to the support provided. After ten years working with them its become a real partnership.'* (Housing Association Employability Services Manager)

These comments were typical of those encountered during the **matrix** Accreditation either through interviews or testimonials and feedback from learners. They demonstrate the quality of IAG support from NLT. The sincerity of learners about life-changing experiences that can challenge cultural norms and stereotypes was telling and gives much confidence in the support provided.

NLT monitors the hard outcomes and targets very carefully so that the data is robust for funders. There are different requirements for each funder and NLT works hard to ensure data is accurate. Evidence was provided for the **matrix** Accreditation Review. One example showed forecasts for outcomes and actual achievement with variances explained. NLT regularly achieves and sometime over-achieves targets. These had been updated to March 2021 and included analysis of learner, achievement and retention and progression with 33 different categories of learner to monitor.

NLT had also completed the **matrix** Standard Self-Assessment form and this helped clarify very well how NLT was progressing. It was completed honestly and fully and appeared to reflect the findings from the **matrix** Accreditation Review.

NLT makes very good use of its resources, and the small staff group it employs. Excellent team-working featured strongly in the organisation as may be expected, and this is a very important element of the NLT's success. IT support has increased, and the introduction of online learning and IAG had gone well. Learners interviewed confirmed that working on-line was managed well by NLT. Examples were given of high quality information provided to learners through website referral, particularly to reputable organisations, such as colleges and helplines. It is recognised how important high quality IAG is to achievement and there is appropriate emphasis on 'front-end' support. The NCS Careers Adviser enables in-depth support that enhances the support provided by tutors leaving them to focus on other areas of IAG support, such as mental health and referral examples were provided such as CAB, housing organisations and local charities.

NLT provides staff with access to an impressive range of training and CPD opportunities. Team meetings include good practice sharing and focus on specific Learning Hives as appropriate. One of the tutors is currently following IAG L2 to build expertise in supporting learners and hopes to move to L3/4. NLT recognises the need to address mental health issues and some tutors have taken the Mental Health First Aid courses and additional wellbeing courses. Prevent, British Values, Safeguarding and Health and Safety are all revisited annually. There is significant potential for enhancing online provision through webinars, blogs, podcasts and sharing of learning and IAG materials. There could be further resources developed around self-employment and enterprise for learners to encourage business ideas and entrepreneurship.

NLT carries out regular feedback activities among learners and achieves excellent satisfaction rates. NLT always receives positive feedback, though lockdowns have made it difficult in 20/21. Recent analysis of learner feedback shared during the **matrix** Assessment Review showed 97% of learners were satisfied (23%) or very satisfied (74%) with their course/support overall whilst 93% were either satisfied (30%) or very satisfied (63%) with the standard of IAG they were given. Learners confirmed they are always asked about progress and whether learning sessions have been effective for them. Partners interviewed were equally positive about NLT and were very pleased to be associated with the organisation.

There is an effective quality assurance approach taken to IAG that demonstrates how the **matrix** Standard has been used positively to improve the IAG service and provide clarity about service expectations. Management control is strong but relaxed. Staff commented that they were not 'micro-managed' but trusted to do a good job. This results in staff who are invested in the learners and NLT's success. The Quality Assurance processes and procedures are robust, and processes appeared comprehensive and appropriate, particularly given the onerous requirements imposed on the organisation for ESF funding, and funding derived from Combined Local Authorities.

During the **matrix** Assessment Review it was evident that at an individual and strategic level NLT has in place very effective approaches to continuous quality improvement. This allows NLT to deliver successfully. Partners and learners commented on the way that NLT is always looking to improve, and it is suggested that continuing joint activity could develop with partners around the demand for creative employability training, particularly after the furlough scheme ends. These will obviously be dependent on funding and successful bidding but NLT's model remains effective and is critical to bringing individuals and communities into education and training that otherwise would have very little access. Staff are impressive, with enthusiasm and ideas that give much confidence for the future.

NLT can be confident it is a very effective organisation that provides a valued and valuable learning service to the people of the North East, and potentially a wider geographic and demographic area.

## Strengths

A number of strengths were identified during the assessment, which are detailed below. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

- NLT provides clear leadership for its staff with very good direction, communication, and decision making. NLT has created a clear ethos which staff members support strongly and this stimulates excellent team working. Innovation in the organisation is enabling forward thinking and building a reputation for excellent delivery. (1.1,1.2)
- The existence of the community Learning Hives remains popular and very well supported by local communities and partners. The model provides excellent results and fosters trust and confidence in NLT and other users of the Learning Hives. Partner housing associations recognise the added value of these centres and that NLT enables the Learning Hives' successes. The model should be adopted as good practice for other organisations to benefit from. (2.1, 3.2)
- Partners interviewed consistently praised the quality of delivery and the high standard of support for learners. Partners cited the professionalism, expertise and enthusiasm of staff and their positive attitude. (1.8, 3.2)
- NLT is a capable organisation that is not fazed by taking on vulnerable and complex learners. Some learners require sustained support and tailored solutions which tutors are skilled at negotiating and presenting. NLT Tutors share life experiences that help learners gain confidence and resilience. (2.1, 3.2)
- There is a strong compliance and quality culture. NLT maintains a robust Quality Assurance system. The commitment to continuous improvement through the **matrix** Standard is embedded in all activities in delivery and reinforced by NLT values. The **matrix** SAR was completed appropriately and reflected well the current situation of NLT. (4.2, 4.3, 4.8)
- NLT responsibilities are discharged effectively and consistently with regard to safeguarding and health and safety. NLT's approach to the coronavirus lockdown demonstrated absolute commitment to safe working practices and procedures that ensured risks were minimised and learners would feel safe and be safe. Learners interviewed confirmed they felt safe in learning environments, and particularly the 'safe spaces' created online. (1.4)
- NLT has established an effective online offer and its digital footprint is capable of expansion. Loan laptops and dongles provided during lockdowns were funded by NLT and provided greater flexibility in determining priorities. (2.1, 3.2)
- Referral networks appear strong and appropriate helping NLT build capacity and support learners effectively. (1.8)
- NLT has improved its reputation for being an excellent place to learn. The prevalence of good practice gives NLT programmes authenticity and boosts effectiveness. Shared values and a commitment to help learners progress well, enhances delivery. (2.1)



## Areas for Development

Areas for development are offered in the spirit of continuous improvement and a way for an Assessor to add value e.g. where the service is of a high quality, development areas are offered to help the service be even better than it already is, or to give insight into practices seen elsewhere. There is no correlation between the number of strengths and areas for development. Where development areas are greater in number this is not intended to indicate that the information, advice and guidance service is in any way lacking. These will form the basis for discussion at the Continuous Improvement Checks (CIC) conducted twelve and twenty-four months from the date of this Assessment, along with any other notable developments. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

The annual **matrix** Continuous Improvement Check will allow the organisation to demonstrate on an ongoing basis the developments they are continuing to make in order to support individuals. These may include the Areas for Development above. <https://matrixstandard.com/assessment-journey/continuous-improvement-checks/>

Please note that annual Continuous Improvement Checks are mandatory and non-completion within the required timescale will impact on your organisation's accreditation, please see the section Assessment Information for dates.

- NLT should review with its partners and learners what has worked well during lockdown and ensure positive lessons learned are embedded into delivery. This review could be valuable in accelerating good practice in online learning and IAG practice and developing future blended learning approaches. Ofsted has produced a 'what works well in remote learning' guide which can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/whats-working-well-in-remote-education/whats-working-well-in-remote-education> (4.1, 4.8)
- The wider use of social media is an objective for the future. The website has improved and is good but could celebrate success of learners even more overtly by using Talking Heads and video particularly for learners from groups and geographic areas where there is low expectation and aspiration. The website has some dated content that would benefit from refreshing e.g. impact reports are now three/four years out of date. NLT could consider using Tik Tok, Instagram or You Tube. Videos on social media and especially You Tube could demonstrate how learners from 'socially deprived' areas or non-traditional backgrounds can succeed. Learners could be willing to create blogs or be the subject of Talking Heads to share their back-story and hopefully inspire others to try courses. (1.6, 2.1, 3.2)
- There was evidence of using former learners' experience for promotion to provide inspirational evidence that learners from NLT can and do succeed, perhaps unexpectedly. It is suggested that NLT adopt a more consistent approach by creating an 'Alumni Strategy' that harnesses the talents and loyalty of former learners to add impetus to acquiring career management skills and help raise aspirations, especially for those learners from 'socially deprived' areas. NLT could explore using blogs and podcasts to share these experiences. (1.6, 2.1, 3.2)
- NLT has secured funding for the Durham Learning Hive for an additional worker in the Post Covid Resilience Team. This could provide valuable evidence to demonstrate how well the Learning Hives work. The project could also enable NLT to explore Social Prescribing models and the use of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and talking therapies to bring about changes. Additionally low-intensity therapies may add capacity in the other Learning Hives and provide more sustainable outcomes especially resilience. (2.1, 3.2, 4.2)



- It is suggested that NLT challenge itself and its partners to ensure learners are representative of learners who would benefit most from provision. It is further suggested there could be more targeting of specific communities where take up of provision provided by NLT and its partners is low. More detailed analytics focusing on for example, high population density areas and specific rural areas, could help identify potential project opportunities. It is recognised that course participation boosts the numbers from BAME groups in Newcastle, perhaps masking actual BAME participation in other provision. (1.4)
- Tutors mentioned that they talked to learners about self-employment and starting a business. It is suggested more online materials are sourced—perhaps even create an online unit or use existing materials to refer learners to. (2.1, 3.2)
- Partners interviewed were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about NLT but suggested that the success of NLT was not widely known nor promoted enough. It is suggested this is not a marketing issue as such but a need to raise awareness relentlessly among funders about impact and value for money. Consideration of the new government report, *A Plan for an Adult Skills and Lifelong Learning Revolution* and influencing strategy subsequently could provide a fresh start to these efforts. See <https://www.tes.com/news/adult-education-needs-revolution-say-mps> (1.8, 4.1)
- It would be helpful to create a version control system for policies and procedures to enable tracking of changes and ensure staff are accessing up to date documents. For example the IAG Policy is dated April 2021 but there is no version number or indication that managers have signed off changes and that the version is current. It is good practice to review policies annually to ensure currency and relevance. (1.3, 1.4)

## Methodology

The following methods were used to gather evidence against the **matrix** Standard during the assessment process. All interviews were carried out by telephone or by MS Teams video link.

Initial discussions with the CEO to identify scope of the Assessment

Opening meeting with the CEO

Interviews with:

Operations Manager

Contract and Performance Officer

Two Community Engagement Tutors

National Careers Service Careers Adviser

Bridge Project Worker

Four learners

Five Partners

Closing meeting with the CEO

Desk research including **matrix** Self-Assessment Review 20/21, Covid-19 online policy, IAG Policy, Safeguarding Policy, Stress Management Policy, Impact Reports, Sample Output reports, Learner Surveys, Case studies, Learner Testimonials, Website and Face Book.

## Conditions of Accreditation

Holders of the **matrix** Standard Accreditation must:

1. Maintain and continually improve upon their services.
2. Throughout the period of accreditation satisfy The Growth Company that the organisation continues to meet the requirements of the **matrix** Standard via the annual continuous improvement checks and the three-year accreditation review.
3. Complete annual continuous improvement checks in a timely way, it is expected these will be carried out annually by the accreditation anniversary date.
4. Inform The Growth Company or their Assessor if the key contact name/contact details change.
5. Submit their Booking Form for re-accreditation to the **matrix** Standard at least 3 months prior to the accreditation anniversary date ensuring all pre on-site activity is completed in a timely way including planning, payment and interview scheduling. Accreditation Reviews are due 3 years from the anniversary accreditation date; it is expected that organisations will be assessed by this date or will risk being de-accredited.
6. Inform The Growth Company of any significant changes made to the organisational structure, senior management or systems that may impact on their accreditation; email: [matrixStandard@growthco.uk](mailto:matrixStandard@growthco.uk).
7. Inform The Growth Company immediately if they wish to extend or reduce the scope of their accreditation.
8. Inform The Growth Company of any serious complaint or rise in numbers of complaints received (within the scope of the accreditation).
9. Not undertake or omit to undertake any activity that may be misleading and/or may cause The Growth Company and/or the **matrix** Standard to be brought into disrepute.
10. Only use the **matrix** Standard Quality Mark for the areas within the scope of the accreditation and in accordance with the guidelines. For example, if a certain department is successfully **matrix** accredited, the Quality Mark can only be used on that department's letterhead or on that department's page on their internet homepage.
11. Ensure in cases where accreditation is withdrawn or where they do not come forward for accreditation review, remove from display any certificates or plaques issued by The Growth Company and do not display the **matrix** Standard Quality Mark nor refer to be a former holder of the **matrix** Standard.
12. Be aware that The Growth Company reserves the right to remove any accreditation and/or certification previously applied if payment is not received for services provided.