

BCTG



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Assessment Information

Assessment Type	Accreditation Review
Assessor's Decision	Standard Met
Assessor's Name	Steve Jackson
Visit Date	08/06/2021 – 10/06/2021
Client ID	C12136
Assessment Reference	PN200816
Continuous Improvement Check Year 1 due by	28/05/2022
Continuous Improvement Check Year 2 due by	28/05/2023
Accreditation Review onsite visit to be conducted by	28/05/2024

Organisation – Introduction, Aims, Objectives and Outcomes

Black Country Training Group (BCTG hereafter in this document) is a not-for-profit training company limited by guarantee. BCTG is based in Oldbury in the West Midlands but operates throughout the West Midlands and through acquisition is gaining a wider geographic spread. The organisation has two directors with a Group Operations Manager responsible for the day-to-day management of the business. The directors are supported by an Advisory Board that meets bi-monthly to review outcomes, safeguarding and offer appropriate support and challenge. One of the Non-Executive Directors is a current Ofsted Inspector so BCTG receives regular updates on Ofsted practice and advice on approaches. Challenge is welcomed by Managers of the BCTG and encouraged.

BCTG established a separate company, The Apprenticeship Works (TAW) to work closely with local partners and employers. The Apprenticeship Works is an ESFA Approved Apprentice Training Agency (ATA), a somewhat rarer model that leases apprentices to employers for training and eventual employment. BCTG derives funding from a number of sources: ESFA for apprenticeship training, West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) for AEB and other structural funds and Big Lottery for a Talent Match programme to support those furthest from the job market including those in offending behaviour. BCTG is well-connected with funding bodies and is adept at bidding for, and winning, new contracts to augment its offer and add value to community development.

Current provision for learners includes traineeships, apprenticeship training, 16-19 Study Programmes and adult employability programmes. The range of sectors covered by BCTG is extensive with construction, health and social care, logistics and early years predominating, while engineering, business administration and supervision and leadership and management courses provide excellent progression routes, especially in health and social care and early years. Construction training has been enhanced with the establishment of a Construction Skills Centre in West Bromwich and through partnership another in Glossop in Derbyshire. This development has provided the opportunity for short course training too, including CSCS courses and introductory courses to trades.

BCTG acquired Eurosource Solutions Ltd in July 2018 following that organisation's disappointing Ofsted inspection, and PTP Training (trading as Performance Through People – PTP hereafter) in May 2020. PTP are graded 'good' by Ofsted and were acquired to add greater diversity in the BCTG offer. Currently Eurosource is a separate brand within BCTG while PTP is operating outside the BCTG structure. For the purposes of the **matrix** Accreditation Review Eurosource will be combined with the BCTG **matrix** accreditation, while PTP operates under its own **matrix** accreditation.

Since the last **matrix** Accreditation Review in 2018, BCTG has improved in several key areas. Investment in staff and resources has improved capability and capacity and the company's focus on growth through quality provided new impetus to the company. Partners and employers interviewed during the **matrix** Accreditation Review were unequivocal in their praise of the quality of partnership working and high-quality delivery.

During the **matrix** Accreditation Review there was strong evidence to help understand how BCTG delivers its training and support to learners to a high standard. The scope of the **matrix** Accreditation Review was based on the Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) service provided to apprentices, learners, and their employers. All delivery staff in BCTG are trained to IAG L3 or L4 or are in the process of following this qualification. IAG is embedded in the delivery of all BCTG's learning activities and is recognised as key to performance. Achievement and retention are the key performance measures used and BCTG has robust systems to ensure these are carefully monitored. Outcomes for learners remain high despite lockdowns and disruption during the last year.

Online learning and IAG support have been provided successfully by BCTG during this time and apprentices interviewed said they felt well-supported. All preferred classroom-based learning but had positive experiences of learning online. Remote learning has suited some learners such as those in residential settings who could plan their learning around shift patterns.

The delivery of apprenticeships' learning content and IAG support has been improved over the last three years with the introduction of a course management system called Canvas which allows tutors to create content and set assignments as well as learners using it interactively to post their own work and monitor progress. This system is used considerably by HE institutions. Linked to the use of E-portfolio BCGT has a flexible and powerful system to ensure learners are clear about their progress. BCTG tutors can take quick action if learners are falling behind or indicate they may not have understood a module or unit. The ability to vary the curriculum has led to innovative work being carried out by tutors and apprentices interviewed said they found Canvas easy to use and extremely helpful. Access to support materials includes referral agencies for IAG support.

TAW appears to have been very well-received by employers. BCTG is particularly concerned to improve the quality of applicants for apprenticeships and that they are screened to ensure 'right person, right employer' which contributes greatly to improving retention rates. TAW enables employers to advertise specific opportunities and BCTG offers a full screening service to employers for apprenticeships. Because of the ATA model apprentices are leased to employers with strong indications of a job at the end of the apprenticeship and remarkably of those who remain with their employer 100% are offered jobs. Overall, there is a 90% success rate into jobs. IAG lies at the heart of the process with robust IAG at the beginning of the process of recruitment to regular IAG throughout the apprenticeship, from Training Advisers. Where an apprentice may be having doubts about their chosen vocational area referral can be made to an IAG Officer who can refer on to other opportunities as required or help the apprentice with their issues more personally. This dimension of IAG support is a clear advantage and helps raise the retention rate.

The Lead IAG Officer also provides local schools with IAG and attends many Careers Fairs and events either physically or virtually over the last year. There are close working relationships with local authorities and with Connexions Sandwell to support those who may be NEET or at risk of becoming NEET. One of the apprentices interviewed had been in the latter category and had been referred to BCTG and had been placed on a short building course which then led to an apprenticeship. In the Initial Assessment stage additional needs are identified and appropriate adjustments are made. There is a clear IAG process, ensuring that apprentices know what is expected of them. Employers interviewed said they recognised the benefit of the ATA with more motivated apprentices. There were also positive comments about the speed of response. Marketing and particularly use of social media is very good and example 'good news stories' were provided.

Apprentices receive IAG at their induction, on course and on exit and this is made clear in the Induction. Apprentices interviewed confirmed they had discussed career plans beyond the qualification but remained happy with their current employer. Apprentices confirmed they were formally reviewed once/twice a month and regular reviews involving their employer took place and included career IAG discussions.

An interesting development recently introduced has been a new focus on the End Point Assessment process (EPA). Apprentices are asked at the beginning of their apprenticeship what grading (pass, merit, or distinction) they want to aim for. This has the effect of raising aspiration in many apprentices' plans and provides a focus on achievement. There is a clear articulation of the learning needed and the IAG required to achieve their chosen grading pathway and this is an early challenge to apprentices (and employers) expectations. This also stresses the importance of the EPA.

Use of Canvas provides individual needs to be identified and better engagement with training beyond the apprenticeship curriculum. This emphasises personal target setting and review as well as engaging the apprentice in their own development. Apprentices' ownership of personal targets is also emphasised and apprentices interviewed confirmed these form the basis of each review with new targets set for the following period. Apprentices interviewed said this helped them focus and the overall ambition helped motivation.

BCTG has put in place a series of targets to raise and maintain achievement and produces regular reports to monitor progress. As may be expected apprenticeships are measured by three Key Performance Indicators: retention, achievement, and progression, and BCTG uses its QA system to monitor progress and outcomes well. Current performance suggested higher retention, and apprentices being well on target to complete, having used lockdowns to complete theory units. Examples of monitoring learner outcomes include EPA pass rates. In May 2021 achievement rates were: Distinction 21.3%, Merit 21.3%, Pass 48.7%, Fail 7.6%, which gives a first-time pass rate of 92.4% which compares favourably with other training providers. There was some reduction in achievement rates directly attributable to lockdowns, particularly in the Health and Social Care sector which has been quite volatile over the last year.

Performance data reports are subject to scrutiny by the Group Operations Manager and the Head of Quality and Performance and the Board and sample reports were provided for the **matrix** Accreditation Review. These demonstrated a high degree of analysis. For example, there were detailed analyses of achievements on WMCA AEB course that included soft skills analysis. One refinement not available to most training providers is the use of Quality and Performance managers to carry out additional research into the background of reports, such as investigation of possible trends and the identification of gaps. These investigations can be triggered by questions from the Advisory Board or individual senior managers, but such capacity means that bids and contract negotiations can be backed up with evidence from this form of research, representing a considerable asset to the organisation.

An Employer Engagement Strategy still being developed was shared during the **matrix** Accreditation Review. It demonstrated how BCGT will consistently engage with employers driven by the Business Development Officers who are responsible for initial contact and employer sign-up. Usefully this document described key performance indicators (KPIs) which helped to anchor this activity clearly in the performance of the company. These KPIs were:

- 80% or more of learners improve their workplace productivity or economic output through gaining employment, a promotion or better paid, stable employment.
- At least 93% of employers confirm productivity improvements because of skills training. At least 93% of employers rate us as Good or Outstanding.
- Every Apprentice benefits from high quality, personalised off the Job training for at least 20% of their programme, delivered flexibly to meet their needs.
- At least 97% Apprentices to remain in employment after the end of their programme.

The first two targets are good bases for measuring impact and it is emerging good practice to focus on the impact on employers. It will be interesting to see how these KPIs develop over time.

BCTG makes good use of its resources and its staff are its principal asset. They are highly motivated towards the company's ethos and those staff members who had experience of other training organisations were able to reflect that they were happy working for BCTG suggesting the not-for-profit ethos was a positive difference.

All staff interviewed felt the line management support was very good and that they could share issues without stigma. Staff interviewed talked about 'great team work' and always trying to find better ways of improving. Team working featured strongly as may be expected, and this is a particularly important element of the company's success. Facilities in the construction training centre and at Oldbury, are very good as indicated by the apprentices and staff as no physical visit could be made by the **matrix** Assessor.

Discussion with apprentices about online learning was very helpful in understanding the impact of going online with helpful comments that will help inform future decisions about the company's next steps. Apprentices interviewed confirmed that working online was managed well by BCTG. It is recognised by BCTG staff how important high quality IAG is to achievement and there is appropriate emphasis on 'front-end' support. Examples were provided of high-quality information provided to apprentices through website referral, particularly to reputable organisations and product manufacturers. TAW staff were able to give examples of where they had referred apprentices to other career sector websites for progression information. BCTG ensures access to current information on other sources of help such as mental health and addiction, and there were further examples provided by Training Advisers of information sources on careers. Training Advisers and IAG staff themselves are valuable sources of career information and excellent, even inspirational, role models.

Regular team meetings and standardisation meetings provide many opportunities to build on knowledge and skills and identify emerging good practice. Examples of mandatory training included Prevent Strategy, British values, safeguarding and health and safety.

Continuous professional development (CPD) is monitored by the Head of Quality and Performance Manager who also undertakes observations. Staff can access online training easily and gave many examples of online training they had undertaken, some recommended by line managers. There is enormous potential for enhancing CPD through webinars, blogs, vlogs and sharing of learning and IAG materials and it is well worth the company exploring how it can make thematic teaching units or sections available.

BCTG places a high priority on feedback from apprentices. They confirmed that their feedback is sought regularly often by online survey. Employers and partners confirmed they are always able to provide feedback and are regularly asked for their views. Apprentices interviewed noted that they could provide feedback including responses to surveys and they confirmed that their always asked them for feedback after every session. High levels of satisfaction with support on apprenticeships were evidenced and there were many comments about extra support that BCTG's staff provide to apprentices on programmes and learners on employability programmes.

Feedback from employers and partners confirmed positive interventions and respect from those interviewed for the professionalism of BCTG staff. Phrases such as 'BCTG are fantastic' (employer) and 'brilliant staff' were used by employers and partners. Learner surveys receive high satisfaction ratings. The latest survey of employers showed that 28% of employers were less than satisfied and this was being followed up with phone discussions to understand why there was such a dip in satisfaction rates which is highly unusual. Regardless of the result the concern and follow up action described gave confidence that the process was robust enough to make changes and respond accordingly. Feedback from stakeholders is a key performance indicator as evidenced in the Self-Assessment Review and Quality Improvement Plan for 20/21 provided.

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 to staff about service expectations. Management control is strong but relaxed.

Even though the **matrix** Accreditation Review was carried out remotely the wealth of evidence encountered in interviews, and the quality of evidence provided to the **matrix** Assessor demonstrated that BCTG is operating at a high level of competence and effectiveness. Reviews of service and performance were shared extensively and generated considerable confidence that these processes are customer focused and clearly support the evolving ethos of the company. The commitment to high quality IAG and continuous improvement built into the **matrix** Standard was obvious. The impact on apprentices on programmes was clear and unequivocal, and those interviewed were confident and positive about their future as a result of their apprenticeship and learning with BCTG.

BCTG's resilience will be tested in the continuing aftermath of the coronavirus, particularly the effect on the labour market after the furlough scheme ends, though there were positive signs of businesses indicating a need to recruit apprentices. The IAG support in place is testimony to the professionalism of staff and their determination to enable apprentices to achieve the best possible outcomes from their experiences with BCTG.

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.

- BCTG provides clear strategic leadership and management with excellent direction, communication, and decision making. BCTG managers provide particularly good management support to staff. Employers and partners interviewed commented on the effectiveness of the organisation and were pleased and proud to be associated with BCTG. (1.1, 1.2)
- BCTG has an authority and reputation that is reflected in the ethos and high-quality delivery evidenced. The ethos of the company grounded in a not-for-profit legal entity enables BCTG to focus on learners and community benefit. Staff are proud to be associated with a company that can move beyond targets and see the bigger picture. (1.1, 2.1, 3.2)
- The ATA model appears to be working very well and creates loyalty and trust among employers. Employers and partners interviewed consistently praised the quality of delivery and cited the professionalism and enthusiasm of staff and their 'can do' attitude. The reputation of the organisation is a key part of their remaining partnered with BCTG. Further comments included the importance of BCTG lobbying effectively on behalf of private training providers in the Black Country and West Midlands. (1.8, 3.2)
- IAG activity is very well embedded in the delivery of apprenticeships and apprentices interviewed felt they were well supported and received good IAG. (2.1, 3.2)
- There is a strong compliance and quality culture. BCTG maintains a robust Quality Assurance system to enable it monitor outcomes effectively for its various funders and their often-rigorous requirements. The commitment to continuous improvement is embedded in all activities in delivery and reinforced by its values. The ability of the Quality Assurance Team to carry out further research into impact and trends as well as going beyond statistical analyses gives BCGT an edge. (4.2, 4.3, 4.8)
- The Talent Match provision is well-regarded and essential for those furthest away from the job market. It appears to be highly effective in raising soft skills levels and particularly giving participants the confidence to improve their skills further. (2.1, 3.2)
- BCTG's responsibilities are discharged effectively and consistently with regard to safeguarding and health and safety. BCTG's approach to the coronavirus lockdown demonstrated absolute commitment to safe working practices and procedures that ensured risks were minimised and apprentices and learners would feel safe and be safe. (1.4)
- Since the last **matrix** Accreditation Review BCTG has maintained and improved its ethos. This appeared to be a major factor in how well the acquisition of Eurosource was handled with staff from Eurosource describing this as very professionally managed. The focus on high quality delivery is underpinned by particularly good internal quality assurance and sharing of good practice gives BCTG an edge in determining what works well. Shared values and a commitment to help apprentices and learners progress well enhances delivery. The company provides excellent opportunities for staff and apprentices to acquire new skills. (2.1, 2.4, 3.2)

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.

- BCTG has managed the lockdown arrangements very well and apprentices interviewed recognised that they had been enabled to complete units and apprenticeships successfully. BCTG staff were uniformly praised for their dedication and commitment. BCTG could consider holding a 'what we have learnt' event for staff and find out from apprentices/learners and employers and partners what had gone well with online learning and IAG to inform future decisions. BCTG will need to determine the future balance of its teaching, learning and IAG delivery methods, and this should be done while experiences are still fresh. Apprentices appreciated the online sessions but obviously missed the practical sessions in the training centre. They also said they preferred 'proper' social contact with other apprentices and wanted to be able to discuss work informally. (1.2, 2.1, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2)
- There was evidence of using former apprentices' experience for marketing to provide inspirational evidence that apprentices from BCTG can and do succeed, perhaps unexpectedly. It is suggested that BCTG adopt a more consistent approach by creating an Alumni Strategy that harnesses the talents and loyalty of former apprentices to add impetus to acquiring career management skills and help raise aspirations especially for those apprentices from 'socially deprived' areas. BCTG could explore using webinars and recorded masterclasses to share these experiences. Identifying within the destinations of former apprentices, excellent examples of success to share with potential apprentices and their parents will enhance choice and give them better perspectives. Some current BCTG employers are former BCTG apprentices who could record their experiences of setting up their own business and what it is like to be an entrepreneur. (1.8, 2.1, 3.2)
- IAG is well-embedded in all the training activities of BCTG and the IAG Policy reflects the intention to raise standards to impact on retention and progression. It is suggested that formal Observation of IAG could be included in the observation cycle and that peer observation would be advantageous to spreading good practice and ideas among staff. (2.4, 4.1, 4.2)
- Learner voice activity is good. It is suggested that BCGT consider re-instating focus groups to augment the feedback gathered in surveys and improve the quality of feedback along more thematic lines e.g. use of Canvas, communication methods, knowledge of short course and online offering. (4.2, 4.5, 4.8)

- BCTG encourages staff to undertake CPD activities and training particularly online including mental health/wellbeing courses. It is suggested that the company work towards all staff taking the Mental Health First Aid course to give confidence about differences between conditions and right language to use when discussing wellbeing and mental health. Over time safeguarding staff could increase their knowledge by obtaining L2/L3 mental health awareness. This also strengthens BCTG's position in discharging its duty of care responsibilities to staff and to learners. (1.4, 2.1, 2.4, 3.2)
- BCTG has adapted ways of identifying soft skills development in its AEB programmes to improve learner outcomes. It is suggested that some review of the impact of the tools used is carried out to ascertain the effect on increasing learner confidence and improving attainment rates with personalised learning and on other programmes. (4.1, 4.2)
- The Apprenticeships Works is well respected by apprentices and employers interviewed. It is a model that works very well. One employer interviewed suggested that there could be even closer liaison about the construction of job descriptions to enable better CVs to be written against job criteria. This employer felt there would be a reduction in the number of rejected CVs because of misunderstandings about job purpose and elements. It was recognised this was a much the need to focus employers on producing better job description and The Apprenticeship Works is ideally placed to help with this. The Apprenticeships Works can also help find candidates from underrepresented groups and this should be promoted as value-added. (2.1, 3.2)
- There was evidence of some activity around the promotion of self-employment and entrepreneurship but this could be more consistent and focused. Given the success of former apprentices creating their own company it is suggested there could be a unit(s) developed that include learning about enterprise, business creation/incubation to support new business ideas. The local Chamber of Commerce may also be interested in supporting this venture. (1.8, 2.1, 3.2)
- It may be valuable to carry out a return or social return on investment exercise around the impact of programmes such as Talent Match and TAW to add to the evidence of impact and added value. This could also be helpful in future bidding processes. (4.1, 4.4, 4.8)
- As always there is the challenge of how to attract more apprentices from non-traditional backgrounds. There were some excellent examples, even one young woman being interviewed by the BBC since she was of Asian heritage and enjoying training to be a bricklayer. However, these remain unusual and BCGT could build upon success like this to encourage more role model examples that might encourage applicants from under-represented groups. Since BCTG is inevitably reactive to applicants through its job advertising and social media it may wish to consider targeting specific groups and using differentiated messaging to drive traffic to specific recruitment campaigns. These could also be promoted through local the Careers events it attends virtually or physically. (1.5, 2.1, 3.2)
- There were some specific suggestions arising from the interviews carried out. One apprentice appeared unaware of BCGT 'in the background' and appeared not to have received emails from the company. Similarly, a management apprentice and employer also said he had not received emails informing him of other courses offered by BCTG. Further he was not aware of any employer portal he could use. It is suggested that a QA check is held regularly to ensure all learners' emails were correct and employer communication is subject to a baseline check to ensure learners and employers are receiving BCGT's communications. (2.1, 3.2)

- A learner on a L5 course suggested that some of the language used in a unit about legal frameworks was outdated and that the unit was not date stamped. This may be a symptom of the review cycle being delayed but legislation quoted in units should be up to date. (2.1, 3.2)

Methodology

The following methods were used to gather evidence against the **matrix** Standard during the assessment process. The **matrix** Accreditation Review took place post Lockdown 3 and was carried out remotely by MS Teams and telephone.

Initial discussions with the Group Operations Manager to identify scope

Opening meeting with the Group Operations Manager and Head of Quality and Performance

Interviews with:

Quality & Compliance Manager

Two Performance and Compliance Managers

Two Business Development Officers (one based with Eurosource)

Quality & Curriculum Manager & Lead IQA (based in Eurosource)

The Apprenticeship Works Manager

Lead IAG Officer

Talent Match Hub Lead

Nine Training Advisers covering Construction, Health & Social Care, Residential Care and Early Years

Digital Marketing Officer

Digital & Functional Skills Leads

One Advisory Board member

Lead IQA and IEPA for Business

Five employers

Four Partners including two sub-contract organisations and two funding body representatives

Eight apprentices

Closing meeting with the Group Operations Manager and Head of Quality & Performance

Desk research including Self-Assessment Review document, QIP, sample SMT meetings with Performance data, Policies including, CEIAG, Equality and Diversity, Safeguarding and Prevent Strategy, Apprentices learning support materials, Website, social media including Face Book and LinkedIn

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.
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.