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Introduction

The aim of this Improvement Action Plan is to provide a comprehensive update on the Group’s response to the recent Ofsted inspection outcome and beyond. This plan outlines the approach NCG will take to ensuring we rapidly deliver the improvements in quality across NCG identified by Ofsted (and by our own self assessment).

Our goal is not to recover a ‘good’ judgement for NCG as a whole, but to pivot the organisation towards a more ambitious goal – to ensure that each constituent part of NCG is at or on a clear trajectory towards an ‘outstanding’ judgement. Critical to this is a review of the role NCG has to play in the quality of provision across our divisions. We will move to a more robust central Continuous Quality Improvement function rather than the previous Quality Assurance approach, with the aim of supporting improvement across each division in a way consistent with operating the NCG Group model of distributed leadership.

Definitions

The term teacher is used to refer to all teaching and training staff within the Group, including teachers and educators, lecturers, assessors, instructors, learning support.

The term learner is used to refer to all recipients of teaching and training and will include learners on study programmes, adult provision, high needs learners, apprentices and commercial activity.

Improvement Action Plan refers specifically to this document, an overview of the process and expectations.

Quality Improvement Plan refers to a specific Excel based-template/working document which sets out the measurable actions to be achieved at Group and in all divisions.
The Vision for NCG

This Improvement Action Plan signals a step-change for NCG - it is the start of a process that will fundamentally reshape our priorities and redefine what it means to be part of NCG. Our purpose is to unlock the potential of our learners and we will achieve this by offering an outstanding teaching and learning experience to all of our learners, all of the time. As a milestone, we will seek to ensure that all divisions of NCG are on a clear trajectory toward ‘outstanding’ learner experiences and outcomes by August 2020.

Historic strategic priorities have focused on a relentless focus for financial resilience, whilst moves in recent years have established a set of common values and a shared mission - to unlock potential through learning. Securing a Grade 2 Good for NCG and for Intraining in 2016 meant responsibility for quality of provision remained devolved to divisions with a Quality Assurance function at the centre, with responsibility limited to accumulating data, challenge, managing self-assessments and Ofsted preparedness. To achieve our mission requires us to revisit the NCG Strategy, in relation to our role in Curriculum and Quality. We will use the recommendations from Ofsted, alongside the perspectives of our people, as a catalyst to accelerate change and in doing so we will build a collaborative learning community that truly exceeds all typical expectations. We will do this by:

- ensuring that learners and apprentices are able to demonstrate progress that far exceeds qualification and course syllabi to truly unlock their potential and enabling them to excel in their chosen ambition and destination.
- ensuring that our teachers and educators understand what is required to achieve this aim and can consistently deliver high quality training and education throughout the Group.

- seeking opportunities to continuously improve the learner experience by providing the very best teaching resources and continuous development of our teachers and educators, managers and support staff throughout the Group.

The aim of this Improvement Action Plan is to accelerate the progress of all NCG Divisions in a way which will be recognised by Ofsted when they next inspect NCG, within two years.

The Emergence of a new NCG

The Inspection Report also identifies that there are changes we need to make in the way that NCG works in order to accelerate quality improvement, including changes to structures and areas where we need to mandate approaches from the centre. These specific changes to the ways of working within the Group are set out in this Improvement Action Plan – the resultant workstreams (which have used the working title of NCG 2.0) incorporate a step-change improvement of several strands:

- Rapidly improve the oversight that Group has of diversional quality with a fundamental shift to continuous quality improvement
- Rethinking and mandating more consistency across our continuous quality improvement processes that are viewed as ‘business-critical’ in achieving our mission and vision
- Rapidly improve the ways in which we work to achieve both of these statements. This will include the emergence of what we are describing as a ‘loose-tight’ management approach from Group to systems and policy whereby Divisional Heads retain their autonomy and accountability, within commonly defined and agreed policy.

At the heart of these changes is a fundamental focus on improving the quality of Teaching Learning and Assessment. Many of the other required improvements will naturally flow as a result of this – for example more inspiring teaching will subsequently improve learner attendance and hence learner progress.

Fundamentally this is a change to NCG’s strategy in that the Group will have an active and more prominent role in driving quality improvement. The entire Group function has now been realigned into the following segments:

- Teaching Learning and Assessment Policy
- Attendance Policy
- Apprenticeship Policy
- English and Maths Policy
- Reporting – Executive and Local Boards
- Learner Progress Tracking
- Enhanced KPIs and Target Setting
- Automated Management Information, Dashboards and Data Standards.

The oversight of these changes will be managed through fundamental changes to the way that we run the monthly quality assurance cycle – coupled with improvements to reporting to the NCG Corporation and local boards to enable more effective support and challenge. The entire process will be underpinned by advancements in management information reporting and fieldwork delivered by Group QA allowing the Group approach to move from Quality Assurance, to combine one of robust Continuous Quality Improvement. This will ensure that we are doing what we say we will do, whilst concurrently and proactively instigating real-time action and improvement.
The Ofsted Findings

The inspection report clearly outlines the key areas for improvement that Ofsted expect the Group to focus on over the coming months.

The Ofsted recommendations are summarised in the accompanying Corporation Board paper; the recommendations are reordered here - those in bold being the key priorities as they are viewed as transformational change, the other aspects being more relatively straightforward in the immediate to short term.

The Ofsted Recommendations

The Ofsted recommendations are as follows:

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning with a specific focus on stretch and challenge
- Review the approaches to apprenticeship provision and ensure delivery standards that reflect provision of a very high quality
- Improve the punctuality and attendance of learners across the Group
- Improve the promotion, and discreet and embedded delivery of English and maths so that a higher proportion of learners secure their target grades and qualifications
- Ensure that both NCG and local boards can effectively challenge and support leaders with a shared aim of improving provision.

- Review and improve the efficacy of self-assessment and quality improvement to ensure rapid improvement to the quality of learners' experiences and associated outcomes.
- Increase the proportion of learners who undertake external work experience (Newcastle College).
- Ensure Leaders and Managers use accurate and comprehensive data, so that they can evaluate the impact of the changes they are making to the apprenticeship curriculum (Intraining).
- Ensure subcontractors who fail to provide a good service are accountable for their underperformance and improve the quality of their programmes rapidly (Intraining).

The Key Issue

Teaching, learning and assessment is not sufficiently consistent to provide sufficient assurance that learners are holistically meeting their potential. Evidence for this is in their attendance and in their outcomes, particularly in study programmes and apprenticeships.

The Key Strength

Teaching, learning and assessment is consistently ‘good’ in both adult provision and high needs, there are aspects of excellence in the latter. This provides an opportunity from which to grow and secure our vision.
The Process

In response to this, Group Executive and their Quality Nominees worked during the 6 weeks following inspection to identify the key actions required in each division and for NCG Group.

The workshop sessions, were an opportunity to scrutinise the final feedback from the draft report and from the verbal feedback provided to the Group and Divisional Nominees. The cross cutting themes were then considered using cause-effect techniques. The resultant ‘remedies’ for these ‘causes’ were subsequently worked up into a general statement of Quality Improvement Planning (this document) that was designed to communicate the approach in delivering changes and associated impact. In addition, the specific detail and measurable actions and impact assessment were concurrently articulated in a series of quality improvement plans for Group (GQIP) and divisional level (DQIP). The plans were crafted to explicitly reference each other for full integration of purpose, responsibility and expected outcomes. The documents remain working documents, forming part of a more robust self-assessment process going forward.

Cross cutting themes

The common theme that ‘cut’ across almost all of the areas for improvement is a fundamental need to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment (TLA). In some areas this will require a fundamental shift, whilst in others it is simply ensuring greater consistency. This is why we have focussed on this area first and ensuring that the implementation of the new TLA policy will be effectively planned, communicated and resourced.

Many of the remaining areas for improvement flow from improved TLA:
• Excellent teaching and classroom experiences for learners are a key factor in driving up attendance and punctuality;
• More effective teaching of English and maths, including the promotion and embedding in applied and technical lessons is critical to improving learner outcomes in this area;
• Great teaching leads to great learner progress and enables more learners to unlock their potential and achieve their career aspirations;
• The new approach to delivering high quality apprenticeships requires excellent teaching of skills and knowledge delivered through well-planned ‘off the job’ training.

Following identification and confirmation of the themes, colleagues engaged in a series of focussed workshops to undertake cause-effect discussion and the likely inputs (or causes) for each of the themes.

Each of these cross-cutting themes are detailed in specific sections of the Group Quality Improvement Plan (GQIP), and will be clearly resourced and actioned to accountable managers. We would adopt a risk-based Project Management approach to overseeing the work. The delivery of the overarching plan will be managed by the Director of Continuous Quality Assurance, supported by the CEO and the Executive Director for Partnerships and Assurance.

Group Business Assurance will be utilised as a specific resource to check compliance with key elements of the plan at key milestones.

The Response

Improvement Action Plan – Immediate Term
The Response

Improvement Action Plan – Short Term

Divisional Quality Improvement Plans (DQIP)
Each division of NCG has already undertaken local work to integrate the key areas for improvement/action, along with the actions required to ensure impactful improvement.

These plans will be converted into a consistent Divisional Quality Improvement Plan (DQIP) format to ensure consistency and ease of monitoring across the Group. To facilitate this, the quality plan template has been developed taking into account the following considerations:

- External practice utilised by other rapidly improving providers in the sector
- Exemplar industry models – specifically a well-defined approach to continuous improvement (DMAIC toolbox – design-measure-analyse-improve-control)
- Governor feedback that suggested a cause-effect approach
- Ofsted feedback surrounding the effectiveness of the current quality improvement plan (QIP) format and associated actions.

The resulting template signals a new approach that removes the need to be constrained by the current Ofsted aspects of leadership, teaching, personal development and outcomes, in favour of a root and branch approach to continuous improvement action planning linked to quantifiable milestones and intelligent target setting. As each DQIP is created, it will be subjected to intensive scrutiny and stress testing by both Group and divisional peers.

Group Quality Improvement Plan (GQIP)
The draft Group action plan (GQIP) is available for scrutiny in Annex C is contained in the following sections.

In terms of methodology, the Quality Improvement Process at NCG, will loosely follow the design, measure, analyse, improve, control methodology which will underpin the move from simple assurance to one of assurance and continuous improvement. This is set out in the diagram below.

```
DEFINE

MEASURE

ANALYZE

IMPROVE

CONTROL

'Hold the gains' using agreed frameworks, policy or process

Clearly articulate the areas for improvement, arising from SAR, Ofsted, EGA, GPR

Measure the current API critically and without inherent bias

Use cause-effect analysis to fully understand the factors underpinning the API

Undertake action planning with confidence that actions can bring about change/ improvement OR pause to re-think.
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The recent inspection outcome highlights that in order to make rapid and impactful quality improvement across an organisation the size of NCG, we need to rapidly change our ways of working. This requires a redesign of some of our key structures and processes and a rebalance of some of the permissions and decision rights currently devolved. In general terms the changes fall into three broad categories:

- Changes to the oversight that Group has of divisional quality (sharper continuous quality improvement function with increased resource)
- Changes to our ways of working (meetings, frameworks, policies and oversight of compliance and access to essential datasets through scorecards/ dashboards/ reports)
- Mandating more consistency across our quality processes (the non-negotiables or loose-tight assurance depending on risk and/or shared confidence).

Fundamentally this is a change to NCG’s strategy in that the Group will have an active and more prominent role in driving continuous quality improvement.

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Changes to NCG Ways of Working and Oversight

- Changes to the oversight that Group has of divisional quality (sharper continuous quality improvement function with increased resource)
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- Mandating more consistency across our quality processes (the non-negotiables or loose-tight assurance depending on risk and/or shared confidence).
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We can capture the changes to processes – the non-negotiables through a clear and incisive NCG Quality Improvement Framework, which strengthens the processes already in place and mandates clear expectations on other areas of quality improvement.

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Mandating more consistency across our quality processes (the non-negotiables or loose-tight assurance depending on risk and/or shared confidence).
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NCG Quality Policy Framework

The Framework includes the following key policies:

- **Teaching and Learning Policy**
  - Includes the evaluation of teaching, learning and assessment (ETLA) and continuous professional development (CPD). The foundation for this is the ‘Great Place to Teach’ concept, which establishes the basic principles of excellence in teaching practice. There are a number of strands to this framework:
    - The 12 key principles for delivering outstanding teaching and learning throughout the Group — these are based on both ETF and DfE standards and underpin the CPD, ETLA and objective setting process for all teachers and educators.
    - Clear policy to ensure consistent approaches to the evaluation of Teaching, Learning and Assessment and how this translates into effective performance management of teachers and educators.
    - Specific approaches to the CPD for teachers and educators.
    - A brand common to the Group, or identifiable at each division, of what is expected of our teaching staff (‘Great Place to Teach’).
    - Integration of the 12 key principles into the annual performance management cycle and objective setting for teaching staff.
- **Attendance Policy**
  - A clear policy for divisions to record and monitor learner attendance that supports rapid improvement whilst allowing presentation of a coherent and compelling picture for external scrutiny. This has synergies with the TLA Policy, whilst also setting out specifics around data management and course planning.
- **Apprenticeships Policy**
  - This will be underpinned by a clear apprenticeship charter signed by divisional leaders across the business. This signals a move away from a minority of legacy apprenticeships that fulfilled the funding requirements, but presented problems during the inspection, to a holistic approach to delivering those apprenticeships that add demonstrable value. This will be based on a simple quality statement set out by the Institute for Apprenticeships and will identify the fundamental characteristics that define an ‘NCG Apprenticeship’, mapped to the key aspects expected by Ofsted. It will contain additional detail to ensure that processes are fit for purpose.
- **English and Maths Policy**
  - An order of magnitude change in the progress and outcomes that learners make on their English and maths programmes is needed to achieve our mission and vision. We will engage with leading external and internal divisional practitioners to put in place a policy for delivery across NCG that is in line with the best in the sector.
- **Reporting and Local Boards**
  - Underpinning the Governance work stream — we will review the current calendars of reporting, quality of reporting and supporting training to ensure that all aspects of governance across the group are focussed on providing the correct level of support and challenge. This will include a clear framework for assurance with specific templates for all reports, containing succinct ‘lines of enquiry’. The Corporation Board will have oversight for such activity and monitor/advise and intervene where appropriate and applicable.
- **KPIs and Target Setting**
  - We will set, wherever possible, equitable and consistent targets for improvement across the Group. These KPIs will be measurable and clearly aligned with external expectations for high performing organisations. They will be used in performance reporting, in setting colleague objectives and reported on at prescribed frequency.
- **Management Information, Dashboards and Data Standards**
  - This is seen as being a fundamental basic ‘hygiene factor’. The Group will need to deliver a functioning system that is fit for purpose ready for November 2018. This will be achieved through a joint project between Group colleagues with specific diversion of resources. Unless we get this right — in terms of accurate data, clear standards and first class reporting - we cannot make the improvements that we need. It will require a clear specification, investment and a tight project management schedule to complete on schedule.
  - Preparatory work has begun by Group QA and MIS Teams and the basic data is available within the numerous management systems across the Group. A ‘quick win’ will be the export of attendance data into the primary performance platform (ProAchieve). The lack of existing interoperability between the disparate platforms being a key challenge in delivering this action, however the ambition here is to provide something that quickly leads approaches in the FE and skills sector. It will be essential to continuously improve the interoperability of NCGs management information systems.
- **SLT - Calendar of Reporting**
  - To complement the calendars of reporting for Executive, NCG and local boards, we will implement a clear calendar of reporting for divisional SLTs to ensure that they have complete oversight of quality within their own division. This will be routinely monitored by the Group’s Governance function, assisted by Business Assurance, with quality checks by the Group Continuous Quality Improvement Team.

The framework will clearly identify how compliance will be measured/monitored along with how assurance of the key processes will be delivered to Executive and the Corporation Board. The entire process will be underpinned by advancements in management information reporting and fieldwork delivered by Group Continuous Quality Improvement — this will include training, development, evaluation of teaching, and learning, in addition to scrutiny of learner work and in doing so a move from Quality Assurance to combine one of robust Quality (and continuous) Improvement.
The current arrangements for Executive oversight of divisions were put in place in May 2017, following the expansion of the Group from six to eight divisions. They comprise of routine monthly meetings between executive colleagues and relevant divisional leads covering Finance, Quality and HR. This report focuses specifically on the approach to performance metrics.

The current monthly quality and performance meetings provide a useful insight into quality and key risks for each Division to the CEO each month, allowing them to challenge the Divisional Head on most areas of current performance. We have, however, identified a number of critical shortcomings in the process:

- The meetings are not sufficiently ‘sharp’ to have rapid impact.
- There is a lack of insight into two critical areas – T&L and Learner Progress.
- Issues (e.g. attendance reporting) have remained unresolved for too long.
- There is often insufficient time in the meeting to ‘deep dive’ into problem areas.
- Divisional colleagues do not prepare sufficiently in advance for the meetings (and are insufficiently mandated to do so).

The NCG Quality Team will remain a central team who work across all divisions to support the quality and now, continuous improvement process.

Changes to ways of working - Quality Performance Meetings

The team work directly to the Group Chief Executive and will be responsible for developing Continuous Quality Improvement. The key shift will be away from routine monitoring and performance data, to one of proactively working with Group and Divisional colleagues to agree ‘business critical’ quality policy, to assure and test the adherence to policy whilst providing a framework for development and continuous improvement.

Accountability for the quality of provision rests with the divisional lead (Principal or Managing Director). Local boards will retain local oversight of quality on behalf of the Corporation Board. Group Continuous Quality Improvement will work with the Divisional Heads (including two additional Heads for Lewisham College and Southwark College, when those positions are filled).

The Continuous Quality Improvement team will be led by the Executive Director of Quality who works with the appointed Principal/Managing Director/Deputy for Quality/Teaching for each Division to embed and consistently implement agreed policy and continuous improvement actions. The Director is currently supported by the Performance, Information and Data Manager and Quality Assurance and Project Coordinator.

It is envisaged that the central team will be proportional to provide demonstrable impact, complimentary services to Division management, robust and self-critical vehicle for continuous improvement.

Changes to central QA resource to become Continuous Quality Improvement

The NCG Quality Team will remain a central team who work across all divisions to support the quality and now, continuous improvement process.

- Provide the direction associated with Continuous Quality Improvement activities including routine bi-monthly performance and quality review and consultancy/intervention where required.
- Ensure that identifying and sharing good practice is planned and delivered to support timely improvements to quality, performance and teaching and learning.
- Undertake fieldwork as part of continuous improvement and preparation for Ofsted monitoring visits and inspection.
- Provide robust reporting (through the QDIP process) on progress/compliance with agreed policy/consolidated strengths and emerging concerns to senior managers, local board and Group Executive Board on all assurance work carried out in accordance with the Annual Assurance Plan.
- Provide ad-hoc assurance work at the request of divisional compliance leads and/or NCG Executive Board around emerging concerns.

Board/Executive oversight of the plan

Group Executive will oversee the project management of the improvement plan over the next 12-24 months through to re-inspection. This will be overseen by routine reports to the weekly Executive Project Meetings, which are chaired by the CEO.

A calendar of reporting will be developed that aligns with both the key quality information releases (e.g. destinations, achievements etc.) and also with the important milestones set in the Quality Improvement Action Plans. The calendar will encompass reporting to:

- NCG Board (which will receive more frequent updates than currently)
- Group Executive Board
- College/Divisional Boards
- Divisional SLT Meetings.

As part of this we would anticipate the NCG Board receiving updates on quality improvement every meeting over the next 24 months. This would alternate between updates on the improvement Action Plan and reports on the latest quality indicators to ensure that the workload is manageable. All local boards will formally agree the ‘lines of enquiry’ for the year and in doing so, agree the support and challenge for the year.

- The frequency of the meetings needs to be reviewed.
- There is no standard calendar of items to be scrutinised.
- The follow-up on agreed actions needed to be more incise.
- We propose to change the way these meetings are conducted in order to drive up improvements and ensure divisions are challenged appropriately by:
  - exploring an extended half day session format with each Division face to face every other month, often utilising video conference, with intervening months being in the shorter one-hour meeting format. It is envisaged that as a result these meetings will become more informed on teaching and learning, and learner progress as well as being able to undertake ‘deep dives’ when risks are identified.
  - issuing clear lines of enquiry before every meeting, so that Divisions can attend with informed responses.
  - ensure that the data and reporting informing the meetings is sharpened and more complete.
  - chasing down progress on agreed actions routinely.
  - creating a clear calendar of reporting aligned with availability of key information.
  - agreeing levels of confidence based on risk. This will underpin and instigate further work extending to Group QA initiating evaluation of teaching and learning, curriculum scrutiny, and other such ‘fieldwork’ that will feed back into the meeting thereby forming a closed loop system for continuous improvement.

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The wider team is therefore dependent on the Annual Business Plan and will:

- support the development of teaching, learning and assessment (working in partnership with the Learning and Organisational Development Team).
- ensure that identifying and sharing good practice is planned and delivered to support timely improvements to quality, performance and teaching and learning.
- undertake fieldwork as part of continuous improvement and preparation for Ofsted monitoring visits and inspection.
- provide robust reporting (through the QDIP process) on progress/compliance with agreed policy/consolidated strengths and emerging concerns to senior managers, local board and Group Executive Board on all assurance work carried out in accordance with the Annual Assurance Plan.
- provide ad-hoc assurance work at the request of divisional compliance leads and/or NCG Executive Board around emerging concerns.
Key Divisional Responsibilities

Divisional colleagues are responsible for ensuring day-to-day compliance with NCG Continuous Quality Improvement policies. Divisional QA leads, in particular, are responsible for ensuring that Group policies and strategies are implemented appropriately and consistently, whilst fully reflecting the local context of the division.

Divisions will be responsible for:

a. Implementing the revised Continuous Quality Improvement frameworks system ensuring that are fit for purpose to deliver rapid improvement to the quality of provision in line with the strategic objectives of NCG and the Improvement Action Plan.

b. Overseeing the system of performance monitoring and evaluation, including teaching and training observation in line with agreed principles.

c. Monitoring the full range of complex data sets and report to the Senior Management Team on success, minimum levels of performance and other key measures set by funding bodies and NCG.

d. Implementing revised policy for high quality teaching, learning and assessment.

e. Managing the Quality Review process at division and sub-division level and provide information on performance for Performance Monitoring and Business Planning purposes.

f. Making arrangements to attend Quality Performance and Quality Forum meetings and lead agenda items of specialism, respond to emerging concerns and support the planning of the Continuous Quality Improvement business plan.

g. Executing the self-assessment and continuous improvement process to ensure that all teams participate, produce the College/Division SAR to NCG standards with the clear purpose of raising standards and learner success; make arrangements for critical friendship and local board validation working with colleagues at Group QA.

h. Locally managing submissions for quality standards as appropriate (such as Matrix, Investors in Diversity where applicable).

i. Manages interactions with MIS, Internal Audit and Business Assurance teams as appropriate.

j. Providing direction and guidance to Quality Managers in sub-divisions.

k. Providing periodic testing of local compliance based, where necessary, on recommendations made by Group Business Assurance.

l. Ensuring that the local division is fully appraised of local performance via the prescribed calendar of reporting and that the challenge from the local board is accurately captured in the agreed minutes of meetings.

m. Releasing colleagues to work on assurance activity when requested – both in terms of providing data and information, as well as joining assurance teams to provide specialist input.

n. Occasionally making available experts to support fieldwork given adequate notice through the planning process.

p. Monitoring the provision delivered by subcontractors, including the undertaking of unannounced visits in line with the revised policy to improve the quality of provisions further.

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Annexes

- Headline Group QIP (draft)