



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT JUNE 1998

Royal Mail North Wales & Northwest Division

SUMMARY

Royal Mail North Wales & Northwest Division provides training across a number of sites in the northwest of England and in North Wales. A significant strength of the organisation is the dedicated support which is given by the training team to all trainees throughout their training. This support is maintained even when training and assessments are interrupted by the operational requirements of the business. Equal opportunity issues are dealt with efficiently. Training in business administration and mail operations is satisfactory. There are excellent relationships between assessors and trainees, but mail operations trainees often experience long delays between assessments. One site relies, to an excessive degree, on simulation for assessment.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	3
Retailing & customer service	3

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	3
Trainee support	3
Management of training	3
Quality assurance	3

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ excellent relationships between trainee and assessor
- ◆ learning targets are set and regularly monitored
- ◆ a dedicated training team committed to trainee support
- ◆ innovative ways of raising equal opportunity issues
- ◆ staff encouraged to contribute new ideas
- ◆ good induction to the Royal Mail and the NVQ programmes

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ unsatisfactory levels of simulation on one site
- ◆ long delays between assessments for some trainees
- ◆ completion rates for some trainees are poor
- ◆ business priorities often conflict with training and assessment plans
- ◆ monitoring/evaluation of equal opportunities in training and assessment are poor

INTRODUCTION

1. Royal Mail is the largest of the three main businesses of the Post Office group, accounting for approximately 70 per cent of its turnover. Royal Mail is organised into nine regional divisions, each with its own management. The North Wales & Northwest Division was the focus of inspection. Divisional headquarters are in Salford, near Manchester. The division is one of the northwest's principal employers, employing over 21,000 people. It has 10 mail centres and 240 delivery offices.

2. Sixteen per cent of the current trainees are women and 8 per cent are of ethnic origin. The trainees are all employed by Royal Mail, the current unemployment rates for the northwest region being 7.6 per cent, compared with the national average of 5.1 per cent. A recent Manchester TEC summary suggests that much higher levels of unemployment exist among ethnic minority groups. The trainees are mainly mature adults and come onto the training programmes with a variety of experience and qualifications: some trainees have degrees and other occupational qualifications. The educational achievement rate in the Manchester TEC area is relatively poor, with 45 per cent of young people leaving school with five or more GCSE subject at grades A* to C, compared with the national average of 53 per cent.

3. The mission and values of the division encourage training as part of the Investors in People Standard. Inspection was concerned with two programmes which receive funding through contracts with Manchester Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). These are mail operations, leading to the national vocational qualification (NVQ) at level 2, and the business administration NVQ at level 2. The mail operations programme has been running since January 1994, with over 2,500 employees achieving the level 2 qualification. The business administration NVQ has been running for two years. From February 1997, both training and assessments have been subcontracted to a college. The trainees funded through TEC contracts have not yet gained awards, and significant numbers have dropped out of the programme. Some significant improvements have been introduced recently as a result of intervention by the divisional training team and the subcontractor.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

4. Royal Mail produced its self-assessment report some months before the inspection. The report failed to identify a number of weaknesses and presented contractual compliance as a strength. The main findings of the self-assessment report were not clearly understood by some divisional managers and assessors. Inspectors agreed with the proposed grades for business administration, mail operations, trainee support and management of training, but found that the company had been overgenerous with grades for quality assurance and equal opportunities.

5. A team of five inspectors spent a total of 20 days at ten different Royal Mail sites. The team covered all aspects of the training and assessment processes, observing training, the delivery of open learning, trainee induction and assessments. The team held personal interviews with the senior manager in the division, with trainees, operational managers and assessors from both Royal Mail and the further education college with which it now contracts. Inspectors observed 12 instruction sessions, the following table showing the grades awarded.

Grades awarded to instruction sessions

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Business administration		5				5
Retailing & customer service			7			7
Total	0	5	7	0	0	12

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Business administration

Grade 3

6. Royal Mail North Wales & Northwest Division recruited 10 trainees onto the NVQ level 2 business administration programme in 1996-97. At the time of the inspection, only four trainees remained on the programme. All four trainees were still working towards their level 2 qualification. Six trainees had left without completing an award. Trainees work throughout the division carrying out administrative jobs in the distribution centres. Royal Mail delivered training and assessment for this qualification until March 1997. Since then, the whole training and assessment process has been subcontracted to a further education college. All training and assessment takes place in the workplace. Workplaces are well equipped and provide good training and assessment opportunities. The self-assessment report identified most of the strengths and weaknesses in this provision, and the inspection grade matches that proposed by the company.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive induction
- ◆ good support for trainees
- ◆ trainees' targets are set and regularly monitored
- ◆ individual training programmes are reviewed regularly

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ poor trainee completion rates
- ◆ no formal contract between provider and subcontractor
- ◆ poor support for some trainees among managers
- ◆ no initial assessment of trainees

7. The subcontractor makes arrangements for training and assessment with trainees on an individual basis. These are set out clearly and are understood by candidates. Completion rates are improving as a direct result of the college's intervention. Trainees receive regular reviews while working on the job. Although no formal contract or service level agreement exists, staff from the subcontractor provide the trainees with good support, and tutors work well as a team. All training and assessment takes place in the workplace. Workplaces are well equipped and provide good training and assessment opportunities.

8. Trainees are not given targets for completion of their awards, and there is a lack of management involvement with the NVQ programme, which can lead to conflicts between work and training. The initial assessment of trainees is poor, and prior learning and experience fail to be included as evidence for the qualification. Many trainees in the past have not completed their qualification, however, recent changes have improved this significantly.

Retailing & customer service (mail operations)

Grade 3

9. Royal Mail has 167 trainees working towards NVQ level 2 in mail operations. All the trainees are employed by the company. The trainees represent a cross-section of the workforce in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. They are spread over a number of sites in the northwest division. Most training and assessment takes place in the workplace, with the first three units of each qualification delivered using the college's open-learning material. Open learning is made available at the Preston training centre by Royal Mail staff, and trainees' work is then assessed outside by the college's staff. It often takes three to four weeks to mark and return trainees' work. Staff regularly visit the trainees at work to assess them and monitor progress, but access is often restricted by the business needs of Royal Mail. The day-to-day operational business needs of Royal Mail often interrupt the training and assessment programme – this creates long delays between assessments, fragmenting the training. The self-assessment report failed to identify both strengths and weaknesses in the

GOOD PRACTICE

Trainees' induction is of a very high standard. Trainees are fully involved in a process which is designed to be interactive. Trainees interviewed after induction had retained the information well and had a clear understanding of the most significant

POOR PRACTICE

On one site, where a full range of assessment opportunities is unavailable through the normal working routine, 85 per cent of assessment is simulated. The candidates' jobs do not correspond with the qualification. This high level of simulation contravenes the industry lead body and awarding body regulations. The trainees working towards an NVQ on this site represent 18 per cent of the total.

provision. Some of the strengths were matters of normal compliance, and weaknesses were not clearly identified.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ assessors work well as a team
- ◆ good understanding among trainees of assessment
- ◆ extensive monitoring of individuals' progress
- ◆ health and safety assessed to high standards and clearly documented
- ◆ excellent relationships between assessors and trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ inappropriate assessment methods
- ◆ simulation on one site exceeds awarding body regulations
- ◆ trainees have little influence over their training programmes
- ◆ long delays between assessments for some trainees

10. Some trainees have had to wait several months for their assessments. The training team has not introduced new assessment techniques, restricting opportunities for trainees. Some initial assessment takes place, but the information gained from this process is not used to create individual training and assessment plans. Every trainee has the same programme of assessment and training, regardless of their initial assessment or developing competence. Work-based mentors and assessors have a strong rapport with the trainees, which helps them to maintain motivation. The support given by the training team is good. Health and safety training is of a high standard. Assessment documentation and trainees' files are up to date and of a good standard. The trainees can easily see their achievements building up on a progress sheet which charts the whole programme.

GENERIC AREAS**Equal opportunities****Grade 3**

11. Royal Mail has a commitment to equal opportunities, and all the TEC contractual requirements are satisfied. The equal opportunities policies are well defined and promoted, but there is little evidence of anything other than a satisfactory, conventional approach. The provider's self-assessment report failed to identify several strengths and weaknesses in this area, and the grade awarded by inspectors was lower than the self-assessment grade.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ staff support and implement equal opportunities policies well
- ◆ listening scheme helps to raise awareness of equal opportunity issues

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ poor monitoring and evaluation of equal opportunities in training
- ◆ some learning difficulties are not assessed

POOR PRACTICE

Candidates with learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, are sometimes identified at neither the first induction nor the more specific NVQ induction. Where learning difficulties are identified, the training team is not told, so that learning support issues can be planned.

12. The Post Office Unions Council endorses Royal Mail's equal opportunities policy, and staff support for its implementation is strong. Royal Mail has developed a 'listening scheme' which quickly deals with any employee issues regarding equality or harassment. No equal opportunity target-setting, monitoring or evaluation takes place within the training programmes, and learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, are not systematically assessed or supported. The gender and ethnicity balance within the current trainee cohort is close to that for working adults within the northwest of England.

Trainee support

Grade 3

13. The training and management teams within the North Wales & Northwest Division identify potential trainees from within the current workforce, and the trainee support often starts before the training programme commences. Assessors maintain close links with many of the selected individuals before they are registered as trainees. This helps to develop strong and supportive links between trainers and trainees. Subcontractor support for business administration training includes accurate advice for trainees and regular progress-monitoring. Induction onto the mail operations programme is thorough, and the youth trainee induction onto the NVQ programme is good. Trainee support in the workplace is variable and is often interrupted, owing to the day-to-day demands of processing the mail and meeting the production deadlines. The self-assessment report failed to identify any strengths or weaknesses, and the grade awarded by the inspectors matched the self-assessment grade.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ all candidates given excellent precourse advice
- ◆ induction programmes are thorough
- ◆ dedicated staff team committed to the support of each candidate

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ business priorities often conflict with training and assessment plans
- ◆ no formal assessor meetings schedule

- ◆ no opportunities for accreditation of prior learning

14. Support and advice for trainees throughout the organisation is generally good. Trainees speak well of their tutors and the overall support they receive. All trainees are full and active members of the workforce and have very little time allocated for training or assessment. Very few opportunities exist for candidates to have access to accreditation of prior learning and achievement. The assessors are dedicated and deliver excellent precourse induction, but often work in physical isolation; this restricts the formal monitoring of issues concerning trainees' progress and reviews.

Management of training

Grade 3

15. Royal Mail has a complex structure which differentiates process from programme management. The training and development team has its own management and reporting structures. The training and development team acts as a support sector, serving the training needs of the whole division. The NVQ assessors and internal verifier form part of this team. In addition to the assessment of candidates undertaking the mail operations NVQ, assessors have several other roles within the training team. The division's business plan links into the training and development plan which helps to identify the division's training needs. The training and development team has service level agreements with each area to deliver NVQs to the workforce. The division's self-assessment report fails to identify strengths and weaknesses in terms of NVQ delivery, assessment and the whole trainee learning experience. The grade awarded by inspectors was the same as the self-assessment grade.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective staff development policy
- ◆ staff encouraged to contribute ideas
- ◆ high level of business plan and organisational policy awareness among staff

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ limited external communication by assessors
- ◆ poor planning of assessor caseloads
- ◆ trainees' assessment opportunities poorly managed

16. Assessors have good working relationships with trainees' line managers, but they often have problems in gaining access to trainees at work for review and assessment. Where assessment is limited in one centre by the work available there, no provision is made to allow trainees to go to other sites where the opportunities do exist. Data on trainees' achievement and progress are not used to inform management decisions. Assessors' caseloads are poorly managed. In some cases, the candidates wait five months after they are ready for their assessments. Managers do not evaluate NVQ delivery and assessment, so that opportunities to address weaknesses are missed.

17. There is a culture of openness and trust in the training and development team. Assessors readily contribute ideas for improvement. The staff development policy is implemented well, and assessors have numerous opportunities to discuss and agree on their own training and development needs. External links and communications are poor. Assessors have limited opportunities to improve and develop their skills and techniques through contact with people doing similar work elsewhere. Assessors' targets are set by their line managers. Managers are often distanced from the training and NVQ assessment processes, and, as a result, the assessors do not have achievable caseloads.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

18. Royal Mail follows the European Foundation for Quality Management model in all its activities. The training and development team of the northwest division meets the Investors in People Standard. In 1997, Royal Mail North Wales & Northwest Division won the British Quality Award. The company's commitment to total quality management and to the Business Excellence Model is high. The company's self-assessment report did not clearly identify strengths or weaknesses which were drawn from the context of learning, training or assessment. The grade awarded by inspectors was lower than that proposed.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ quality assurance systems prominent in strategic planning
- ◆ regular reviews part of quality management

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no formal monitoring of trainees or managers' views
- ◆ management information not used to improve training standards
- ◆ poor practice in some areas of assessment

19. Royal Mail regularly seek to improve the performance of their business by

reviewing key operational features, such as planning, resources and customer satisfaction. The views of all employees are used to inform this process. The review process effectively meets targets set by the company within its business excellence model. However, measures to assure the quality and consistency of assessment and training are not integrated within current quality arrangements. The analysis of employees' views does not effectively secure improvement in the quality of mail operations and business administration training programmes.

20. Royal Mail has comprehensive quality management and quality assurance systems. The systems have not been fully integrated with NVQ training and assessment. A variety of tracking documents is used for mail operations trainees. Evaluation of trainees' feedback on their programmes is weak. Quality monitoring fails to ensure the improvement of training and trainees' performance. Exchange of good practice among the assessment team takes place by chance, rather than on a planned basis.