



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT NOVEMBER 1998

Aylesbury Training Group

SUMMARY

Aylesbury Training Group offers outstanding training in engineering and good training in business administration, customer service and care. The strong links between the group and local employers are used to good effect in arranging work placements for trainees in companies which provide a high standard of training and resources. The generally high rates of trainees' achievements are recognised in the awards which trainees and staff have received from the local training and enterprise council. Trainees are well supported throughout training, and identified needs for additional support are met. However, initial assessment does not always identify needs, some of which are detected later in the training programme. Training is well managed throughout all aspects of the programmes. Quality assurance is systematic and focused on improving the quality of training. The group's self-assessment identified the need to develop a more systematic approach to the analysis of trainees' views and it is acting to address this.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Engineering	1
Business administration	2
Retailing & customer service	2
Health, care & public services	2

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	2
Trainee support	2
Management of training	1
Quality assurance	2

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good work placements in each vocational area
- ◆ extensive progression opportunities, particularly in engineering
- ◆ strong staff commitment to equality of opportunity
- ◆ well-developed links with schools, colleges, employers and the local community
- ◆ clear performance targets agreed on, monitored and generally met
- ◆ extensive programme of staff development
- ◆ productive and honest self-assessment involving all staff

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ employers' equal opportunities practices are not uniformly well monitored
- ◆ some unidentified support needs at initial assessment
- ◆ key skills assessment is at a developmental stage
- ◆ some management information is difficult to retrieve from the system
- ◆ unsystematic monitoring of trainees' views and sharing of good practice

INTRODUCTION

1. Aylesbury Training Group (ATG) was established in 1967 specifically to provide first-year training for engineering apprentices. The group operated an off-the-job apprentice training programme, in partnership with the Engineering Industry Training Board (EITB), for local engineering companies. ATG, which has charitable status, is owned by its member companies which elect a board of directors from their representatives each year. The company's board of directors appoints the chief executive. The group has provided government-funded training since the 1970s. About 70 per cent of its provision is work-based training, and this is funded through the Thames Valley Enterprise Training and Enterprise Council (TEC).

2. ATG has developed and expanded its training provision and is now the largest training provider in the Thames Valley area. The group operates from two sites in Aylesbury. The head office and engineering training centre are on one site and the business centre on the other. In addition to 33 full-time staff, the group employs 19 part-time staff, 15 of whom work in the business centre. The company has nearly 500 trainees and works in partnership with 150 companies.

3. Thames Valley has one of the country's principal service-sector economies, with 81 per cent of the workforce employed in this sector. Manufacturing remains an important sector, and along with the information technology and telecommunications industries is forecasted for growth. Unemployment in the area is less than 2 per cent. Average income in the area is high, reflecting the high educational achievements of the workforce. The proportion of young people staying on in full-time education is 77 per cent. The number of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 55 per cent, compared with the national average of 53 per cent, for 1997.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

4. Aylesbury Training Group produced its first self-assessment report for inspection. It was written by the company's training manager. All staff were involved in compiling the report, and each occupational area contributed its own self-assessment to the information source from which the final report was drawn. The self-assessment was carried out according to the Council's framework for self-assessment. The report was open and honest, and the conclusions drawn were supported by evidence drawn from all areas of the company's work. Inspectors endorsed the grades proposed for business administration, retailing and customer service, health, care and public services, trainee support and quality assurance. The report was harsh in its judgement of engineering, management of training and quality assurance, and inspectors gave higher grades in these aspects than those proposed in the self-assessment report.

5. A team of seven inspectors spent a total of 25 days at Aylesbury Training Group during November 1998. All aspects of training in engineering, business administration, retailing and customer service and health, care and public services were inspected. Inspectors examined documents at the training centre and in employers' premises. Sixty-one trainees were interviewed. They met managers and staff from the training group, employers, trainees and representatives from a local further education college, from the TEC and from the regional government office. Inspectors visited the group's training centres, 33 workplaces, a local further education college and a university college. They examined assessment records, trainees' work and portfolios, observing 20 training sessions, 18 reviews of trainees' progress and nine assessments of trainees' work. The following table shows the grades awarded by inspectors to sessions of on- and off-the-job training observed.

Grades awarded to instruction sessions

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Engineering	2	3	1			6
Business administration		4				4
Retailing & customer service	2	6				8
Health, care & public services	2					2
Total	6	13	1	0	0	20

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Engineering

Grade 1

6. Engineering provision at ATG is jointly managed by an engineering skills manager, responsible for off-the-job training in the group's training centre, and a technical training manager, responsible for the employer-based trainees. Eighty per cent of the 178 engineering trainees, of whom 116 are modern apprentices, are employed. All the trainees work towards achieving national vocational qualifications at levels 2 or 3. In addition, trainees work towards other qualifications ranging from craft level to degrees. Nearly all trainees take foundation training in the group's well-equipped training centre, where they develop basic engineering workshop skills, including milling, turning, fitting, welding, electrical wiring, electronic assembly, computer-aided design and the use of computer numerical controlled (CNC) machines. On completion, trainees achieve an NVQ level 2 in engineering manufacture. Following this, they move to the workplace, in one of the good-quality engineering companies with which the group operates. ATG's staff regularly visit trainees in the workplace and use their excellent working relationships with employers to ensure good workplace support for trainees. The group's self-assessment highlighted many of the strengths and weaknesses identified by inspectors who awarded a grade higher than that proposed in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ high standard of practical and theoretical work from trainees
- ◆ flexible and extensive progression paths, from craft to graduate qualifications
- ◆ full involvement of employers throughout the training process
- ◆ rigorous and closely monitored assessment procedures
- ◆ well-structured off-the-job training
- ◆ thorough staff commitment to good-quality training and trainees' success
- ◆ innovative curriculum development with local schools, colleges and employers

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficiently frequent reports, to employers, about trainees' progress at college
- ◆ trainees who achieve early in the training centre are unable to move immediately to the workplace

7. Off-the-job training is carefully planned and delivered through a series of projects which enables trainees to produce a range of useful tools, that they take with them to the workplace on completion of their foundation training. The group's workshop is well equipped, and considerable investment has been made in a rolling programme of equipment maintenance and replacement. The welding bays and some

of the hand tools used in welding and fabrication now need replacing. In addition to the NVQ level 2, trainees also acquire skills which equip them well for the workplace. Most of the trainees in the centre are recent school leavers; the disciplined structure and attention to punctuality and attendance provide a good preparation for transfer to employers. The practical and written work which trainees produce is of a high standard and they display pride in their achievements. While carrying out foundation training, trainees also attend a local college of further education where they take additional qualifications in an appropriate engineering discipline. The group's training staff are enthusiastic and encourage trainees to succeed. Retention and trainees' achievement rates are high, and several trainees who start training with poor achievement at school go on to achieve an engineering degree. Some particularly able trainees successfully complete their foundation training early. Although training staff ensure that they are fully occupied with additional project work, some of these trainees are frustrated at remaining in the centre, rather than moving straight to the workplace.

8. Training in ATG's centre is good. Staff make good use of their experience in the industry to ensure that the training equips the trainees for the workplace. Through a combination of demonstration, clear explanation and practice, the trainees develop their practical skills to a good standard. Assessment procedures in the training centre and the workplace are rigorous and managers closely monitor the standard of work produced by the trainees. Internal verification, both on and off the job, is thorough and exceeds the requirements of the awarding body. ATG's staff regularly visit the trainees in the workplace to review their progress. At each review, short-term achievement targets are agreed with the trainee and the workplace supervisor. The achievement against these targets is closely monitored and, where necessary, the workplace supervisor and ATG's assessor agree a course of action with the trainee to address any shortfall.

9. The high regard which engineering employers have for ATG is used to good effect in securing employment for those trainees who are not employed at the start of training. The employers with which ATG works help to provide supportive training in a modern, clean and safe environment, frequently in the highly skilled specialist areas of the mechanical and electronic engineering industries. Staff work hard to ensure that assessment is thorough and competence is often achieved to a standard higher than that required by the awarding body. The links between ATG's staff, trainees, employers and local colleges operate very effectively to provide the complete training package. Employers complain about the infrequent progress and attendance reports, about trainees, which they receive from colleges. ATG's staff work closely with employers and colleges to ensure that trainees are able to progress through the additional qualifications route to achieve their full potential; this has included apprentices being supported through national, higher national and degree qualifications.

10. Engineering staff run a young engineers' club for children aged 13 to 15 from local schools. It helps to break down the stereotypical views which children have of engineering as a career choice. They learn to use some of the machinery in the workshop and keep the work produced, including a steel toolbox. The club runs the programme one evening each week, and demand repeatedly exceeds availability. In

In addition to briefing and promotional visits to schools, ATG's engineering managers are developing a joint general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) programme with a local school and are involved in a collaborative project with a local university to develop a specialised engineering curriculum. In recent years, ATG's engineering trainees have won many external awards, including the Thames Valley Enterprise Trainee of the Year several years running. Last year, the Thames Valley Enterprise Gold Award for support to training was presented to ATG's technical training manager.

Business administration

Grade 2

11. ATG has been providing training in business administration since 1992. Since then, the provision has expanded each year and now includes information technology and accounting. There are 179 trainees working towards achievement of NVQs at levels 2 and 3. In administration, there are 72 modern apprentices, 12 national trainees and 51 on other training programmes. In information technology, there are 29 modern apprentices and 15 on other training programmes. In accountancy, there are seven modern apprentices and three on other training programmes. About 60 per cent of trainees are employed. The company's self-assessment of this provision identified most of the strengths and weaknesses found by inspectors, who agreed with the grade proposed by the company.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective and well-delivered training
- ◆ good work placements
- ◆ enthusiastic and well-motivated trainees
- ◆ frequent, rigorous progress reviews of trainees
- ◆ high level of staff commitment
- ◆ excellent facilities in the training centre

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ initial training programme lacks flexibility
- ◆ some trainees not permitted to attend off-the-job training

12. While a few trainees are already employed at the start of their training, most attend a five-week training programme at the company's well-resourced training centre and are then found work placements. This programme is designed to provide theoretical knowledge for the NVQ, as well as acting as an extended induction for trainees. Trainees in information technology receive a further three weeks' high-quality training in the centre. However, some trainees stay at the centre for up to seven weeks longer, and the additional training is of less value, as they have already acquired the underpinning knowledge and undergone induction.

13. The training centre provides an excellent facility, and trainees attending receive an appropriate induction. Their basic skills are assessed. These processes are less rigorous for those who do not attend the initial training in the centre. Their individual training needs are not always identified. Managers have recognised this, and a work placement co-ordinator has been appointed to address it. At the end of the initial training, the company makes good use of its strong links with a range of employers in finding trainees high-quality placements, offering excellent training opportunities.

14. Trainees are well motivated and enthusiastic about their training. They benefit from the good working relationships which they have with staff. Assessors regularly visit each trainee in the workplace every five weeks, which is more frequent than the contractual requirement of 12 weeks. They review his/her progress, agree on achievable short-term targets for further progression and monitor performance. During these visits, assessors sometimes identify the need for some additional off-the-job training. Occasionally, this is most appropriately provided in the group's training centre, although a few employers are reluctant to release trainees for this additional support. Trainees' individual training plans are reviewed every three months, but, in some cases, the copy held in the office is not updated.

15. Staff are suitably qualified and experienced, work effectively as a team and are highly committed to the trainees and their success. Staff recognise the need for integration of key skills into the vocational training programme, although assessors do not make full use of naturally occurring evidence of trainees skills from the workplace. Managers have identified the need to assess trainees' key skills effectively on entry and have purchased a computer-based key skills diagnostic tool which is being used on all new trainees.

Retailing & customer service

Grade 2

16. There are 86 trainees in customer services, working towards achieving an NVQ at level 2 or 3. Seventy-eight of the trainees are modern apprentices and eight are on other training programmes. ATG's assessors support trainees through regular visits to the workplace. Many of the trainees are also encouraged to attend training sessions in the group's training centre, workload permitting. Other ATG trainees, add customer service NVQs to qualifications in care or administration in order to increase their skills and employability. The company's self-assessment was effective, noting most of the strengths and weaknesses identified by inspectors who awarded the same grade as that proposed by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well motivated, involved and informed trainees
- ◆ good working relationships between trainees and enthusiastic assessors

- ◆ assessment processes include a wide variety of evidence and methods of correction
- ◆ constructive feedback linking trainees' performance to the NVQ standards
- ◆ short-term goals and achievement agreed with trainees
- ◆ frequent workplace visits, every three weeks

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ unclear long-term goals
- ◆ formal assessment of achievement is not continuous
- ◆ poorly managed progression through qualifications

17. The good-quality work placements used by ATG provide good training opportunities. Most employers are involved in the planning and management of their trainees' training programmes. Assessors use their own enthusiasm during frequent workplace visits to maintain trainees' motivation. Trainees, themselves, are encouraged to contact assessors between one three-weekly visit and the next, if necessary. This contact includes facsimile transmissions of workplace evidence from trainees, so assessors can feed back on its suitability for inclusion in trainees' portfolios. The lead internal verifier for customer service has recently left the company, but succession plans have already been implemented, and there are other internal verifiers. Additionally, all assessors are working towards the internal verifier award and will be responsible for the verification of each other's work. Assessors are observed every six months, and trainees' work in progress is sampled. All portfolios are sampled in the verification process. Although this is beyond the requirements of the awarding body, managers have decided to maintain it as a rigorous check on quality. Staff have made creative use of evidence sources, and a recent trial of audiotaped evidence is being explored further with the awarding body.

18. Although some trainees are unsure when they will complete their qualification or the progression route on completion, they have agreed on short-term goals. Trainees propose their own targets for each review visit and these are reviewed and generally met. Trainees appreciate the expertise which assessors use during their visits to help them to identify where work relates to the NVQ criteria. Where additional evidence is required, assessors discuss a wide variety of sources and offer access to the training centre's workshops, where necessary. Trainees understand the requirements of the NVQ and its assessment, although some are unclear about the key skills component.

19. Trainees' individual training plans, completed at the start of training, are not used in subsequent assessment planning or training reviews. There is a clear and effective induction process for new trainees, but some of those who are already employed at the start of training miss out on this. Although trainees are encouraged to progress through qualifications at their own pace, formal accreditation of units takes place towards the end of the programme rather than throughout the training.

Health, care & public services

Grade 2

20. Modern apprenticeship programmes for care and early years care and education, are based at the company's business centre. The early years programme started in September 1997 and there are now 16 modern apprentices on the programme, all employed. Three of the trainees have achieved the NVQ at level 2, towards which the others are working. Trainees are employed at five different nurseries, owned by a company working in partnership with ATG. The care programme, which started in March 1998, has 17 modern apprentices, all but one of whom are employed. Trainees work in residential care provision with one of the six employers involved. All trainees progress at a good pace towards achievement of their qualifications. The company's self-assessment report identified most of the strengths and weaknesses confirmed by inspectors, who awarded the same grade as that proposed by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-qualified trainers and assessors
- ◆ trainees are encouraged and assisted to be independent learners
- ◆ opportunities for trainees to obtain additional vocational qualifications
- ◆ trainees are closely monitored
- ◆ all assessment is carried out in the workplace
- ◆ creative learning opportunities in childcare

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ key skills not fully integrated with the occupational training and assessment
- ◆ training programmes not sufficiently tailored to individual trainees' needs

21. Trainees are well motivated and benefit from the enthusiastic support of well-qualified workplace supervisors and assessors. The clear emphasis on, and careful planning of, work-based assessment enables trainees to determine their rate of progress. There is a strong link with, and good co-ordination between, on- and off-the-job training. Assessment is carried out rigorously by the workplace assessors and ATG's staff conduct the internal verification independently. Trainers and assessors work closely as a team, making realistic demands on trainees. They are flexible in providing advice and guidance for their trainees.

22. The prior experience and achievements of trainees are taken into account in determining their individual training plans, but the plans do not reflect the trainees' individual needs and, other than the allowance for prior achievement, tend to be the same for all trainees. Assessors closely monitor trainees' attendance, punctuality and progress. The reasons for absence are quickly checked and efforts made to ensure that unreasonable absence does not occur. The close working relationships between

trainers and trainees are used to good effect in promoting independent learning, which is relevant to the requirements of the occupation and the NVQ assessment.

23. The integration of key skills, and their assessment, in the vocational training programme is at an early stage. Key skills awareness of trainees and staff has been raised by recent initiatives. ATG has good facilities in information technology, which it makes available to trainees who do not have adequate access at work.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 2

24. ATG has a comprehensive equal opportunities policy, which is central to the values and principles of the organisation. Trainees from minority ethnic groups make up approximately 10 per cent of the total; this percentage is comparable with the community from which ATG recruits. The company has developed a strong working relationship with a local school for young people with learning difficulties, and some local employers have been supported by ATG in committing themselves to antidiscriminatory recruitment practices. There is a clear complaints procedure, which is distributed to all trainees and explained during their induction. ATG's self-assessment report identified many of the strengths and weaknesses, which inspectors confirmed, but it was overly critical in proposing a lower grade than that awarded by inspectors.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ external agencies are used effectively in supporting initiatives
- ◆ the principles of equality of opportunity are widely promoted
- ◆ ATG provides access to training through employment in the group
- ◆ racial and gender stereotyping is actively countered
- ◆ policy and practice are shaped by equal opportunities monitoring data
- ◆ flexible entry requirements remove potential barriers to training

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ equal opportunities training needs further development
- ◆ some weak monitoring of employers' practices

25. ATG monitors new trainees in terms of their ethnicity, gender and disability and uses the data to identify under-represented groups. The drive to recruit more women trainees into engineering resulted from the group's analysis of its collected data. It has made considerable efforts to embed antidiscriminatory practice in the organisation. It does not adopt an active approach to disseminating its equal opportunities policy or principles to employers. It does, however, respond when

GOOD PRACTICE

A young Asian trainee was unhappy about her proposed work placement. Following extensive discussions with the trainee, her parents and representatives of other appropriate organisations, the cause was found to be the close male presence and dress code in the workplace. ATG found an alternative placement, which met the needs of the trainee and her parents, such that she could still achieve her qualification without considering that her cultural identity was challenged.

resources or advice are needed to secure employment for a trainee. The company's approach has encouraged some employers to take a positive approach to the recruitment of trainees with learning difficulties or disabilities and to review their dress code for trainees from different cultural or religious backgrounds. In the areas of care and early years provision, positive steps have been taken to encourage the recruitment of young males, and, in engineering, there has been success in recruiting female trainees.

26. The principles of equality of opportunity are enthusiastically pursued in the organisation. However, some staff have difficulty in translating policy into effective practice. ATG has identified the need for additional training in this aspect of its work. Monitoring employers' performance regarding equality of opportunity is not uniformly good. The company's promotional material makes little use of positive images of trainees from minority ethnic groups or with learning difficulties or disabilities.

Trainee support

Grade 2

27. ATG provides a good level of support for trainees on all its programmes. This extends from advice at recruitment and help during training to support after completion of training. The recruitment and selection procedures are highly regarded by employers, and many use ATG to recruit all their trainees. ATG was accurate in identifying the major strengths and weaknesses in this aspect of provision, and inspectors awarded the same grade as that proposed by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ strong links with local schools and colleges
- ◆ trainees are given up-to-date advice on progression to employment
- ◆ frequent opportunities for trainees and employers to discuss trainees' progress
- ◆ long-term working relationship between trainees and their training officer
- ◆ public celebration of trainees' success
- ◆ creative support for trainees with learning difficulties or physical disabilities

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some additional learning support needs not identified early in training
- ◆ no systematic mechanism to address the number of early leavers

28. The training group enjoys strong links with local schools and is welcomed at their career events. Many trainees are recruited through this means. Local school children are keen to attend the group's engineering club, many going on to a career

in engineering. Most of the group's trainees attend the training centre, where they receive appropriate induction, and their basic skills are assessed. The process is less rigorous for those trainees who do not attend the centre. In a few of these cases, additional training needs are not identified at the start of training, but are generally picked up later, during the programme. ATG has identified this weakness and has taken action to address it, but it is too early to assess the effectiveness of that action.

29. At the end of initial training, ATG arranges work placements for trainees. Most trainees are given up-to-date information and advice about progression at this stage. Most trainees are offered employment following their time in placement. During their work-based training, trainees have frequent opportunities to discuss their progress with assessors. The low staff turnover enables trainees to form close working relationships with their assessor during training. Around 17 per cent of trainees leave before completing their training, and ATG has no systematic support mechanism to address this.

30. Trainees' achievements are celebrated. During reviews, assessors are encouraging and congratulate trainees on their successes and unit achievements. The celebration culminates in an annual prize-giving event, which is held in the local civic centre, and attended by trainees, parents, local employers and dignitaries. Speakers have included the vice chancellors of local universities, the chief executives of large multinational companies and other senior figures, which have a rôle in the trainees' future. In addition to their NVQ success, ATG's trainees have, over recent years, won several of the Thames Valley Enterprise Trainee of the Year awards, including the vocational achievement award, personal development award and the 'most likely to succeed' award. Trainees and staff are justly proud of their achievements.

Management of training

Grade 1

31. Over the last five years, ATG has managed a period of rapid and sustained growth, particularly in business administration training. The company is now consolidating its training provision. The company has a clear management structure. The company is divided into two business sectors, with a centralised administrative unit. The senior management team reports to the chief executive and is responsible for the strategic direction and operational control of the organisation. The company is well led and operates within an open-style of management. Staff share and support the company's values and strategic vision. Senior managers communicate business objectives through regular, formal team meetings. The company's self-assessment report highlighted many of the strengths and weaknesses identified by inspectors in the management of training. However, the self-assessment process placed undue emphasis on the weaknesses and proposed a lower grade than that given by inspectors.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ staff support and promote the organisation's strategic and operational vision
- ◆ staff and subcontractors value the appraisal system
- ◆ an extensive staff development programme
- ◆ clearly defined and fully understood staff responsibilities
- ◆ managers agree on and closely monitor performance targets
- ◆ excellent communications with employers and local agencies
- ◆ thorough integration and management of on- and off-the-job training

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ individual learning plans are not systematically updated
- ◆ management-information system does not supply some data in a useful format

GOOD PRACTICE

A local engineering company, having identified a lack of skilled craftsmen and a need to introduce expertise in new technology as the factors inhibiting growth, approached ATG for help. In partnership, they developed an apprenticeship framework to address these problems. The company achieved the growth and, as a result, went on to employ several new apprentices which it placed with ATG. The company has since won the TVE gold award for employer commitment to training.

32. New staff are appraised after three months. All staff, including subcontractors, are appraised annually. The appraisal reviews past and current performance. Staff development needs, which address the company's requirements and the personal goals of staff, are discussed and agreed on. The company does not set a staff development budget, but is highly responsive to any learning requirements and provides long-term financial commitment to staff taking higher academic or vocational qualifications.

33. The organisation has clear lines of accountability, and staff understand their rôles and responsibilities. Frequent team meetings and fortnightly meetings between managers and individual training advisers enable managers to closely monitor trainees' performance.

34. The management team agrees on recruitment targets and, where the company exceeds contractual requirements, negotiates new profiles to ensure that all trainees are placed on an appropriate programme. Trainees' performance and achievements are monitored each month, and, where targets have not been met, managers take appropriate action. The close monitoring of trainees' performance ensures the early identification of trainees who require additional support, and the frequency of monitoring visits to the workplace is varied accordingly.

35. ATG works in partnership with a wide range of organisations. Managers are involved in the local community and are members of several appropriate committees. The company's strong partnership with employers has a direct impact on training programmes. ATG helps companies to develop assessors in the workplace and holds fortnightly meetings of internal verifiers to share good practice. NVQs are discussed, and staff and employers are updated on related issues. The company has strong links with local schools and colleges and provides advice and practical help to young people at school and in the training centre.

36. Although managers in each vocational area have developed their own database for monitoring and tracking trainees, there is no overall system to monitor trainees' achievements. Managers are not easily able to identify trainees who have left without a qualification or those who achieved more than one qualification.

Quality assurance

Grade 2

37. There is a comprehensive and clearly documented quality assurance system which operates in the ISO 9002 quality framework and, together with effective informal mechanisms, focuses on the continuous improvement of training quality. Staff throughout the organisation, are aware of the quality assurance policy and associated procedures, sharing the aim of continuous improvement. The group's self-assessment noted many of the main strengths and some of the weaknesses identified by inspectors who confirmed the grade proposed.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive self-assessment and action-planning involving staff at all levels
- ◆ comprehensive policy and procedures regularly audited, reviewed and updated
- ◆ identified issues are rapidly addressed
- ◆ thorough and rigorously implemented internal verification
- ◆ quality assurance system focuses on improving training
- ◆ clear improvements in training, resulting from implementation of the system

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of systematic monitoring of trainees' views on training centre provision
- ◆ no trend analysis of trainees' retention or achievement rates
- ◆ no formal mechanism for instructors and assessors to share good practice across vocational areas

38. ATG has good quality assurance. As part of the process of achieving ISO 9002, ATG reviewed all its procedures and work instructions and from this review the current quality assurance system was developed. There is a clear emphasis on the quality of training, rather than compliance with system requirements. All aspects of the quality assurance system are regularly reviewed and updated, and there is a rigorous audit of processes. When issues are identified, through either the formal system or one of the informal mechanisms, action is quickly taken to address them. There are many examples of improvements, which have resulted from changes made in the organisation to address issues identified through the quality assurance system.

39. The group has a rigorously implemented system of internal verification, which considerably exceeds the requirements of the various awarding bodies, and involves



total monitoring of some aspects of trainees' work and its assessment. In vocational areas, staff share good practice, but there is no formal mechanism to ensure shared good practice across vocational areas; some duplication of effort occurs. Good working relationships between staff and trainees in the training centres enable trainees to express their views freely, but there is no structured collection or analysis of views about training. Trainees' retention and achievement rates are recorded, but there is no analysis of year-on-year trends to inform the quality assurance system. The staff development programme takes account of individuals' development needs and is frequently steered by the group's strategic objectives, but no procedure exists to ensure that the strategic view is incorporated into the programme. Managers are aware of these issues, and the quality representative continues to review and modify the quality manual and the system it underpins.