



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT NOVEMBER 1999

**Mardell Associates Ltd
(trading as Smart Training)**

SUMMARY

Smart Training offers good training in early years care and education. Training sessions are interesting and make effective links between new information given to trainees and their daily working practices. Management and professional has a well-structured programme but underdeveloped key skills training. Equality of opportunity is assured for trainees. There is an open-access recruitment policy, and comprehensive and effective procedures to support trainees with disabilities. Trainee support, management of training and quality assurance are good. Good advice is given to trainees on progression and personal issues. However, there is no formal system for assessing their basic or key skills. Staff receive a thorough induction to the company and internal lines of communication are good. Co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training is poor. Monitoring of the quality of training is rigorous.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Management & professional	3
Health, care & public services	2

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

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ high level of achievement by modern apprentices in early years care and education
- ◆ well-planned off-the-job training
- ◆ staff from diverse backgrounds
- ◆ comprehensive and effective support for trainees with disabilities
- ◆ effective lines of internal communication

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some poor programme management in management and professional
- ◆ underdeveloped key skills training in management and professional
- ◆ missed opportunities for work-based assessment in early years training
- ◆ inadequate monitoring of health and safety
- ◆ no systematic assessment of trainees' basic and key skills

INTRODUCTION

1. Mardell Associates, trading as Smart Training, is based in Kingston-upon-Thames, in Surrey. Smart Training is a family-owned business established in 1993. The training company was established when a growing need for training in early years care and education was identified through the work it undertook for a childcare recruitment agency. The company moved its head office and main training rooms to High Street, Kingston-upon-Thames in October 1999. Additional training rooms are hired for off-the-job training sessions. Most of these rooms are in childcare day nurseries, others are in hotels. Eight of these facilities are located in Greater London. A further 14 are located across England in Brighton, Cheadle, Cirencester, Redhill, Farnham Common, Leeds, Leicester, Lichfield, Maidstone, Milton Keynes, Portsmouth, Slough, Solihull and Wakefield.

2. Smart Training offers national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3 in early years care and education, NVQs at levels 3 and 4 in management, and key skills at levels 2 and 3. There are 459 trainees, all of whom are modern apprentices. Trainees are employed in childcare nurseries or work as nannies. Trainees attend off-the-job training on a Saturday once a month. The remainder of their time is spent in the workplace. Smart Training has 11 full-time members of staff and has contracts with 27 others who work on a self-employed basis.

3. The company contracts with six training and enterprise councils (TECs). These are Solotec, Focus Central London, North West London, AZTEC, Thames Valley Enterprise and Staffordshire TEC. In addition, the company has a contract with the National Training Partnership. The company also undertakes private work with individual clients. Smart Training operates over a large geographic area and has trainees in both rural and urban areas.

4. Unemployment in the areas in which the company operates ranges from 8.9 per cent in the Focus Central London TEC area to 4.5 per cent in Staffordshire, compared with the national average in November 1999 of 3.8 per cent. The proportion of people from minority ethnic groups ranges from 36 per cent in the North West London TEC area, to 1.7 per cent in the Staffordshire TEC area. The proportion of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates in secondary education (GCSEs) at Grade C or above ranges from 52.3 per cent in Solihull to 32.2 per cent in Portsmouth.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

5. Smart Training produced its third self-assessment report two months before inspection. This report was a half-year update on the second annual self-assessment report which was produced in January 1999. The director of training produced a single report with contributions from the staff at the various training centres. Trainees and employers were also consulted. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses outlined in the report and identified both additional strengths and weaknesses. One of the grades awarded by inspectors was lower than that given in the self-assessment report. The other grades remained the same.

6. A team of seven inspectors spent a total of 40 days at Smart Training during October and November 1999. Inspectors examined company, TEC and awarding body documents. They interviewed 106 trainees, the directors of finance and training, the training manager, training advisors, assessors, internal verifiers, employers and workplace supervisors. Inspectors examined trainees' personal files and portfolios of work, and observed eight training sessions, four assessments, three individual inductions and eight reviews.

Grades awarded to instruction sessions

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Health, care & public services	3	2	2	0	0	7
Total	3	2	2	0	0	7

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Management & professional

Grade 3

7. There are 59 trainees working towards NVQs in management: 50 of them are working towards level 3 and nine towards level 4. All trainees are modern apprentices and all are employed. Trainees attend monthly off-the-job training days at one of four training venues throughout the London area. Trainees are employed in a wide variety of childcare facilities in and around the Greater London area. Qualified peripatetic assessors visit trainees in the workplace to observe their performance and assess their portfolios of evidence. The management programme was introduced in June 1998. To date, no trainees have achieved a qualification. The retention rate for trainees who joined the programme in 1998-99 was 77 per cent up to the time of inspection. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. Inspectors identified additional weaknesses. The grade awarded by inspectors was the same as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-structured programme
- ◆ well-planned and -taught off-the-job training
- ◆ trainees well supported by employers

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some poor programme management
- ◆ underdeveloped key skills training and assessment
- ◆ some poor assessment practice
- ◆ no accreditation of prior learning

8. There is a highly structured approach to training and assessment. Trainees attend a programme of training days, which take place on Saturdays once a month. This theoretical training underpins trainees' practical knowledge and helps them to identify potential sources of evidence for their portfolios. Trainees' attendance is closely monitored and any absences are followed up with trainees and their employers. In some instances, individual tutorials have been provided where trainees have missed training days. Training days are also used by trainees and their tutors to plan evidence collection. The company sets demanding targets for achievement. Trainees' progress towards these agreed targets is closely monitored by the training advisors. Trainees who fall behind the agreed target dates for the completion of NVQ units are strongly encouraged to take action to ensure that they meet future target dates. Most trainees make good progress.

9. The training programme is well designed and relates closely to the units within the management NVQ. Some of the individual training sessions demonstrate excellent planning and all of the topics are closely cross-referenced to the NVQ standards. Trainees develop a good knowledge and understanding of management practices and related information. However, trainees are not aware of the criteria for personal competence within the NVQ standards or that they are included in the assessment process. Trainees are encouraged to share ideas and management practices from their own work environments. In addition, they are encouraged to identify best practice across the wide range of childcare facilities in which they work. The individual sessions include one-to-one support from their tutor.

10. Trainees have access to a wide range of good textbooks. There is, however, a lack of other teaching aids such as video and audio material. The company is aware of this and has plans to expand the range of training resources.

11. The company has excellent working relationships with most employers, who are encouraged to actively support their trainees. Many provide good opportunities for trainees to develop their portfolios of evidence during working hours. Some

employers set time aside on a regular basis to work with trainees to identify evidence-gathering opportunities. Where trainees' job roles do not enable them to meet all the requirements of the NVQ they are working towards, most employers help by widening the scope of trainees' work. Training responds well to requests for assistance and advice from employers and trainees.

12. There has been poor management of some aspects of the programme and 23 per cent of trainees who began training prior to April 1999 have so far left the programme early without qualifications. The company identified that the training and evidence-gathering advice given over a six-month period at the start of the programme was incompatible with the requirements of the NVQ. As a result, most of the work presented by trainees in their portfolios had to be discarded. Smart Training is not always effective in ensuring that trainees and employers are informed of changes. Trainees have had a number of new training advisors since the start of the programme. The company does not ensure that new training advisors are familiar with the trainees' backgrounds prior to conducting reviews. It recognises that there have been shortfalls in the management and delivery of the programme, which has recently been reorganised.

13. Most trainees do not understand the relevance of key skills and have a poor understanding of how key skills will be assessed. Trainees' competence in key skills is not initially assessed. Most of the training and assessment for the key skills unit is left until the end of the programme. There have been missed opportunities for assessment and a delay in trainees' progress. Smart Training is now more closely integrating its key skills assessment with assessment of the management NVQ as a whole. Peripatetic assessors have undertaken the assessment of the management NVQs since September 1999. Internal verification of some portfolios has been delayed and has resulted in a delay in trainees receiving feedback on the evidence that they have submitted. There is no accreditation of trainees' prior learning when they start working towards an NVQ in management.

Health, care & public services (early years care and education)

Grade 2

14. Smart Training has 400 trainees, all of whom are modern apprentices. All trainees are employed. Most of the trainees are based on eight training sites in the Greater London area and the rest attend another 14 training sites throughout the country. Trainees attend a monthly off-the-job training session, which is held on a Saturday. Attendance is compulsory. Trainees are given a workbook, which relates to the NVQ units and provides guidance on collecting and recording written evidence. Key skills are fully integrated into the occupational study in the NVQs. Any prior learning is accredited, including key skills. Trainees are issued with a vocational competencies record which is used to record on-the-job training. The record outlines the performance criteria for each NVQ unit and trainees use it to make their employers aware of the training that they need to undertake. Clear

guidelines have been produced on how this record should be completed. There are 20 self-employed tutors/assessors who carry out all assessment in the workplace. There are no work-based assessors. All tutors/assessors are occupationally qualified and experienced. Sixteen of them have assessor awards, and four more are working towards these awards. Eight members of staff have internal verification awards. Five training advisors are responsible for the induction of trainees and for carrying out quarterly reviews. The self-assessment report identified a number of strengths and weaknesses, some of which represented no more than normal practice, or related to the generic areas of training. Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report. Action has been taken to address some of the weaknesses which were identified. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-planned and -taught off-the-job training
- ◆ key skills fully integrated
- ◆ good portfolios
- ◆ good learning resources

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ missed opportunities for workplace assessment

15. Off-the-job training is well planned and delivered. Tutors design their training plans carefully, giving due consideration to the teaching methods which best suit the needs of their trainees. Lesson plans are detailed and identify the learning aims and objectives for each session. Lesson plans include tutors and trainees' activities, and the approximate timings for each. Training sessions are interesting and individual trainees are encouraged to participate. Most of the off-the-job training sessions are held in nurseries in which trainees have access to a variety of resources. Tutors are knowledgeable and skilled at relating the information that trainees need in order to carry out their daily work with the off-the-job training programme. They introduce trainees to new ideas and provide guidance on working with children which is drawn from their own extensive experience. The company has workbooks which cover NVQs at levels 2 and 3. These workbooks provide guidance on various types of evidence and how to record it. A workbook has recently been rewritten to address two of the weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. It has been simplified and the layout changed and trainees now find it much easier to use. All trainees are provided with two textbooks on child development. If trainees are unable to attend off-the-job training sessions they are invited to attend a training session held at another venue, or the tutor will give them the information they need on an individual basis. Tutors/assessors provide good support for their trainees.

GOOD PRACTICE

Trainees experience good practice in the nurseries in which they are employed. In one nursery where there are very young babies, mothers are encouraged to bring in expressed breast milk. This milk is frozen for use at a later date in the nursery.

16. Trainees are employed in good-quality workplaces. The employers' pack carefully outlines the role of the workplace coach and mentor. Employers are encouraged to allocate an individual to support trainees at work. Many employers feel that the information that is given to trainees on their training days is of benefit, not only to the trainee, but to their organisation as a whole. Trainees share their new knowledge with other staff in the nursery. Some practices in nurseries have been changed as a result.

17. Key skills are integrated with the rest of the NVQ work and are clearly identified in the workbooks. Trainees are given appropriate guidance on the evidence they can use for the key skill units. Information technology is taught separately at off-the-job training sessions. Tasks are often used as evidence for more than one key skill. For example, trainees are required to carry out a milk survey in the nursery in which they work. This provides evidence for the application of number key skill. The tutor then assists trainees to use the computer to produce graphs to highlight their findings, which is used as evidence for their information technology key skill.

POOR PRACTICE

When working with babies and young children some trainees in the workplace wear excessive amounts of jewellery. This causes potential hazards. Injuries can be caused to both the children and the trainee.

18. Assessment is generally well organised, recorded and monitored. The production of written evidence is discussed and planned at off-the-job training sessions. Trainees who find it difficult to produce written evidence are helped to use other methods including tape recordings or a greater use of oral questioning by assessors. Planning for observations in the workplace takes place at training days, over the telephone or when an assessor visits the workplace. Observation records are detailed and cross-referenced so that the evidence can be used for a number of NVQ units, where appropriate. However, there are missed opportunities for workplace assessment. For example, an assessor visiting the workplace to carry out an observed assessment was unable to see the trainee carrying out the planned activity and did not take the opportunity to observe naturally occurring evidence. Use is not made of staff in the nurseries who have assessor awards. Trainees are required to complete all of the written evidence they need before any observation takes place. There is uneven practice in the planning and assessment of key skills. Some assessment plans clearly identify key skills, but in others, there is no reference to them. There are clear guidelines on the use of the vocational competencies record, but there is confusion about who should sign the record and how assessors should use it. The full potential of the record to identify gaps in skills is not recognised by trainees. Not all assessors monitor completion of the record.

19. Trainees are set challenging targets. They are required to produce written evidence for one NVQ unit each month. On completion of each unit, trainees receive a certificate. This steady recognition of growing knowledge and skill encourages trainees. Assessors use a variety of assessment methods. Portfolios contain a range of good-quality evidence. Trainees are actively discouraged from including photocopied materials. Internal verification is thorough. Trainees make good progress, even though a large number begin training with poor GCSE grades. Levels of achievement are satisfactory. In 1997-98, there were 157 modern apprentices and 111 have since left the training programme. Of these, 67 achieved

a modern apprenticeship, (60 per cent) two completed an NVQ at level 3, and 11 completed an NVQ level 2. Forty-six are still in training. Of these, 25 have achieved an NVQ at level 2, four have achieved at level 3, and 17 have not yet achieved the full NVQ.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 2

20. Smart Training's equal opportunities policy relates to both trainees and staff. Responsibility for the implementation and monitoring of equal opportunities is clearly identified. The finance director is responsible for routine monitoring and the director of training is responsible for dealing with complaints, harassment and discrimination. Equal opportunities data are collected and analysed. Information about equality of opportunity is circulated and discussed at management review meetings. Staff receive training in equal opportunities. The recruitment policy is comprehensive. Inspectors agreed with the strengths identified in the self-assessment report and identified additional weaknesses. The grade awarded by inspectors was lower than that proposed in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ open-access recruitment policy
- ◆ staff recruited from diverse backgrounds
- ◆ effective monitoring and analysis of equal opportunities data
- ◆ staff trained to meet trainees' needs

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ policy does not reflect current legislation
- ◆ poor understanding of equal opportunities by some trainees

21. Smart Training accepts all trainees who apply and are suitable. Some trainees are already employed, and others are looking for work. Information relating to equal opportunities is included in staff recruitment and selection procedures. Smart Training recruits staff from a diverse range of backgrounds with regard to age, gender, disability and ethnicity. There are seven female and four male staff among whom are four staff from minority ethnic communities. Senior staff have attended a number of training days on equal opportunities issues. The information they gain is shared at staff meetings. All staff attended a training day on equal opportunities in September 1999. Staff set a good example to trainees.

GOOD PRACTICE

There are several staff members at Smart Training who have dyslexia. After every staff meeting, time is taken to go over the main points discussed to check understanding. This approach is replicated at training sessions for trainees with dyslexia. Trainees with dyslexia receive individual tuition, either during or after the training session. Trainers take the time to check trainees' understanding. Dyslexic trainees are given handouts in large type on coloured paper. This helps them to understand and retain the information given to them.

22. Smart Training monitors trainees' gender, ethnicity and disability. This information is discussed every six months at senior management meetings. Data are used to inform future practice and to evaluate performance. Trainees from minority ethnic groups are well represented. Thirteen per cent of trainees are from minority ethnic groups, both within early years care and education, and in management. There has been an increase to 6 per cent in the number of trainees with disabilities. There are six male trainees working towards early years care and education NVQs, a 100 per cent increase over the past year. Nine trainees have English as their second or third language. These data are used by staff to ensure that trainees receive the support they require. The company brochure uses positive images and illustrates young men in nursery settings. Smart Training's centre is accessible to those with mobility difficulties. Staff are trained in working with trainees with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The company holds regular national and local training sessions during which new issues are discussed, staff are updated and best practice shared. The company has a complaints procedure and trainees are aware of it. The company has received only a few complaints and these have been taken seriously. Complaints are fully recorded.

23. Although the company's equal opportunities policy includes reference to gender, age, ethnicity, race, marital status, sexual orientation, religious and political beliefs, the information relating to the *Race Relations Act* and *Disability Discrimination Act 1995* is not accurate and up-to-date.

24. Trainees are told about equal opportunities and grievance procedures in general terms at induction. However, there is no reference to a trainee's own rights and responsibilities. Trainees are required to read the information given to them. A significant number of trainees have a poor understanding of equal opportunities issues. All employers are asked whether they have an equal opportunities policy. However, these policies are not checked, nor are employers monitored for their commitment to equal opportunities.

Trainee support**Grade 2**

25. All trainees have a training advisor who carries out their initial induction and monitors their progress every three months. Initial induction takes place in the workplace. Advisors seek the views of employers and workplace supervisors. They are required to outline trainees' performance and are asked which level of NVQ they believe the trainee should most appropriately work towards. Previous learning and experience are also considered when deciding which level of NVQ the trainee will work towards. Tutors for the off-the-job training sessions are usually those who also assess the trainees. During the induction the training advisor clearly explains to trainees the requirements of the NVQ and attendance at off-the-job training sessions. Trainees are provided with a copy of the NVQ standards they are working towards, a workbook and two textbooks. The grade awarded by inspectors was the same as that proposed in Smart Training's self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good additional support for trainees
- ◆ effective target-setting
- ◆ good advice on progression and counselling

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no systematic initial assessment of trainees' basic and key skills

26. There is a broad range of appropriate support available to trainees. Training and assessment are managed in geographical areas called 'clusters'. The staff in each cluster have a three-monthly meeting when the progress of each trainee is discussed, problems are identified, potential solutions proposed and targets reviewed. Trainees' support needs are discussed within the group. The company gives special support to trainees with literacy problems. Dictation machines and laptops with voice-activated software are available. These are lent to trainees if they wish to try alternative methods of producing evidence for assessment. Tape recordings of training sessions are also offered to trainees. Training advisors sometimes meet trainees outside office hours to offer additional support. There has been pioneering work with trainees who are dyslexic. Several tutors are trained in this area. Trainees are encouraged to record study-day sessions to help their learning. Assessors encourage the use of tape-recorded evidence.

27. The review process is effective in helping the majority of trainees to progress. They are set clear targets which are agreed with trainees themselves and workplace managers. Reviews are also used to record and praise what trainees have achieved. Trainees receive a Smart Training certificate for each NVQ unit that they complete. This tangible evidence of achievement encourages trainees to further effort. Staff are supportive to those trainees who have the ability and desire to achieve within a shorter timescale than is normally expected, giving additional advice and sometimes staying longer when they visit the workplace so that additional assessment observations can take place.

GOOD PRACTICE

Smart Training celebrated trainee achievement this year by hosting a large awards ceremony in a prestigious venue. All trainees who had successfully achieved an NVQ qualification were invited to attend. The event was well attended and published locally.

28. During induction, training advisors provide comprehensive information about Smart Training, the NVQ process and trainees' responsibilities. Trainees' retention and understanding of this information is not checked. Trainees have a poor understanding of the appeals procedure. Training advisors consider trainees' previous experience, training and skills in deciding which level of NVQ the trainee will work towards. Some of these advisors are not occupationally experienced.

29. There is no systematic initial assessment of trainees' basic and key skills. Their individual learning needs are not consistently identified at the start of the programme and, there have been delays in providing appropriate support for some trainees. There is, however, ongoing assessment of basic skills, including the use of a health and safety questionnaire to check trainees' literacy ability.

30. Trainees are advised on additional qualifications that they may work towards. The various progression routes available within early years care and education are discussed with trainees. Training advisors provide good pastoral care and counselling.

Management of training

Grade 2

31. Smart Training is a family-owned business. There are two directors. The director of contracts and finance manages a team of three administrative staff. The director of training manages the training manager, the five training advisors and 27 self-employed tutor/assessors. Smart Training was awarded the Investors in People Standard in March 1999. Recruitment for assessors is mainly through advertisements in national childcare journals and magazines. Other staff are recruited through the local job centre. All are interviewed. New staff undergo a three-month probationary period. All staff have an annual appraisal. Staff understand their roles and responsibilities and work well as a team. Open debate is encouraged. Inspectors agreed with the main findings of the report. They identified additional weaknesses and awarded the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good staff recruitment and induction
- ◆ effective internal lines of communication
- ◆ highly effective management-information systems

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of management responsibility for on-the-job training
- ◆ poor co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training

32. Staff recruitment procedures are comprehensive. During their probationary periods, new staff shadow their colleagues. They observe experienced staff undertaking a variety of roles. Staff development plans are agreed with each new member of staff during their induction. As part of a mentoring system for new staff, the training manager accompanies a trainee advisor when visiting a trainee to undertake induction. This process effectively familiarises staff with the way Smart Training works. Staff are dedicated and loyal. There are good working relationships with all parties involved in training and staff work well as a team. The training of assessors is carried out on a regular basis and includes the opportunity to gain an assessor award. There is open discussion where staff are encouraged to express their views and share ideas. Staff are encouraged to continue their professional development, to diversify their capabilities and to take on additional responsibilities.

All staff have a job description. The company has modified job descriptions and employment contracts to suit individual staff's aspirations.

GOOD PRACTICE

Smart Training celebrates staff achievement through a 'cluster bonus scheme' which was introduced in April 1999. Each member of the cluster has to achieve more than 80 per cent of its targets, so that every member of the cluster can gain a bonus. In addition to this, there is an annual event that awards the best tutor, assessor, internal verifier and training advisor. A local dignitary presents a certificate of excellence. The information used to help make the decision on who receives the bonus and awards is gathered from the evaluation forms completed by trainees.

33. There is good communication within the company. Many staff are located away from the main office. These staff are kept well informed of new developments, changes and the requirements of the company. Smart Training manages its training programmes in geographical clusters. There are eight early years care and education, and two management, clusters. An internal verifier and a training advisor lead each cluster. Clusters are made up of training groups. Each training group has a tutor, who is responsible for arranging and providing the training and undertaking the assessment of a group of trainees. Link advisors are responsible for carrying out reviews of trainees' progress. Staff in each cluster meet on a three-monthly basis. These meetings are used to share information relating to trainees. Problem areas, trainees' achievements and progress are discussed and good practice shared. Action plans are produced at the end of each meeting. The outcomes of these meetings are shared at quarterly internal verifiers' meetings. All meetings are minuted. These minutes are accessible to all staff. The lead internal verifier takes the opportunity to give feedback to individual tutor/assessors on assessment documents and the assessments they have undertaken. There are monthly meetings for training advisors which the training manager, the two directors and administrative staff attend. These meetings are not minuted. The outcomes of cluster meetings are discussed, including an update on trainees' achievements.

34. There is a comprehensive management-information system. The information details each trainee, the funding body, the qualification they are working towards, their starting and anticipated completion date and equal opportunities data. As trainees progress and are successfully assessed the information is updated.

35. During trainees' induction, training advisors familiarise employers with their role and responsibilities and outline the requirements of the NVQ. A handbook is given to employers. Employers receive a copy of the vocational competencies record, but it is not discussed and employers do not understand its purpose. Trainees' attendance at off-the-job training sessions is the main focus of staff concern, but there is no monitoring of on-the-job training. The company is unaware whether trainees receive training in the workplace.

36. The company has established an advisory committee. It includes representatives from employers and other childcare and education practitioners. Attendance by employers is poor. Trainees are given information for their employers at the Saturday off-the-job training sessions. Sometimes the information is not passed on to employers.

Quality assurance

Grade 2

37. Smart Training has a well-recorded quality assurance manual. There are procedures for most aspects of its work. In addition, there are individual manuals for the training and assessment of the early years care and education and management NVQs. All staff receive a copy of the policies and procedures relevant to their work. The self-assessment report gives a good introduction to Smart Training, its work and statistical information relating to the geographic areas in which it operates. Separate action plans are used to address the range of issues identified in the report. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective quality assurance methods promote continuous improvement
- ◆ rigorous monitoring of trainees' achievements and destinations

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of rigour in monitoring of health and safety

38. Smart Training has a comprehensive quality assurance manual. It is not regularly updated to reflect practices required by awarding bodies and those with whom it contracts. The company has a variety of quality assurance mechanisms, including a rigorous internal verification system for early years care programmes. This involves the observation of each assessor once each year. Internal verifiers give assessors constructive feedback. Internal verifiers' records identify which units have been verified, and which NVQ units have been sampled. There are regular standardisation meetings between those involved in assessment. Assessors' meetings take place every three months. Each unit that is assessed and verified is returned to the company's head office and logged on a manual tracking system. The achievement and progress of each trainee is then entered on the trainee's personal file on the management-information system. Every three months, internal verifiers moderate colleagues' work to ensure consistency. Smart Training has responded well to recommendations made by the external verifier.

39. Trainers/assessors are keen to improve their own practice. Arrangements are made for assessors to observe colleagues assessing trainees. Cluster meetings provide a forum for sharing good practice. All trainers are observed annually by the director of training. A checklist is used to ensure that all trainers are assessed against the same criteria. Trainers receive verbal and written feedback, which includes recommendations and areas for improvement. The outcomes of these observations are collated and analysed.

40. Trainees complete an evaluation form annually. This is used during appraisal of their trainer. In addition, trainees are required to evaluate every training session. All

evaluation forms are analysed and action plans produced to address any issues or concerns. These action plans have included the introduction of more frequent and rigorous monitoring of trainers who do not perform to the required standard. In such instances, additional training is given. The company has introduced an annual evaluation by employers, although many do not respond. Each response is analysed and a plan of action was devised at an advisory committee meeting. Through analysis of these data, the company was able to identify that there was no co-ordination between on- and off-the-job training. Efforts are now being made to improve this situation. The company monitors the destinations of trainees by sending questionnaires to them when they leave.

41. All contracts specify that health and safety checks of trainees' work placements be carried out prior to the trainee starting training. These checks are carried out but they are not rigorous and some documents are not complete. The annual review process for health and safety checks is not rigorous.