



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT FEBRUARY 1999

Stuart's Training Centre

SUMMARY

Stuart's Training Centre offers an exceptionally high standard of training in hairdressing, which reflects the latest trends and practices in commercial salons. Training in administration and retailing is good, with effective development and assessment which meets the needs of both trainees and employers. All trainees receive a high level of pastoral support. The company demonstrates commitment to ensuring equality of opportunity for both staff and trainees, through consistent application of its policy statement. There is a high standard of internal and external communication, which facilitates good management practice. Quality assurance policies and systems are well developed and meet the needs of the company.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	2
Retailing & customer service	2
Hair & beauty	1

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

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ rigorous assessment across all sectors
- ◆ effectively structured training programmes
- ◆ broad range of assessment methods
- ◆ effective additional support for trainees with special learning needs
- ◆ good working relationships with employers

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of written feedback on assessment decisions
- ◆ no system for the accreditation of prior learning

INTRODUCTION

1. Stuart's Training Centre is a private family run company, established in 1978 by Margaret Stuart. The company is currently owned by two partners, who took over the company in April 1998, following Margaret and Derek Stuart's retirement. In addition to the partners, the company employs five full-time staff. It is based on a single site in Chorley, Lancashire, and contracts with Lancashire Area West Training and Enterprise Council (LAWTEC) to provide training for young people in hairdressing, business administration and retailing. The company does not subcontract any of its delivery to local colleges or other training providers.
2. At the time of inspection, there were 12 youth trainees and 10 modern apprentices working towards national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3 in business administration, 24 youth trainees and 12 modern apprentices working towards NVQs in hairdressing and 10 youth trainees working towards NVQs at level 2 in retailing, a total of 68 trainees. All trainees were in placements with companies in the surrounding district. Stuart's Training Centre has established working relationships with over 70 local employers which provide placements to match the needs and career aspirations of trainees.
3. Chorley borough's population is expanding steadily and is expected to increase from its current level of 97,000 to over 102,000 by 2006. The workforce is also expanding, having increased by 14 per cent between 1981 and 1991. In 1991, the economically active population in Chorley comprised 27,728 men and 21,106 women. The skilled workforce is seen as being one of the key strengths of the local area. The borough benefits from having a high proportion of qualified adults and a low unemployment rate. Latest figures show the local unemployment rate standing at 3.1 per cent, compared with an average of 5.8 per cent for the northwest of England and a national average of 5.2 per cent. The proportion of unemployed, aged under 25, however, stands at 29.4 per cent, which is higher than the national average of 27 per cent. The service sector accounts for 73 per cent of all employment in the borough, and employment opportunities for trainees completing the programmes offered by Stuart's Training Centre are good.
4. The number of Chorley and surrounding district school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 52.7 per cent, compared with the Lancashire Education Authority average of 43.8 per cent and the national average of 46.3 per cent, for 1998. Approximately 70 per cent of school leavers continued to further education. Seven per cent of young people entered skills training and 19 per cent entered either full-time employment or modern apprenticeship schemes. In the Chorley district, 53 per cent of those over 16 are male. Four per cent of young people over 16 are from minority ethnic groups.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

5. The company produced its self-assessment report in November 1998. The two partners prepared the report, with support and involvement from all staff. LAWTEC provided workshops for all local training providers to support them in the self-assessment process. External consultants facilitated these workshops. As part of its self-assessment, the company put together a detailed action plan to address issues identified in its report. The self-assessment report was found to accurately identify strengths and weaknesses in most areas. However, the self-assessment judgements were highly self-critical. Inspectors agreed with the grade awarded for trainee support, but awarded higher grades in all other areas.

6. A team of four inspectors spent a total of 12 days at Stuart's Training Centre during February 1999. All of the occupational sectors offered by the company were inspected. Inspectors examined company and awarding body documents. They met staff from the company, employers and trainees. They examined assessment records, trainees' work and portfolios and observed training, assessment, monitoring and review sessions.

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Business administration

Grade 2

7. There are 22 trainees working towards NVQs at levels 2 and 3, 10 of whom are modern apprentices and 12 are youth trainees. Most trainees enter Stuart's Training Centre directly from school aged 16, with GCSEs. Seventy per cent of trainees are in permanent employment. Trainees are placed in a variety of organisations in the Chorley area. These organisations include industries such as telecommunications, construction, consultancy and newspaper printing. On applying to join a business administration programme, each individual is interviewed and completes appropriate initial assessment activities. Following this stage, trainees are interviewed by prospective placement providers and then undergo a comprehensive induction process. Trainees visit the centre on day release, initially weekly and then every three weeks. A rolling programme of training, covering each of the NVQ units, is on offer during day release. Training is clearly related to all relevant elements and key skills. Trainees use the equipment in the information technology suite to build portfolios. Assessment planning is also carried out during day release. Monitoring visits are carried out every six weeks for the first year of training, then every 12 weeks after that. Assessments are carried out by assessors from Stuart's Training Centre. Placement providers do not play a formal rôle in NVQ assessment, supporting evidence by completion of witness statements. Programmes are generally two years long. The self-assessment report identified some strengths and one weakness. However, some of the strengths are no more than normal practice. The weakness was not confirmed, with other weaknesses identified during inspection.

Inspectors awarded a higher grade than that proposed by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ work placements offer good range of assessment opportunities
- ◆ good on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ rigorous assessment
- ◆ good resources

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of formal, written feedback following assessment
- ◆ complex tracking systems

8. Trainees develop their competence in well-managed, supportive working environments. Employers stress the importance of the quality of training and the ability of trainees to work as required. All evidence is produced in the workplace, with assessment carried out by experienced, qualified NVQ assessors. Placement providers have a strong understanding of NVQs and their evidence requirements, ensuring that trainees have access to relevant assessment opportunities in the work placement. The monitoring and assessment processes ensure close links between placement providers and Stuart's Training Centre. Employers attend promotional events offered by the centre. By attending Stuart's Training Centre regularly, trainees receive relevant training and support from its staff. The availability of good information technology facilities ensures that trainees' portfolios are of a professional standard. Trainees are able to develop their administrative skills, using industry-standard equipment. Trainees decide with their assessor when they are ready for assessment. Assessment takes place at trainees' placements. Trainees are encouraged to offer a range of evidence, all drawn from their workplace activity.

9. The lack of formal, written feedback, following assessment activity, results in uncertainty among trainees, who are not always able to state which NVQ elements or units they have achieved. There is confusion between assessment activity and actual achievement. Several trainees rely on the progress chart displayed at Stuart's Training Centre to know when they have completed a unit or element. The progress chart indicates only the start date of assessment, for any element, and the completion date. Some trainees believe that they are further forward than the records at Stuart's Training Centre illustrate. Progress towards elements is briefly reviewed during the monitoring visits, carried out by a staff member from Stuart's Training Centre, who is not the trainee's assessor, so sometimes there is a lack of continuity in the support provided and confusion among trainees as to the purpose of the monitoring visits. Visit reports are held in trainees' record files, with actual assessment documents held separately by the assessor. With trainees receiving their assessment documents

only on achievement of an element, they have no written guidance on the quality of evidence presented.

Retailing & customer service

Grade 2

10. There are 10 trainees on youth training programmes working towards NVQ level 2 in retail operations. Eight trainees are in full-time employment, with employers viewing the NVQ programme as an effective staff development scheme. Seven of the trainees are men, contradicting the traditional female bias which can exist in this occupational area. Trainees attend Stuart's Training Centre on a monthly basis for portfolio development and formal training sessions. Assessment takes place in the workplace, with Stuart's Training Centre's staff visiting trainees regularly. Trainees' achievement is good, with many entering employment. Those involved in training and assessment are both occupationally competent and experienced in the delivery of NVQ programmes. The self-assessment report accurately identified some strengths in this area. However, others could not be confirmed. Additional strengths and weaknesses are identified during inspection, and inspectors awarded a higher grade than that proposed by the company in its report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-motivated trainees
- ◆ broad range of assessment methods evident in portfolios
- ◆ effective use of structured training sessions
- ◆ regular and detailed workplace assessments

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ assessment decisions not detailed in trainees' portfolios
- ◆ evidence not used to demonstrate competence against a range of criteria

11. Trainees are enthusiastic about their training programmes and see the NVQ programme as being directly relevant to their rôles in the workplace. Employers have good working relationships with Stuart's Training Centre; these are, in many cases, long-established relationships. They value the development received by their employees. The employers are fully involved in the reviews of trainees' progress and are generally aware of the content and structure of the NVQ. During the monthly off-the-job training sessions, there are well-planned tutorial sessions which cover key aspects of retailing, such as display and stock control. The training centre is well resourced, providing trainees with the opportunity to develop skills which can then be applied in the workplace. There is a comprehensive bank of questions, used to test trainees' understanding in discussions and following assessment. The sessions are structured to allow trainees to work together on common elements, while also providing time for portfolio development and individual support. Portfolios contain a broad range of evidence. During training sessions, the trainer works with trainees to

identify opportunities for assessment and methods of assessment. Trainees are encouraged to take responsibility for identifying additional assessment opportunities and can contact the assessor at short notice to fit in extra workplace visits, as required.

12. There is frequent contact with trainees in the workplace, and assessments take place regularly. There is effective use of photographs to support assessments, and workplace supervisors are encouraged to contribute to assessments through providing supporting witness testimonies. Assessments are rigorous, with assessors recording performance and giving trainees constructive verbal feedback on performance. They do not, however, give trainees any written feedback about their assessment decisions, until the whole of a unit has been completed. Trainees do not complete their assessment records until the end of each unit, and it is impossible to track individual progress through examination of portfolios. Trainees do not have an overview of their progress to date and frequently underestimate the amount of work which they still have to complete for their award. The assessor uses direct observations, wherever possible. However, these are often seen in isolation, with the assessment being used to demonstrate competence in one area only and not being cross-referenced to support other units of the NVQ. This increases the workloads for both trainees and assessor.

Hair & beauty

Grade 1

13. There are 36 hairdressing trainees, 24 on a youth training programme and 12 on modern apprenticeships. There is one male trainee currently on a youth training programme, with two other male trainees working through a trial period to identify appropriate work placements. Hairdressing was introduced to Stuart's Training Centre in 1980. The centre maintains contracts with the local TEC to offer youth training programmes for trainees aged between 16 and 25 and modern apprenticeships. Work placements for this area are situated within a 10-mile radius of Chorley town centre. A close working relationship is maintained with the salons whose work-placement supervisors play an integral part in each trainee's learning programme. Trainees attend the centre on day release, with the work placements supplying four salon working days. Assessors work with trainees' line managers to ensure that individual support meets trainees' requirements, while in the salons. This often means assessors working out of contracted hours in the placement environment to support trainees individually. Three trainees have been identified as needing additional support, owing to learning difficulties. One trainee is working towards wordpower and numberpower awards. All Stuart's Training Centre's staff hold relevant qualifications in training and assessment. They are also highly competent in their vocational sector. One of the staff is qualified to train, assess and support trainees with special needs. Assessments are carried out at both Stuart's Training Centre and work placements. Trainees' progress is monitored regularly. Most trainees complete their NVQ level 2 programme in an 18-month to two-year period, with level 3 trainees completing in a further 12 to 18 months. Stuart's Training Centre accurately identified the main strengths and weaknesses in this occupational

area. Additional strengths were identified during inspection, and inspectors awarded a higher grade than that proposed by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ high standard of work achieved by trainees
- ◆ widely available assessment opportunities
- ◆ effective partnership arrangement between work placements and Stuart's Training Centre
- ◆ programme requirements, processes and responsibilities are clearly understood by trainees
- ◆ strong review system supports individuals' progress
- ◆ creative use of resources to enhance learning experience
- ◆ high rate of achievement among trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ underdeveloped key skills integration

GOOD PRACTICE

Trainees use a digital camera during hairdressing practical sessions to keep a visual record of their progress, resulting in immediate processing of the picture and printing through a computer to give trainees a colour picture to enter into their portfolios. Not only does this act as good supplementary evidence, but it acts to inform their current employers of skills achieved and offered a complete portfolio of work to show prospective employers during interviews.

14. Training programmes are structured and delivered to suit an individual's requirements, with trainers skillfully matching trainees to work placements. On- and off-the-job training meets awarding body requirements and further develops trainees' skills to address modern fashion techniques. Continual communication takes place between trainers and supervisors to ensure that off-the-job training is linked to workplace practice. Trainees carry out developmental work in the well-equipped centre, which resembles their daily working environment. Work-placement supervisors are fully involved in supporting and assessing trainees in the workplace. Those who hold assessor qualifications are encouraged to carry out assessments and complete witness testimonies about trainees' work experiences. All trainees show a full understanding of their programme requirements and recognise their part in obtaining their qualifications. The process of assessment is structured and well documented, with trainees able to influence their learning programmes by requesting assessment, as and when required. Assessments are rigorous and address whole tasks, rather than individual units.

15. A high percentage of trainees, across all of the hairdressing programmes, produces an excellent standard of work. Trainees receiving additional support have gained confidence and have achieved higher targets than were initially identified. In some instances, level 2 trainees have excelled in their work, producing level 3 results. These trainees are on track to complete their programmes ahead of planned schedule.

16. Stuart's Training Centre's staff attend work placements' model nights, shows and technical update sessions. During these sessions, they act as team members

alongside trainees and their supervisors, fostering good working relationships and also creating further opportunities to support assessment and to carry out individual training. Stuart's Training Centre and work placements work in harmony to achieve competent, well-skilled professional hairdressers. Emphasis is on helping trainees to achieve, and each party is recognised as contributing to trainees' overall learning experience. Work-placement supervisors are invited to attend six-monthly update evenings to network with other salon staff and find out more about current practices in the NVQ programmes. At least 50 per cent of all supervisors attend these evenings, at which good practice is shared and queries answered about individual trainees or general information.

17. During the first year of the NVQ programmes, review sessions are carried out six-weekly at the work placement. Discussions take place among assessor, work placement supervisor and trainee. Clear actions are agreed on and recorded. Where necessary, additional support is arranged in the form of individual support sessions in the salon, with, if required, additional resources identified to meet learning needs, eg spell-check machines to support trainees with dyslexia. Second- and third-year reviews take place regularly, every 12 weeks. At all times, assessors are fully aware of individuals' needs and offer appropriate additional support. Resources are made available to trainees to help them to collate additional information needed for their NVQ portfolio, eg a digital camera used to photograph work in the centre salon environment, the results being printed in colour with an immediate impact on trainees' portfolios. Stuart's Training Centre's salon is well equipped with up-to-date technology and equipment. The products used in the salon are recognised as those of a major hairdressing supplier, which offers free technical support to trainees, on the various aspects of product use. Visual aids in classroom environments are clear and imaginative.

18. Stuart's Training Centre has a high rate of achievement in this area. TEC statistics do not reflect this achievement and have not accounted for trainees who have progressed quickly to other programmes. There are also some trainees who have left, owing to pregnancy or long-term sickness, who return and achieve at a later date. Stuart's Training Centre's documents also shows that most leavers who have completed their NVQs obtain full-time employment in hairdressing.

19. Key skills are being introduced to the level 3 programme. Further development is needed to map key skills against sessions' content to enhance the integration of these skills in the hairdressing programme. Assessors have started to raise awareness of key skills with trainees on the level 2 programmes. However, this has yet to be fully developed.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 2

20. Stuart's Training Centre has a written equal opportunities policy which is reviewed and updated annually. The centre maintains contact with the equal opportunities commission to keep updated about new and changing legislation. The organisation offers equal access to vocational training and qualifications to all candidates. To reinforce this message, it places equal emphasis on assuring equality of opportunity throughout all internal dealings with company employees. Procedures and policies are documented and made widely available, with all employees having copies of the policy statements. Stuart's Training Centre currently employs one man and six women. Although there is no regular analysis carried out of the percentage of trainees from minority ethnic groups or those who are registered as having a disability, Stuart's Training Centre is aware of the need to promote opportunities to all. Closer monitoring has been identified as a future action point in the development plan, resulting from the self-assessment report.

21. The percentages of female trainees on modern apprenticeships and youth traineeships are 87 and 74, respectively. Programmes offered by the company are traditionally those with a strong female bias. Stuart's Training Centre has successfully attracted a higher number of men to all programme areas. Three trainees, registered on the retail programme, are from minority ethnic groups and two trainees on the hairdressing programme are classed as having disabilities. Additional strengths were identified during inspection, and inspectors awarded a higher grade than that proposed by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ current policies reflect legislative requirements and are regularly reviewed
- ◆ good gender balance on modern apprentice programmes
- ◆ comprehensive employers' pack details Stuart's Training Centre's expectations
- ◆ promotional literature shows positive images reflecting the local population

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some trainees unaware of Stuart's Training Centre's equal opportunities policy
- ◆ limited facilities available for trainees with disabilities

22. There is a detailed, annually reviewed equal opportunities policy statement. It is widely available to employees, trainees and employers alike. Communication is maintained with the equal opportunities commission, for Stuart's Training Centre to keep abreast of changes. Trainees are made aware of equal opportunities, in the broader sense, through their NVQs' theoretical knowledge sessions. They are less aware of the content of Stuart's Training Centre's policy statement and the impact which this has on their learning programme, although, as a topic area, this features

strongly in their induction programme. During the review sessions in their work placement, equality of opportunity in practice is regularly discussed with all trainees. Work-placement providers are informed of the equal opportunities policy through its inclusion in the comprehensive employer's pack. Introductory literature to prospective work placements clearly expresses the company's culture and the expectations which it has from all of its partners in this area. Employers and trainees are asked to read, question and sign to show their understanding of the policy statement.

23. The company's marketing materials have recently been updated to ensure that they fully address the equal opportunities policy. Photographs showing trainees working in their occupational environments reflect the diversity of the local population. Mobile promotional display boards used at careers conventions and school open-evenings show similar material. Focused targeting takes place during these events, and figures for recruitment over the past three years reflects their effectiveness in attracting increased applications from under-represented groups.

24. All trainees have customised individual support which enhances progress and ensures equality of access to assessment. Trainees with learning difficulties receive additional support which takes the form of individual meetings and extra time spent in trainees' working environment. Stuart's Training Centre and work placements work in unison to help in the achievement of individuals' goals. All trainees demonstrate a clear understanding of the complaints procedure, which is seen to be effective in addressing issues which arise, before they develop into major causes for concern. All staff at Stuart's Training Centre are approachable and can be relied on to pursue agreed actions.

25. Facilities for trainees and employees with disabilities are limited to additional support in the forms of individual spelling-checking machines and filter screens for computers for trainees who suffer from epilepsy. Further alterations to the premises are needed to make them fully accessible to wheelchair-users. The company is aware of the modifications needed and has approached the TEC for support in carrying them out. Financial constraints mean that alterations will be carried out only when required to meet specific applicants' needs.

Trainee support

Grade 2

26. Stuart's Training Centre offers NVQ development programmes to young people living mainly in the local Chorley area. The company has well-established links with the careers service and with local secondary schools. It holds regular open-evenings to inform prospective trainees about training and employment opportunities. The company has good links with employers in the area and frequently recruits trainees to fill identified employment vacancies. It has a good reputation for securing employment for trainees who successfully complete their training programmes. The company accurately identified most of the strengths in this area, and inspectors awarded the same grade as that proposed by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ excellent links with local schools and employers
- ◆ well-planned and comprehensive induction
- ◆ additional support mechanisms to meet trainees' needs
- ◆ high level of pastoral support for trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no procedure for the accreditation of prior learning
- ◆ informal support frequently not recorded

27. Trainees are referred to Stuart's Training Centre through the local careers service. The company works closely with local secondary schools, delivering presentations to students about NVQs and the training programmes available. Open-evenings are held to provide potential trainees with more detailed information about specific training and employment opportunities. The company is working with the TEC, employers and other local training providers to offer enhanced work experience programmes to young people, while still at school. The programmes are intended to help them to determine their preferred career option and to establish their suitability for different vocational training schemes. Stuart's Training Centre regularly attends local careers fairs and liaises closely with the careers service to ensure that careers' staff have access to current information about training.

28. All trainees are interviewed and asked whether they are aware of any support needs which they may have. On being offered a place on one of the training programmes, youth trainees undergo initial basic skills assessments to determine whether they will need support with their literacy or numeracy skills. A member of staff has been trained to provide support for trainees who require development in this area. They liaise closely with the TEC, to ensure that all identified needs are fully met. Where necessary, they are able to borrow specialist equipment through the TEC, such as a spell-checker to assist trainees with dyslexia. Trainees who require additional support are closely monitored, and their progress is reviewed regularly by both the trainer responsible for them and Stuart's Training Centre's managers. Trainees who are applying to join the modern apprenticeship programmes undergo additional assessments to determine their suitability for the award chosen. The results of initial assessments are noted on individual training plans, although trainees are not always aware of the outcome. The company has no procedure for the accreditation of prior learning, and assessors generally assume that trainees will need to complete the whole of their NVQ, without looking to establish whether any existing skills or knowledge could be accredited. There are some isolated examples of evidence from general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) being credited, but there is no structured approach to ensure that all relevant competence is identified. There is no formal mechanism by which trainees who may have particularly well-developed skills already, can have this competence recognised and

used as the basis for a 'fast-track' development programme. The company has recognised the need for staff development in this area.

29. On starting their NVQ programme, trainees receive a well-planned and comprehensive induction. Reviews and questionnaires are completed to check trainees' understanding of induction content. At this stage, the support available to all trainees is iterated. During training, trainees receive effective continual pastoral support from the staff at Stuart's Training Centre. They are aware that, if they have a problem, they can contact the centre, and there will always be someone available to help them. Support is frequently of a very practical nature. In trainees' base room in the training centre, there is a comprehensive folder which gives contact details, for advice about issues such as drug abuse, homelessness and contraception. Where trainees are considering changing their employment aims, they are referred to the careers service for specialist support. As trainees come towards the end of their NVQs, they are provided with additional careers guidance and job-search skills training, if they have not already secured permanent employment.

30. Management are fully aware of their responsibility to provide appropriate support for all of their trainees. Formal support given is fully recorded and is the subject of regular monitoring. Most informal support given is not recorded in trainees' files, so its effectiveness cannot be reviewed.

Management of training

Grade 2

31. Stuart's Training Centre employs seven staff, including the two partners. There is a clear organisational structure with well-defined rôles and responsibilities. The company has established systems and procedures which have been developed and refined since the company's establishment in 1978. The company recognises the need to network with other local organisations. Staff from the company are involved with groups organised through the local TEC, as well as forming close working links with schools, employers and the careers service. The company accurately detailed the main strengths and weaknesses in this area. Additional strengths were identified during inspection and a higher grade was awarded than proposed in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective internal and external communication
- ◆ company's policies and objectives effectively disseminated
- ◆ regular monitoring of management information
- ◆ accurate, regularly reviewed job descriptions
- ◆ staff development needs identified and met

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some management systems have yet to become established

32. Communication in Stuart's Training Centre is very effective. All staff meet daily at lunchtime for an informal discussion about current issues and concerns. More formally structured meetings take place weekly and quarterly. Outcomes of meetings are recorded, and the agreed action points are circulated to those involved. Staff are fully informed about developments in the company and are aware of business objectives. Where specific issues need to be addressed, such as reducing the number of trainees leaving programmes early, all staff are involved in the development and monitoring of action plans. Company performance against targets set by the TEC are reviewed and discussed with staff on a monthly basis.

33. Management information is regularly collected and analysed to inform decision-making. Since taking over the company in 1998, the current partners have begun a process of reviewing all management systems and, where necessary, revising them to ensure that they are up to date. This is a continual process, intended to encompass all areas of business activity. For example, methods of capturing data are being refined to ensure that sufficiently detailed information is available to meet external monitoring requirements. Recently introduced management systems have yet to become fully established. It is too soon to be able to comment fully on their effectiveness.

34. The company has a detailed set of company policies to underpin its operational activity. All staff are aware of the policies and refer to them as working documents. Where appropriate, staff are involved in their annual review and updating. Changes to policies are routinely communicated to all staff. Copies of the key policies are circulated to work-placement providers as part of a bound handbook. This is part of the process of ensuring that work-placement providers are fully aware of their responsibilities and of furthering effective working relationships with employers. Managers in Stuart's Training Centre monitor these working relationships carefully, seeing it as essential that its training provision be responsive to employers' needs, if it is to continue to secure high-quality placements.

35. There is an established system of staff appraisal, through which staff are regularly reviewed. A system of self-assessment has recently been introduced, whereby staff are encouraged to reflect on their own performance and to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Staff development is arranged to meet not only company objectives, but also personal goals. Detailed job descriptions outline key rôles and responsibilities. These are updated annually as part of the appraisal process. The effectiveness of staff deployment is regularly reviewed, and staff responsibilities are adjusted accordingly.

Quality assurance

Grade 2

36. Stuart's Training Centre has a sound quality assurance policy, last updated in December 1998. A shortened version of this policy is included in the introductory pack, given to placement providers. The company also has a full procedures manual. The company's partners are fully involved in running the organisation, participating in training and assessment and verification activities, as well as in the company's management. Continuous improvement forms a natural part of their daily activity, and their close working relationships, with both trainers and trainees, ensure that issues are addressed as they arise. The self-assessment report is accurate in identifying the main strengths and weaknesses in this area. Additional strengths were identified during inspection, and inspectors awarded a higher grade than that proposed by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ policies and procedures cover the main strands of activity
- ◆ simple and effective control systems for maintaining regular quality assurance activity
- ◆ established systems for gathering feedback from trainees and employers
- ◆ quality improvements in place following self-assessment

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ statistics do not monitor all aspects of activity
- ◆ some informal systems insufficiently documented

GOOD PRACTICE

There is a full list of trainees on the noticeboard, with their due dates for review. Review completion dates are entered by monitoring staff, and, two weeks before the due date, a prompting memo is issued by the company's secretary. She continues to pursue outstanding action, until it has been fully completed and signed off.

37. There is a clear and simply expressed policy on quality assurance and procedures manual which, along with the file of master documents, guide staff through each main element of the organisation's activity. Policies and procedures are updated at least annually - more often when changes necessitate it, in either the organisation or the operating environment. Changes are brought to the notice of staff who put their initials to a control document to indicate that new procedures have been read and understood. The attitude and approach of all staff and, in particular, the partners, indicate a pride in the organisation's achievements and a conscientious determination to maintain and improve standards. There is a procedure for auditing trainees' files, carried out by all staff on a delegated basis. This ensures that all staff are fully aware of the need for accuracy and adherence to given guidelines. In addition to the staff checks, one of the partners personally checks all new files, as well as those for trainees leaving their training programmes. This secondary check not only ensures that all documents are completed accurately, but also enables outstanding issues to be addressed.

38. A noticeboard carries a system of monitoring documents, which reminds responsible members of staff of outstanding action to take. Similarly, regular

actions, such as file audit procedures, stationery ordering and claims actions are listed for the responsible person to initial weekly or monthly, on completion. Verbal prompting is given, if action is not recorded by the required date. Dates for appraisals and other less frequent action, such as insurance renewals, are held in an electronic diary system, with the month's events included on the noticeboard to prompt action. The company's secretary again monitors completion.

39. There is a well-established system for collecting feedback from trainees and employers, when a trainee leaves the programme. This can be either on or before programme completion. Following the self-assessment process, this is now supplemented by additional monitoring of feedback during the training period. A partner reviews all responses, noting any adverse comments and attempting to establish the reason for dissatisfaction and to develop improvements, where appropriate. Patterns of responses are noted for the same reason, although there is no record kept of issues raised for analysis at a later date and no formal action plans developed.

40. The company has an effective internal verification system which is one of the partners' responsibility, whereas responsibility for the different programme areas is delegated to appropriate members of staff who are all qualified internal verifiers. The system has recently been improved in response to recommendations from one of the centre's external verifiers. This has resulted in streamlining the approach and improving trainees' assessments' monitoring. Awarding body requirements are fully met, with any requests for action made by external verifiers always promptly met.

41. Some areas of activity-monitoring are informal, with the recording of some activities confined to a brief entry in a weekly log of events. These are not always transferred to more formal systems to log action taken, such as trainees or staff's files. They may, therefore, evade the control and prompting systems which aim to ensure necessary action, for example monitoring of training by observation is carried out in an unplanned manner, and findings are not fully recorded either in staff appraisal or quality improvement within subject teams. Similarly, statistics do not fully show all aspects of monitoring of trainees' progress. Evaluation responses are noted informally, but not used as the basis for statistical reports.

42. The self-assessment process has resulted in careful analysis of all areas of operational activity, and quality assurance improvements are planned or have already been implemented. Overall, the self-assessment report accurately detailed several findings confirmed during inspection. However, several strengths were not recorded, having been viewed by the company as standard practice. There is a focus on using findings taken from evaluations of trainees and employers as the basis for evidence in the report. Many of the strengths identified by inspectors were not appropriate for measurement in this way, and, consequently, this led to a modest self-grading in all occupational areas.