



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT

MAY 1999

Aigburth Training Opportunities

SUMMARY

Aigburth Training Opportunities offers satisfactory training in business administration, and good training in health, care and public services. Trainees have access to local work placements. Programmes focus on the development of trainees' occupational and employability skills. There are good opportunities for trainees to achieve qualifications, as well as to gain work experience and, in many cases, jobs. Training and assessment are thorough, with many examples of trainees who have gained additional accredited skills and qualifications. This is not always recorded or fully documented in their training plans. Trainees' reviews are not systematically recorded or monitored. Trainees receive comprehensive support throughout their training. There is an open and participative management style, with all staff involved in the planning of training. A formal procedure, which contains action-planning processes for improvement in quality assurance, has recently been drawn up, mainly as a result of self-assessment. This has yet to become established.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	3
Health, care & public services	2

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

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good links between workplace assessors and staff at ATO
- ◆ frequent monitoring and assessment visits
- ◆ knowledgeable and supportive placement staff
- ◆ good theory training
- ◆ active promotion and reinforcement of equal opportunities
- ◆ staff professional development actively supported and encouraged
- ◆ effective internal verification system

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ trainees' reviews not documented
- ◆ individual training plans not working documents
- ◆ replacements of work placements contracts incomplete
- ◆ poor achievement in business administration

INTRODUCTION

1. Aigburth Training Opportunities (ATO) has been involved in government-funded training programmes since 1978, then as the Liverpool Catholic Youth Service's Youth Opportunities Programme. Its aim was to help young people who were both socially and academically disadvantaged to find employment. In 1982 it became independent from the Youth Service and changed its name to reflect the requirements of the local community and also to achieve charitable status in its own right.

2. ATO has been an approved training supplier with Merseyside Training and Enterprise Council (MTEC) since 1990. Good relations have been fostered with local employers, who provide work experience placements as well as, in many cases, permanent employment for the trainees. ATO contracts with MTEC for the provision of youth training called locally 'Other Future Training' as well as for modern apprenticeships and national traineeships in business administration, childcare & education and customer service. ATO takes responsibility for the recruitment of trainees and their subsequent placement with employers. The management and delivery of training is the responsibility of ATO staff and strategic development is by the board of directors with support from the centre manager. Off-the-job training is delivered at the ATO training centre at Future House in Liverpool. At the time of inspection there were 47 trainees, of whom all were on youth training programmes. Some are to transfer to either the modern apprenticeship or national traineeship programmes in due course.

3. Merseyside is split into the three main areas of Liverpool, Knowsley and Sefton, with Liverpool City being the largest of the three councils. Liverpool was once a major seaport with much of its employment based on the maritime and service industries, but this has now changed with the demise of shipping. Tourism has become a key industry, with attractions such as the Albert Dock complex being extremely well visited.

4. Liverpool has the highest unemployment rates in the Northwest. There is a working population of about 304,000 out of a total population of 436,000, of which some 70,000 fall into the 15-24 year age groups. Unemployment claimants as of November 1998 stood at 10.4 per cent, which is twice the average for the Northwest and the country as whole.

5. Education and training figures for all the young people in training in Liverpool in 1997 show that 66 per cent achieved NVQ level 2 and 41 per cent achieved NVQ level 3. The major employment opportunities are public administration, education and health 36 per cent, distribution, hotels & restaurants (19 per cent) and banking and finance (18 per cent).

INSPECTION FINDINGS

6. All staff were involved in the self-assessment process. Information was gathered at staff meetings and workshops. Training in self-assessment for particular individuals was through both external consultants and MTEC. Trainees also provided input through their respective programme co-ordinators, some through a formal questionnaire and others through group and individual discussions. Feedback from placement providers also played a part in the overall production of the self-assessment report. ATO's self-assessment report is detailed and comprehensive, it identified strengths and weaknesses for two of the three occupational areas being delivered. A programme for action was identified resulting from this process, which led to a greater awareness on behalf of the staff of the key issues that the organisation needed to address.

7. A team of three inspectors spent a total of nine days at ATO in May 1999. Inspection covered the training provision in the three occupational areas offered by ATO. The inspectors visited 12 placements and interviewed 34 trainees and 12 placement staff. Three training sessions were observed, all of which were awarded a grade 3. Meetings were held with the centre manager, training co-ordinators, trainers, assessors, internal verifiers, work-based supervisors employers and administrators. A wide range of documents were examined, including management files, quality assurance manuals, TEC contracts, audit reports by external agencies, trainees' progression and achievement data, trainees' personal files and work portfolios, plus resources for on- and off-the-job training were evaluated.

Grades awarded to instruction sessions

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

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Business administration

Grade 3

8. Aigburth Training Opportunities offers training in business administration to young people at or soon after the time they leave school. Of the 10 trainees, one is working towards NVQ level 1, five are working towards level 2 and four working towards level 3. In addition, customer service at level 2 is offered either alongside their main qualification or between completion of level 2 and starting level 3 in business administration. Most also take additional certificates focused on keyboard skills. Slightly fewer than 50 per cent of trainees leaving the programme in the last

relevant year achieved their NVQ. ATO have very recently begun to offer modern apprenticeships and national traineeships but at the time of the inspection none of the current group of trainees had transferred onto these programmes. Trainees attend the training centre regularly, usually for half a day each week. They are all placed with employers where they gain experience and where assessment is carried out. The self-assessment report for business administration was accurate in most respects. The grade awarded by inspectors was the same as that in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ thorough, well-delivered coverage of theory
- ◆ supplementary qualifications offered
- ◆ frequent visits for workplace training and assessment

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ on- and off-the-job training uncoordinated
- ◆ trainees have no workplace record of progress
- ◆ poor achievement rates

9. Most trainees attend weekly for half a day of training and computer practice. The training covers the broader knowledge of administration that the NVQ requires. Training is planned in well-delivered sessions with small groups of two to four trainees. Assessors ensure that trainers receive the relevant training for each NVQ unit before its assessment is completed. The co-ordination between on- and off-the-job training is not comprehensive and trainees carry out procedures in the workplace well before they cover the relevant areas at the training centre. This weakens the relationship between the theory and practice and between the NVQ and the workplace for some trainees.

10. In addition to the business administration and customer service NVQs, most trainees take one or more certificate in typing, text processing, legal text processing and related topics. These improve the specific skills which their placement employers value and improve their prospects of permanent employment. The training centre is appropriately equipped with industry standard information technology hardware equipment and software to support this training for small numbers of trainees.

11. As well as weekly visits to the training centre, trainees are visited frequently at work where assessors offer coaching and observe work activity for assessment purpose. Many are visited weekly, and all at no more than monthly intervals, depending on their needs. Visiting assessors offer immediate written feedback. They also accept workplace evidence for assessment, giving feedback on this at the next visit to the training centre.

12. Trainees keep their portfolios of evidence at the training centre for safekeeping, though some take the separate files of training material home or to their workplaces. Since progress records are usually kept in the portfolio this means that some trainees

are unable to recall which areas they have completed and which remain to be done and are unable to review their progress until the next centre visit.

13. Trainees who join the programme have a standard two year target achievement date stipulated on their individual training plans. This fails to take into account the varying ability levels of trainees and also the varying opportunities for NVQ achievement that are available within the different placements. Currently there is an early leavers' rate of 75 per cent on the business administration programme and of those that complete the programme only 25 per cent leave with an NVQ.

14. Those trainees that are also working towards a customer service NVQ level as an additional qualification were all targeted to achieve by the end of March. However, some trainees have made slower progress than expected due to staff and organisational changes. These trainees have now been set new targets for achievement in May.

Health, care & public services

Grade 2

15. ATO provides training for 15 trainees in early years care and education at NVQ level 2 and 15 trainees at level 3. All trainees are in one of 11 placements that have been used consistently over a long period. These placements are private nurseries with which ATO has a long-standing relationship, some of whom have been dealing with ATO for over 10 years. These nurseries accommodate at least one trainee at any given time. Most of these placements have staff who have gained assessor qualifications supported through ATO. None of the trainees are employed. Assessment staff are appropriately qualified to deliver the NVQ and all assessments are carried out in the placements. The induction programme covers both training at the centre and at the work placement. Throughout their time on the programme, trainees attend ATO's training centre for half a day every week when theory is delivered. There are visits by centre staff to the work placement on a weekly basis. Of the 30 trainees on the programme, 97 per cent were female. Fifty-seven per cent of trainees who had left the programme early had left without achieving their qualification. However, of the remaining trainees, 14 achieved level 2 and two level 3 in the year 1998-99.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ knowledgeable and supportive placement staff
- ◆ good links between workplace assessors and centre staff
- ◆ very good theory delivery
- ◆ frequent assessment and monitoring visits
- ◆ careful matching of trainees to placement opportunities

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ trainees' reviews not documented

GOOD PRACTICE

The provider has access to an excellent network of placements which all belong to a local consortium called, 'the private day nursery association'. Trainees are placed in nurseries which are appropriate to each individual and as near to their home as is possible. If a trainee is placed with an employer where they cannot cover the required range of activities, they are moved to another to complete the work without the need to have simulated assessments.

16. The company has a well-established network of work placements, which are of a high standard. Staff within these placements are very experienced and occupationally competent, providing a supportive and encouraging environment for trainees.

17. When the trainee begins a placement, a member of ATC staff meets with a member of staff from the work placement provider and the trainee to put together an individual training pack. This is supplementary to the individual training plan, and includes details more personal to the trainee. Prior learning is accredited and recorded in the pack, a note is made of individual learning needs, as well as the trainees' interests. Also, details of the training given at the training centre are included so that the work placement provider is aware when certain subjects are being covered, so that on- and off-the-job training can be co-ordinated. This helps trainees to keep track of their own training.

18. A progress chart for each trainee is placed in the trainee's portfolio and updated. Trainees and assessors are aware of this, but in the few instances where there are no work-based assessors, other workplace supervisors are not necessarily aware of it, so are not able to track the trainee's progress. This means that NVQs are not comprehensively tracked for all trainees.

19. Reviews of trainees' progress throughout the programme are through discussion but there are no further records kept. ATO staff are in frequent contact with workplace assessors and visit trainees on a weekly basis for both monitoring and assessment purposes. If necessary, centre staff visit placements more often than once a week and are available by telephone contact most of the time. Trainees also visit the training centre regularly.

20. ATO is very careful when matching trainees to placements. Trainees are placed within their own locality wherever this is possible and in a placement which is suitable to their needs.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

21. ATO has documented equal opportunities policies and procedures which are regularly reviewed by the centre manager in the role of equal opportunities officer. Equality of opportunity is included in staff and trainees' inductions and is a standard item on the agenda of management and board meetings. Subcontractor and placement agreements include a specific requirement to endorse and promote ATO's equal opportunities policy. Data are routinely collected and form part of the manager's report to the board. There are currently six male trainees representing 12.5 per cent of the total number of trainees, two trainees are from minority ethnic groups, and there are eleven trainees with disabilities (19 per cent). The self-assessment process has heightened awareness of equal opportunities issues and has resulted in an equal opportunities section within the company's action plan. The

inspectors awarded the same grade that was given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ active promotion of equal opportunities
- ◆ effective use of data in strategic planning
- ◆ good, responsive understanding of trainees' needs

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ recent staff recruitment has not reflected company policies and procedures
- ◆ poor access to placements for people with mobility problems

22. ATO operates an 'open door' policy, which guarantees all young people an interview. Trainees are informed of their rights and responsibilities and the grievance and appeals procedures during their induction to training. They each receive a copy of the written procedures at the start of training. Trainees on childcare and customer service courses have follow-up equal opportunities training as part of their NVQ programmes. In addition to this, equality of opportunity is actively promoted within childcare placements, where cultural and ethnic diversities are celebrated. Equality of opportunity is promoted in all advertising and marketing materials, and this is reinforced by the careful use of visual images throughout the training centre. For example, there are posters celebrating occupational success of local people from all ethnic backgrounds, welcome messages in several languages from local communities, posters produced by trainees illustrating 'signing' for those with a hearing impairment, and advertisements for 'Childline' depicting a black child.

23. Equal opportunities data collected on recruitment are extracted from the management information system by the equal opportunity officer, and are analysed and used to form a regular part of the report to the board, which in turn informs strategic planning for the organisation. Business and action plans include sections for equal opportunities issues, although many initiatives are still embryonic. Complaints are dealt with promptly, and personally by the manager who is the equal opportunities officer but are not always formally documented.

24. ATO as an organisation has a common sense approach to individual needs of staff and trainees. For example, transport is provided for trainees to and from work experience and flexible working hours are allowed for new mothers. There is also an understanding of the specific needs of cultural and religious beliefs. In particular, ATO invite family members to accompany female Muslim trainees to evening presentations, which they would otherwise be unable to attend.

25. ATO is also involved in a pilot project, which provides work experience for pupils from local schools who cannot leave school until the end of the summer term and do not normally have good job prospects. ATO has many new equal opportunities initiatives in development, such as questionnaires to survey placements for accessibility, staff training in equal opportunities issues and actions to address gender imbalance in the traditionally female-oriented occupational areas of childcare

and business administration. However, these are too new for the organisation to have been able to evaluate their effectiveness to date. Although there are documented procedures for open advertisement of job vacancies, the two most recent recruits to ATO staff were from internal routes and external applicants were not given an opportunity to apply.

Trainee support

Grade 3

26. Most trainees are referred to ATO by the careers service or by friends and other trainees. They are interviewed, undergo initial assessment and receive induction programmes before taking up work placements with employers. ATO takes pride in its continuing support for trainees both during their programmes and sometimes after the end of programmes. Trainees' welfare is high on the list of priorities. The self-assessment report was found to be accurate in identifying strengths, however some additional weaknesses were found. The grade awarded by inspectors was lower than the self-assessment grade.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ frequent opportunities to discuss progress
- ◆ additional funded training offered
- ◆ high profile celebration of trainees' achievements
- ◆ additional support for special training and assessment needs

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ initial assessment does not always impact on training plans
- ◆ individual training plans are not working documents
- ◆ poor retention of induction information
- ◆ poor recording of support activities

27. Trainees are inducted into the training programme, the NVQ framework and to their workplaces. The induction programme covers all the major issues, but the delivery of the information is dull and routine. Trainees do not find the induction memorable and some retain little of the important information it contains. Initial assessment operates for all the new trainees, but this only notifies staff of serious literacy or numeracy difficulties. More subtle learning requirements are not picked-up at this point and are only discovered later when trainees struggle with their work. As another result of the inadequate initial assessment, trainees' individual training plans are poor. The plans contain little detail and are not used to drive the training and assessment for each trainee. The plans themselves do not include spaces for changes and updates to be made to the training and assessment, or for reviews to be made to the targets for achievement.

28. Trainees are able to both discuss their progress and get pastoral help during the

GOOD PRACTICE

ATO provides additional support for trainees who may otherwise have to leave training. Two examples include one trainee who was pregnant when recruited but was encouraged to make as much progress as possible before taking maternity leave. Another has been required to serve a custodial sentence in a local prison. ATO has made arrangements for her to continue with her NVQ by distance learning, and for her work placement to be kept open until she returns.

frequent visits to their workplaces made by ATO staff and at their regular visits to the training centre. The level of contact allows staff to remain well informed and provide trainees with speedy support when problems arise. If a trainee's work pattern or other circumstances prevent them from attending sessions at the training centre, staff visit them at work for individual training tutorials. These visits can be outside normal working hours. In addition, staff give trainees their home telephone number for ease of contact and to enable them to provide coaching and support on demand. Progress reviews are carried out at intervals of between eight and 12 weeks. The review process is incomplete. It involves the trainee and placement employer filling out a form, but it does not encourage discussion around progress or emerging training and support requirements. Records are made of the major support recommendations, but much of the day-to-day advice and minor problems are not written down. This system is too dependent on the trainers and assessors memory of events and hinders continuity of support.

29. Trainees are offered free additional training in, for example, first aid and dental hygiene. Gaining certificates in these areas often increases individual employability. ATO holds annual events at which local celebrities present certificates and awards to trainees. These events encourage current trainees to achieve, acknowledge the achievement of successful trainees and give their parents and friends an opportunity to share in the celebration.

Management of training

Grade 3

30. The manager, who is responsible for the day-to-day running of the programmes, reports to a board of directors, all of whom are volunteers and are drawn from a variety of backgrounds. There are currently six board members, five of whom have been associated with ATO for over 10 years. Their backgrounds cover education, industry, finance and banking. The role of the directors is to oversee the running of ATO, and to advise, direct and support the manager, who has delegated powers of authority. At the time of inspection, there was one full- and four part-time staff reporting directly to the manager. In addition, two freelance consultants and eight qualified work-based assessors are used to support the programmes. All staff have job descriptions, however, owing to the size of the company many of the individuals perform more than one role. Staff attend monthly formal staff meetings which focus on key issues affecting the business. ATO receives approximately 60 per cent of its funding from contracts with MTEC. Other funding is from private sources. Inspectors agreed with the grade awarded in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ range of qualifications complement individual roles and responsibilities
- ◆ staff professional development actively supported and encouraged
- ◆ fully involved and supportive board of directors

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ replacement of work placement contracts not fully implemented
- ◆ over-reliance on informal communication

31. The manager has been with ATO since November 1981 and has wide experience of management and training. All staff are qualified as trainers and are vocationally competent, including the administration officer. Most have either achieved or are working towards the assessor and verifier qualifications. Assessors and internal verifiers work closely together. They observe one another's work and give feedback on how performance can be improved. There is also a professional training advisor who, as well as undertaking internal verification on business administration and customer service, acts as a consultant to the whole company. This enables a process of sharing good practice, not just within the company, but also with other training providers that the consultant works with. External verifier reports are used constructively to improve the delivery of current programmes and to spread good practice across the company. Great emphasis is placed on teamworking at all levels. The starting point for this is the annual business-planning process which involves all staff. Previous year's achievements are reviewed and targets are set for the following year. The annual targets on the MTEC contract form the basis of individual staff targets. These are regularly reviewed both in one-to-one meetings with the manager and during staff and board meetings. Staff demonstrate a high level of understanding and ownership of not only their own targets and objectives but also those of the company as a whole.

32. Staff are appraised annually. The annual appraisal system reviews staff performance and identifies areas for development based on individual and company needs. All staff have detailed job descriptions, which are reviewed at appraisal. There is an extensive development programme, which not only encompasses full- and part-time staff within ATO but also staff employed by companies used as placement providers. This training is financially supported by ATO and has included training into deaf awareness, general equal opportunities, as well as attendance at conferences linked directly to occupational specialisms. The emphasis is on continued professional development. Staff have a clear understanding of their role in the company and feel supported by the open style of management.

33. The board plays an active role in both the strategic developments of ATO as well as operationally. Some board members visit the centre each week to advise and offer support as necessary. Performance and targets are reviewed against the business plan on a monthly basis at every board meeting. Board members were also involved in endorsing the self-assessment report.

34. ATO currently has 24 work placements, of which 14 are used for the care programme and 10 for business administration. They are all based within the city and are easily accessible by local transport. ATO has good working relationships with all placement providers. High proportions of trainees gain full-time employment within these placements. ATO is in the process of re-issuing new contracts to all placements as well as carrying out equal opportunity and health and

safety checks. Some of these contracts have not yet been replaced and the appropriate checks have not been carried out. Old contracts are deficient in new legislation regarding the *Disability Discrimination Act 1995* and harassment policy, so trainees are not protected in these instances. ATO takes advantage of being a small organisation in its use of informal communication. However, this is at the expense of formal recording methods, such as during trainees' reviews. No standard documents are used to record information regarding the trainees and programmes.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

35. ATO has a quality assurance system, which has recently been revised. There is a comprehensive set of documented quality assurance procedures. Responsibility for the development and implementation of these procedures lies with the manager. New documents are clear and easy to understand. However, some of these procedures have yet to be fully established. ATO has achieved the 'Quality through Progress' award, presented by MTEC. Inspectors largely agreed with the grades in the self-assessment report. The action plan had been substantially updated, following achievement of some of the targets set as a result of initial self-assessment. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that given by the company.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive range of policies and procedures
- ◆ thorough internal verification systems

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ continuous improvement not fully established
- ◆ limited standardisation of some documents

36. The recent review of quality assurance arrangements has been effective. All staff were involved in a reviewing of the procedures resulting in inadequacies being highlighted and corrected. A new set of policies and procedures has been written which focuses on the key processes of training. For example, a white board has been introduced in the office to keep track of trainees' progress. This means that staff can see at a glance if any trainees are falling behind in their training. The board of directors has in turn endorsed these processes. Staff understand the procedures and many are able to indicate the specific improvements that have resulted from this review process. Communication between staff is generally good and is maintained through regular meetings, supplemented with informal discussion. Although the procedures are now operational, they are not yet fully established as standard working practices.

37. ATO has a rigorous system for internal verification. Trainees' portfolios are verified and guidance is given on areas for improvement. There is a comprehensive and detailed programme of observations of assessors by verifiers. Extensive records are kept of internal verification for all occupational areas, and there are detailed

action plans to address issues following internal and external verification visits. Verifier visits are welcomed as part of continuous improvement.

38. The process of self-assessment has enabled ATO to review its systems and procedures in a holistic way. Staff have responded positively to the process of self-assessment. All staff are fully involved in assessing their own provision, and the analysis they carried out for the purposes of self-assessment was systematic and detailed. The self-assessment report is pertinent, with only a few strengths and weaknesses not concerning key issues. The action plan has been updated and a new, more detailed one written. This action plan addresses the weaknesses identified by ATO. The responsibility for ensuring that the actions are taken as described in the plans is shared by all members of staff.

39. Although a new quality assurance arrangement is in place, some documents are still not standardised, a process for auditing internal paperwork has yet to be established. A system to attain feedback from trainees and work placement providers has been developed. However, not enough questionnaires have been returned to inform further developments. The process is too immature for useful analysis at this stage.