



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT JUNE 1998

REINSPECTION REPORT SEPTEMBER 1999

# First Rung Limited

## SUMMARY

First Rung Limited offers training in business administration, information technology, care, retailing, distribution and foundation for work. Training in all of these occupational areas is of good quality. The company is successful in training young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities for employment. There are good working relationships between staff and trainees, and the level of trainee support is excellent. Equal opportunities policies are regularly reviewed. At the time of the first inspection, the company did not have a management-information system and the quality assurance procedures did not ensure consistent standards across all areas. First Rung Limited was reinspected a year after the original report was published. The company has addressed all its weaknesses, including key weaknesses. A management-information system has been introduced which gives managers and staff accurate and timely information. Staff are now given feedback on their own performance, and that of the company in general, at the regular staff and management meetings. Feedback is sought from all customers of the company, including trainees and employers. Quality assurance procedures have been completely revised and now cover all aspects of the company's work, but they are still new and not yet fully established.

**As a result of the reinspection of First Rung Limited, the original published report text for management of training and quality assurance has been replaced by new text which makes reference to the original inspection findings. This summary page, the overall report introduction and the inspections findings introduction have also been amended to reflect the findings of the reinspection. All other sections of the original published report which have not been subject to full reinspection have been left in their original form.**

## GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	2
Retailing & customer service	2
Health, care & public services	2
Foundation for work	2

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	2
Trainee support	1
Management of training	4
Quality assurance	4
<b>REINSPECTION</b>	
Management of training	2
Quality assurance	3

## KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ excellent trainee support
- ◆ trainees' individual learning needs are met



- ◆ strong links with employers and community organisations
- ◆ good working relationships between trainers and trainees
- ◆ extensive and effective use of management-information systems

#### **KEY WEAKNESSES**

- ◆ some policies and procedures not fully established

## INTRODUCTION

1. First Rung Limited (First Rung) is a registered charity based in Edmonton, north London and works on a non-profit basis. It was formed in 1983 to provide training and employment for young people, particularly those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Currently, First Rung has contracts with North West London, North London, Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire, and Luton Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs). The company operates from five locations: Borehamwood, Edmonton, Kilburn, Mill Hill and Stevenage.

2. At the time of the inspection, the company employed 28 staff, in addition to the chief executive, and had 223 trainees, including two modern apprentices and one national trainee. By the time of the reinspection, the number of staff had increased to 44, while the number of trainees had risen to 249, including 11 modern apprentices and 28 national trainees.

3. The company offers an initial training programme in basic life and social skills, including wordpower and numberpower, and NVQ programmes in administration, information technology, retail operations, distributive operations, customer services, childcare and direct care.

4. Unemployment in the North West London TEC area stood at 5.9 per cent in April 1998. The corresponding figure for the North London TEC area was 7.1 per cent. Both of these figures mask considerable variances among boroughs within the TEC areas. Unemployment in Hertfordshire, at the same point in time, was 2.3 per cent, compared with the national unemployment rate of 5.1 per cent in November 1997. The 1991 population census showed that minority ethnic groups accounted for 36 per cent of the population in the North West London TEC area, while the corresponding proportions for the North London and Hertfordshire TEC areas were 20 per cent and 4 per cent respectively.

5. The level of attainment for year-11 pupils in the North West London TEC area is slightly better than the national average, as measured by the percentage achieving five or more passes at grades A\* to C in the general certificate of secondary education (GCSE). In 1997, 53 per cent achieved this level, compared with 46 per cent nationally in November 1997. In Hertfordshire, 50 per cent of pupils achieved this level. Figures for boroughs within the North London TEC area were 52 per cent (Barnet), 42.3 per cent (Enfield) and 26.7 per cent (Haringey).

## INSPECTION FINDINGS

6. First Rung produced its first self-assessment report for the original inspection. All members of the management team contributed to the report and all members of staff were aware of its contents. The report lacked specific detail, especially in the occupational areas, where one report was written to cover all training. In several areas, the report identified as strengths things which should be normal practice. Inspectors found more strengths in trainee support than were identified in the self-assessment report and awarded this aspect a higher grade. Inspectors agreed with most of the company's judgements on business administration, retailing, care, foundation for work and equal opportunities, including the grades awarded. In other areas, weaknesses were understated or not identified during the self-assessment process. The grades awarded by inspectors for management of training and quality assurance were lower than those given in the self-assessment report. An action plan was produced following inspection, and was used to address the weaknesses identified. Prior to reinspection, the company produced a concise report which summarised all the actions taken to remedy weaknesses identified in the first inspection and gave grades for the two areas being reinspected. Inspectors agreed with the grade given for quality assurance but found more strengths for management of training than identified by the company and accordingly awarded a higher grade.

7. During the first inspection, a team of five inspectors spent a total of 15 days at First Rung during June 1998. The three main occupational areas offered by the company were inspected. Inspectors examined a wide range of documents generated by awarding bodies, the TECs, and the company itself. Interviews were conducted with 30 trainees, 18 workplace supervisors and eight of First Rung's training staff. Inspectors observed 18 assessment or training sessions and examined trainees' portfolios, assessment records, individual training plans and learning materials.

8. Reinspection was carried out by a team of two inspectors for a total of four days in September 1999. They interviewed five trainees and six members of First Rung's staff. They examined documents relating to trainees, including portfolios and assessment records, training materials and management and quality assurance documents.

## OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

### Business administration

### Grade 2

9. First Rung has over 100 trainees working towards NVQs at levels 1 to 3 in administration and levels 1 and 2 in information technology. The trainees include those who have completed initial in-house training and/or information technology training before transferring to administration and those who have gone straight into the administration NVQ. There were also two modern apprentices in

administration and one trainee on a national traineeship in information technology. Ninety-five per cent of trainees are employed. They are working in a variety of companies and are able to practise most of the skills required to enable them to achieve NVQs. Training for administration is mainly on the job. Trainees are brought to the company's premises to practise only those skills not achievable in the workplace. The company is well equipped to offer training in information technology, and trainees carry out real work in an office environment. Training and assessment for information technology level 1 is currently carried out off the job. Level 2 trainees are work based, but are supported, where necessary, by in-house workshops for specific units. The self-assessment report identified only generic strengths and weaknesses for the occupational areas and did not refer specifically to administration and information technology. Inspectors agreed with the grade given in the self-assessment report.

### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ good support for trainees with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- ◆ good work placements allow trainees to meet NVQs' requirements
- ◆ trainees' progress is reviewed regularly with employers
- ◆ staff and workplace supervisors understand their roles/responsibilities clearly
- ◆ off-the-job workshops' resources are good

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ lack of rigorous assessment procedures for NVQ level 3 administration
- ◆ inadequate development of key skills in the modern apprenticeship programme
- ◆ no development of key skills on work placements

10. Those trainees interviewed were enthusiastic about their training and had a clear understanding of the units which they had achieved. They know the objectives which they are working towards and what evidence needs to be collected. Employers are keen to help trainees to complete NVQs. Work placements provide good opportunities for trainees to acquire and practise the necessary skills. Providers ensure that a suitable range of activities is available to trainees. Staff and workplace supervisors have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, with communication between them good. First Rung's staff and workplace supervisors are committed to getting the best out of trainees. Individual attention is given to trainees with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, many of whom are referred from careers offices. If potential trainees have transport problems, staff from First Rung will make special arrangements to interview them in the careers office. Trainees' progress is carefully monitored, reviewed and recorded every two to four weeks. Workplace supervisors are knowledgeable about trainees' progress and are actively involved in the planning of training.

11. There are no documented assessment procedures for NVQ level 3 administration. The assessment process is not rigorous enough. Trainees working towards a modern apprenticeship (5 per cent) have no evidence of completed units

or assessment, although they had started the modern apprenticeship in September 1997. Key skills for modern apprentices are underdeveloped. In the workplace, key skills are recognised, but opportunities for assessing key skills alongside the assessment of occupational competences are neglected.

## **Retailing & customer service**

## **Grade 2**

12. At the time of the inspection, First Rung had 50 trainees working towards NVQs at levels 1 and 2 in distributive operations, level 2 in retail. Most trainees have learning difficulties and/or disabilities; their needs are diverse. They may experience difficulties with numeracy and literacy or have emotional problems. Most training takes place in the workplace. Off-the-job training includes induction and information technology which take place on the company's premises. Placements with employers include large national retailers, independent retailers, warehouses and charity shops. Inspectors found examples of good practice in training and assessment. The self-assessment report identified only the generic strengths and weaknesses of occupational areas and did not refer specifically to retailing and customer service. Inspectors agreed with the grade given in the self-assessment report.

### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ varied and effective range of training methods
- ◆ good relationship among staff, trainees and workplace providers
- ◆ continuing development of training and assessment materials

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ lack of co-ordinated on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ no systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of training sessions

13. Trainees experience a range of learning methods, including on-the-job training observed by the supervisor. Good use is made of open-learning videos and workbooks, with learning materials, such as the initial assessment pack, being continually developed.

14. Trainees are offered the opportunity to attend courses provided by the work-placement providers. Eighty per cent of the trainees interviewed said that they found learning methods to be helpful and effective. There are open and effective relationships among staff, trainees and workplace supervisors/managers. There are several examples of trainees either changing their programme or moving to a different placement provider. Trainees found that on-the-job supervisors are supportive and encouraging; this was confirmed by inspectors' observations.

15. Trainees attend the company's premises on a regular basis for off-the-job training, but there is a lack of co-ordination between on- and off-the-job training. One third of the employers visited during the inspection said that they were

unclear about the purpose and content of off-the-job training. One employer stated that it would be helpful to plan training and assessment activities further in advance than the current system of just planning from one visit to the next. There is no systematic way of obtaining feedback from the trainees, so there is a shortage of information on which to base longer-term plans.

## Health, care & public services

## Grade 2

16. There are 19 candidates registered in childcare and 11 in direct care. Inspectors conducted interviews with eight trainees. They observed two examples of one-to-one training, two observations of assessment sessions and seven interviews with placement providers or employers. They also examined candidates' portfolios and assessment documents. During the 1997-98 contract period, 53 per cent of trainees obtained employment. Three candidates are progressing to level 3 as modern apprentices. Training is not systematically evaluated, with no information on which to base changes in delivery, style and content. Key skills need to be further developed and mapped against the new vocational awards. Inspectors agreed with the grade proposed in the self-assessment report.

### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ assessor standardisation meetings contribute to consistent, rigorous assessments
- ◆ excellent staff relationships with trainees and placement providers/employers
- ◆ placement providers/employers are well informed
- ◆ trainees are set realistic goals
- ◆ monitoring of progress is thorough and well documented
- ◆ retention rates have risen to 90 per cent in the last contract year
- ◆ external agencies contribute to a systematic training programme

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ lack of systematic evaluation of training
- ◆ inadequate development of key skills

17. Training is well planned and well delivered and candidates are regularly achieving their NVQ units. Level 2 awards are being achieved within 12 months. There are good assessment and verification systems. Assessment of units is regular and rigorous. The company belongs to a consortium which has established an assessment centre for its members. Assessor standardisation meetings and detailed feedback from internal verifiers contribute to an assessment process which is regular, consistent and rigorous. A particular strength identified by all those interviewed was the degree of support which the provider offered to trainees and placements/employers. Visits are regular and well recorded. All employers have



copies of the standards. Employers are kept informed of what trainees are learning and feel that they are viewed as a partner in the process.

## Foundation for work

## Grade 2

18. There are 43 trainees undertaking an initial training programme. The programme covers basic skills, life skills, wordpower and numberpower. Each of the two TECs with which the provider contracts for this work has individual requirements. As a result, there are different induction programmes at the two sites where the training takes place. The premises offers spacious and well-lit accommodation for trainees and is equipped with modern IT equipment. Training areas are attractively decorated with examples of trainees' work. Other facilities for trainees include social and recreational areas on each site. The self-assessment report identified only the generic strengths and weaknesses of occupational areas and did not refer specifically to initial training. The grade awarded by inspectors is the same as that suggested in self-assessment report.

### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ trainees' individual needs are met
- ◆ trainers and trainees enjoy an excellent rapport
- ◆ trainees undertake real work
- ◆ continued use of National Records of Achievement (NRAs) throughout the programme
- ◆ strong emphasis on trainees' personal development
- ◆ well-organised assessment sessions
- ◆ up-to-date portfolios

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ disregard of mixed abilities in some classes
- ◆ there are no effective mechanisms for sharing good practice among sites
- ◆ informal assessment procedures

19. The assessment is informal, but well structured, with trainees actively involved. Assessment sessions are well organised. Trainees' portfolios are up to date, and action-plans in place. Trainers/assessors encourage trainees to maintain a public record of the progress which they are making towards achieving their targets. Charts and graphs showing progress and achievement were on display in the training area. Trainers/assessors place a strong emphasis on enabling trainees to work at their own pace. Their response to individuals' needs includes the use of language appropriate to trainees' ability level. The company uses trainees as a resource in undertaking its day-to-day administrative tasks, for example, trainees are asked to produce real letters and memoranda. Staff are active in encouraging trainees to maintain and value their National Record of Achievement (NRA),

starting at interview. There is a strong emphasis on personal development. Trainers help trainees to break down communication barriers by encouraging them to interact effectively. During the induction process, trainees are taken on external visits which include ice-breaking and team-building activities.

20. Occasionally, at both sites, trainers use a class-teaching approach in which all trainees cover the same topics using the same resources. This means that some trainees are struggling to understand the topic, while others are not being challenged enough. As a result, some trainees have to repeat work already covered. There is no formal system for identifying good practice and sharing this between staff on different sites.

## GENERIC AREAS

### Equal opportunities

### Grade 2

21. First Rung has an equal opportunities policy. The ethnicity and achievement rates of trainees are monitored. At the time of inspection, there were no trainees with physical disabilities. The grade awarded by the inspection team is the same as that suggested in the self-assessment report.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ active recruitment from disadvantaged local groups
- ◆ positive portrayal of ethnicity and gender in publicity material
- ◆ training staff provide good role models
- ◆ placement providers must either have an acceptable equal opportunities policy or sign up to First Rung's policy, before placements are arranged
- ◆ successful placements of young black men in training for childcare
- ◆ equal opportunities policy regularly reviewed and updated

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ equal opportunities for people with physical disabilities is not positively portrayed in promotional material and literature
- ◆ not all job descriptions contain a commitment to the equal opportunities policy
- ◆ only one centre is accessible to wheelchair users

22. Working with its links in the local community, First Rung plays an active role in recruiting disadvantaged youths onto training programmes. Publicity material portrays positive images of ethnicity and gender groups, but lacks images of disability. The training workshops have various displays of appropriate material, including posters designed by the trainees. Before placing trainees with a provider, the company ensures that an acceptable equal opportunities policy is in place. If there is no suitable policy, the company insists that the provider agree to use

First Rung's policy. Equal opportunities issues are discussed with trainees and on-the-job supervisors as part of their regular meetings. First Rung reviews its equal opportunities policy regularly. In the area of childcare, the company has successfully placed young black men on work placements, breaking the traditional domination of this work by women. The proportion of staff and trainees from minority ethnic backgrounds is similar to that within the communities which the provider serves.

23. There are job descriptions for all staff currently employed, but not all contain a commitment to the company's equal opportunities policy and practice. The staff interviewed were all aware of First Rung's equal opportunities policy. The company operates from five sites, with only one accessible to wheelchair users.

### **Trainee support**

### **Grade 1**

24. Trainee support is a priority for First Rung, and the welfare of trainees is at the heart of all the support which is given. Staff are clearly committed to delivering high-quality training, providing additional support for trainees as required. The company also provides a counselling service for trainees, which is purchased at the company's expense. Each trainee undergoes initial assessment, and, from this, an individual training plan is prepared. Trainees will be placed either in in-house training workshops to develop basic skills or with the provider for work experience. Careers guidance is available, where necessary.

25. Inspectors identified considerable strengths not identified in the self-assessment report. As a consequence, inspectors awarded a grade higher than that proposed by the provider.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ excellent relationships among provider, staff, trainees and tutors
- ◆ counselling service available to all trainees
- ◆ trainees have frequent contact with assessors
- ◆ trainees receive excellent support
- ◆ social areas are provided for trainees on the company's premises

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ there were no major weaknesses

26. The attitude of staff towards trainees is caring and supportive. They show interest in trainees' personal development, as well as in their training progress. Inspectors found several instances of pastoral support being given to trainees. For example, trainees receive help in dealing with medical and social problems, as well as with learning difficulties. All the trainees interviewed were positive about the levels of support offered. Trainees have access to a counselling service, which is

### GOOD PRACTICE

*An assessor made daily calls to a workplace supervisor to ensure that a trainee with severe emotional and health problems was eating properly at breakfast and lunchtime. After visiting a counsellor on site, a trainee will, if necessary, be referred to a more specialised service. In one case, the trainee was accompanied by a member of the company's staff until she felt confident to go alone. The cost of these services was borne by the company.*

well used. Trainees are visited in the workplace by provider staff every two weeks, for assessment reviews, or on a weekly basis, if extra welfare support is needed. The company invests considerable resources in ensuring that trainees receive help and advice on personal matters, as well as the opportunity to discuss their progress. Trainees are expected to adhere to accepted standards of work practice, for example, good timekeeping, suitable dress and appropriate standards of work, both on and off the job. When a trainee is late, he/she will incur a financial penalty. Trainees have access to assessors at the off-the-job workshops held at providers' training premises every two weeks. Inspectors found a high level of motivation among trainees.

27. A broad range of support is offered to trainees to meet their particular needs, including English-language support for speakers of other languages, enlarging the print on documents and enabling trainees to record evidence on audio tape. A discrete budget is available, if needed, to purchase appropriate clothing for trainees to attend interviews. Trainees are offered the opportunity to go on a group holiday, accompanied by staff, during which they develop personal skills and generate further evidence for their portfolios. Staff contribute to raising funds for this.

## Management of training

## Grade 2

28. First Rung has extended its management team since the last inspection in June 1998. One of the new managers has specific responsibility for the development of a management-information system. The company's commitment to staff appraisal and development remains high and this aspect of management is well planned and clearly recorded. The organisation's business plan is easy to understand and has been effectively communicated to staff. Progress towards meeting TEC contractual targets is closely monitored. Management of training is now governed by a broad range of relevant and regularly updated company procedures. First Rung has sought additional markets for 1999 and now offers training to New Deal clients. Managers have fully accepted the comments made in the original inspection report and have tackled weaknesses with enthusiasm and drive.

Inspectors identified the following weaknesses at the first inspection:

- ◆ inadequate management information
- ◆ lack of structured management development programme
- ◆ inadequate recording of outcomes of supervisory meetings
- ◆ individual team targets not related to strategic plan
- ◆ inappropriate deployment of some staff

29. First Rung has successfully addressed all of the previously identified weaknesses. The full impact of the actions that have been taken has yet to be felt. Significant changes have been made to the management-information system. A new database has been installed that is networked between each of the company's training centres. The staff development programme has been strengthened to include teaching qualifications and management NVQs at level 4, which are

specifically aimed at developing managers' skills. There are very clear records of internal communication at all levels. Meetings are now held regularly, are more formally organised and are recorded in clear and appropriate minutes. Targets for teams and individuals are now closely monitored through formal and informal meetings. Data on progress towards these targets are fed into the management system and progress charts are updated monthly and posted in managers' offices. There is a good awareness of individual targets, which are now referenced against numbered objectives within the business plan. The job descriptions for each post have been updated and re-issued to ensure that everyone is clear about their roles and responsibilities. The management team, in particular, is stronger and is highly motivated to introduce change that will benefit trainees and the whole organisation. First Rung was successfully re-assessed for Investors in People accreditation in May 1999. Inspectors found more strengths than those identified by First Rung and awarded a higher grade.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ strong links with employers and the local community
- ◆ extensive and effective use of management-information systems
- ◆ clear and regularly updated management procedures
- ◆ open and effective communication throughout the company
- ◆ good staff development programme

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ some new initiatives not fully established and tested

30. The company actively establishes, develops and maintains links with local employers and community organisations. Regular contact is maintained with employers and workplace providers, who are invited to participate in social events organised by the company. There are good working relationships with social agencies such as the careers service, social services, police and the housing department. At one site, the company has established strong links with a Tamil refugee organisation and an Afro-Caribbean business group.

31. First Rung has made a significant investment in both human and physical resources to improve the effectiveness of its management-information systems. Monthly reports are produced that track progress towards achieving contractual targets. Each occupational sector and training centre is analysed separately. Detailed achievement statistics are now produced, and these are broken down by gender, ethnicity, NVQ level, numbers of those leaving their programmes early, occupational area, name of qualification, and average times taken to complete courses and achieve qualifications. Year-on-year comparisons have now been made. Each of the TEC-funded training programmes is reviewed separately to consider any differences in achievement between modern apprentices, national trainees and other types of trainee. The information is discussed at managers'

meetings and fed into the programme review meetings that have recently been introduced.

32. The procedures manual has been completely revised since the original inspection. Managers meet regularly to discuss the effectiveness and use of the company's procedures, and several procedures have now been altered to reflect changes in practice.

33. There are good formal procedures for recording staff discussions at all levels of the organisation. Managers meet fortnightly and there are general staff meetings every month. There are additional meetings for each occupational team as well as internal verification meetings that aim to standardise practice. Minutes of management meetings clearly show what information needs to be passed on to the rest of the staff. Twice a year, all staff are invited to attend a meeting with members of the board of trustees when a general overview of the company's performance is presented and discussed. Lines of communication are clear and information flows freely from staff to board level.

34. Managers routinely identify development and training needs of staff as part of their appraisal process. The company encourages and supports staff in their personal and professional development. The staff development programme has been extended and training staff are all now working towards teaching qualifications. Some managers have chosen to follow level 4 NVQ programmes in management. Assessor training for new staff is well structured and includes a mentoring scheme and work-shadowing an experienced assessor for a month.

35. There have been many changes to the management of training since the original inspection. It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of these changes as many policies and procedures are still evolving, and their full impact has yet to be felt.

### **Quality assurance**

### **Grade 3**

36. First Rung has comprehensive, recorded quality-assurance procedures that, in addition to meeting administrative and contractual requirements, also stipulate how training and assessment are evaluated. A new member has recently been appointed to the management team, with responsibility for introducing quality-assurance procedures and ensuring consistent practice across the company's different centres and occupational areas. Many new initiatives have been introduced that are beginning to measure the company's performance in a structured and systematic way. External consultants have been used to provide advice and to test quality-assurance arrangements. Internal verification is sound; uniform recording methods and strict standards are used throughout the company. Quality-assurance arrangements are still developing and managers have a clear commitment to continuous improvement and the self-assessment process.

The main weaknesses identified in the first inspection were:

- ◆ poor monitoring of the effectiveness of the training provision
- ◆ no internal audit of quality assurance
- ◆ quality of learning materials varies from poor to good
- ◆ current procedures not always followed
- ◆ no management-information system to improve the quality of training

37. Since the original inspection, many changes have been introduced that have made quality-assurance arrangements more formal and more effective. Feedback is now systematically collected through questionnaires and regular trainee reviews. Programme review teams have been set up to analyse the overall performance in each occupational sector. Not all of these reviews have yet been completed. An internal audit procedure has been established, but this mainly concentrates on contractual documents and does not yet ensure that all quality-assurance procedures are being complied with. Learning materials have been completely revised. Some professionally published training packages have been purchased. Other material is produced internally and is of a good standard. The company procedures manual was reissued at the beginning of 1999 and several individual procedures have since been revised. The effectiveness of procedures is a regular agenda item at managers' meetings, and changes are disseminated through staff meetings at each centre. Documents are effectively controlled by issue dates and version numbers. Out-of-date procedures are promptly destroyed. There is a new management-information system that produces detailed and valuable statistics about the company's performance. Managers are now better informed and are able to respond to hard data rather than having to rely on instinct. The inspectors found a balance of strengths and weaknesses and awarded the same grade as that given by the provider.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ clear and effective quality assurance arrangements
- ◆ good action-planning leading to continuous improvement

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ immature quality assurance system

38. Managers now have a good understanding of how to measure their own performance using a variety of diverse methods. These include regular feedback from trainees at various stages of their progression through the programme, surveys of employers in each of the occupational areas, evaluation of individual training sessions, and staff questionnaires to collect their views on a wide range of issues. The management-information system now systematically produces data that is used to identify trends and areas of concern. One of the managers has been given responsibility for sharing good practice within the organisation and for maintaining consistency in training and assessment practice. The impact of this



appointment has already been felt. Internal verification is well planned, fully recorded and is serving to raise standards among assessors. The chief executive ensures that policies are kept up to date and controls all documents relating to policies and procedures. Old copies of a procedure are removed from circulation when a new version is issued. The procedures manual not only covers the areas required by the TECs, but also covers a range of additional issues, including initial assessment, induction, assessment practice, the development of learning materials, complaints, and programme evaluation. Staff now have a good understanding of quality assurance and have a clear commitment to continuous improvement.

39. Since the original inspection, First Rung has followed a rigorous programme of continuous self-assessment and action-planning. Progress towards achieving planned targets is reviewed monthly at managers' meetings. The action plan has been consistently updated each month to reflect progress and to address new issues. This process has resulted in many changes that have led to general improvements in the training provision. These include a new management-information system, additional managers that have brought new skills to the team, a new trainee welfare officer at one of the centres, the appointment of team leaders to co-ordinate assessors, teacher training for key personnel, standardisation in assessment and internal verification practice, and new learning materials in some areas.

40. The company has implemented many new quality assurance arrangements since the original inspection. Some of these have been introduced only in the past few months. Systems have been amended as their effectiveness has been analysed. Not all of the new procedures have been fully tested. For example, only the information technology and administration NVQ courses have been subject to a programme review. Some of the feedback systems are not yet fully developed. Trainees and employers' questionnaires are not anonymous, and some ask too many closed questions. The staff survey is only partially completed. Trainers are not yet observed as part of the quality-assurance procedures. Plans for further development are evolving as the company's own knowledge and understanding of quality assurance continues to expand. The impact of the new arrangements was clearly significant at the time of reinspection, but their full effects have yet to become apparent.