



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT OCTOBER 1999

BESTCO

SUMMARY

BESTCO offers training in a variety of occupational areas with a particular emphasis on foundation level training. The company works in partnership with many local cultural and educational agencies. Trainees benefit from a high level of individual support and well-resourced training facilities. The training programmes in retailing and distribution are effective. Trainees in this occupational area are well supported in the workplace. Training in foundation for work and business administration is satisfactory, although few trainees progress from foundation to higher levels. On- and off-the-job training in care is poor for both adult and youth trainees. BESTCO's commitment to equal opportunities is strong and has resulted in wider participation in training by disadvantaged groups. The management of the organisation is open and collaborative. Quality assurance within the organisation is satisfactory, but there is insufficient monitoring of the subcontractors' training.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	3
Retailing & customer service	2
Health, care & public services	5
Foundation for work	3

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	2
Trainee support	2
Management of training	3
Quality assurance	3

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ excellent promotion of equal opportunities
- ◆ open and consultative management
- ◆ high level of support for trainees
- ◆ excellent health and safety arrangements
- ◆ well-resourced learning environment
- ◆ strong links with other organisations
- ◆ effective targeting of disadvantaged groups

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ inadequate monitoring of subcontractors' training
- ◆ ineffective use of individual training plans
- ◆ staff not occupationally up to date
- ◆ no quality assurance of off-the job training

INTRODUCTION

1. BESTCO was established in 1988 as a partnership of voluntary organisations. The organisation is a non-profit making charity limited by guarantee. Its aims are to work closely with employers and to support people who are disadvantaged in their efforts to gain employment. The head office and main training centre is situated in the inner city area of Radford in Nottingham. There is a training annexe nearby. Newly refurbished premises in the centre of Nottingham will provide additional training as part of a partnership arrangement with other voluntary agencies. The organisation has delivered government-funded training in various forms since it was established. Currently, it delivers youth and adult training programmes through contracts with Greater Nottingham Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). BESTCO also delivers training through the voluntary option and the Gateway of the New Deal. The main occupational areas of training are foundation for work, business administration, retailing and customer service, and health, care and public services. New Deal training is offered across a variety of occupational areas. Trainees are working towards a range of qualifications, including national vocational qualifications (NVQs), and other vocational and prevocational qualifications. BESTCO currently employ 25 full-time and seven part-time staff. There are a total of 258 trainees and clients on government-funded training programmes.

2. The table below shows the numbers and types of trainees in each occupational area. The 48 clients listed as being on 'other programmes' are following the voluntary sector option of New Deal and are training in a variety of vocational areas, including sound engineering, maintenance, catering, youth work, leisure, and animal care. These clients were not inspected, however, as there were less than 10 training in each occupational area.

Numbers of trainees by occupational area and programme

	Youth	Adult	Foundation Level	New Deal	Total
Business administration	19	20	7	17	63
Retailing & customer service	12	4	0	25	41
Health, care & public services	6	0	0	11	17
Foundation for work	28	61	0	0	89
Other programmes	0	0	0	48	48
TOTAL	65	85	7	53	258

3. Unemployment in the Nottingham city area is currently 5.2 per cent, compared with a national average of 3.9 per cent. While unemployment in Greater Nottingham has fallen recently, it remains high in the inner city area in which BESTCO is situated. Nottingham is primarily a banking and financial centre, which is also recognised as an important centre for retailing. The city's manufacturing

base continues to be eroded, however, with only three large employers remaining in this sector. Minority ethnic groups constitute 9.2 per cent of Nottingham's population.

4. In 1998-99, the proportion of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of education (GCSEs) at grade C or above was 28.7 per cent, well below the national average of 47.9 per cent. In Nottingham city, 63 per cent of 16 year olds continue in full-time education and 20 per cent enter work-based training. Many local schools have sixth forms. There are a number of colleges and other private training providers in the local area who compete with BESTCO for trainees.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

5. BESTCO started its self-assessment process in 1998. Senior managers attended a number of training sessions organised by the local TEC. All staff were given the opportunity to be involved in the working groups set up to contribute to the self-assessment report. The process involved appraising existing documents and analysing feedback from trainees, partner organisations and staff. A further survey of trainees was carried out in January 1999. The responses were analysed and used as a basis for the action-planning process. A survey of employees' attitudes was also carried out.

6. A team of five inspectors spent a total of 20 days at BESTCO during October 1999. Inspectors examined trainees' portfolios and personal files. They also examined achievement and retention data, company documents, information from awarding bodies, TEC contracts and audits, and employers and subcontractors' agreements. Inspectors carried out 58 interviews with trainees, 29 interviews with employers and work-based supervisors, and 25 interviews with BESTCO's staff. Inspectors also observed off-the-job training sessions, NVQ assessments and reviews.

Grades awarded to instruction sessions

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Business administration			1			1
Health, care & public services	1					1
Foundation for work	1					1
Total	2	0	1	0	0	3

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Business administration

Grade 3

7. BESTCO provides programmes leading to NVQs in administration and information technology. There are currently 63 trainees and clients, of whom 19 are on work-based training for young people, 20 are on work-based training for adults, 17 are on New Deal, and seven are on foundation for work programmes. Two are working towards level 1 NVQs in administration and nine are working towards level 1 NVQs in using information technology. There are 24 trainees and clients working towards level 2 NVQs in administration and 25 towards level 2 NVQs in using information technology. Very few progress to level 3 qualifications. In 1997-98, 35 per cent of trainees and clients completed their programmes, but in 1998-99, the proportion rose to 60 per cent. In the past 18 months, 50 per cent of those starting training have gone on to achieve the principal goal of their training plans. Most

trainees and clients enter the programmes having no background in business administration. About a third are found work placements, mainly in the voluntary sector or at BESTCO itself. The remainder complete their training in-house. While on placement, most trainees and clients attend BESTCO for off-the-job training one or two days a week. There are three staff. One trains and assesses in administration and information technology and internally verifies information technology. Another trains and assesses in information technology and administration and internally verifies administration. The third member of staff trains in information technology and is working towards the vocational assessor award. Most business administration activity takes place in two adjoining rooms: one is equipped with 20 up-to-date computers and the other is a general training room used mainly by administration trainees. Workstations comply with health and safety requirements and printing facilities are good. BESTCO has an arrangement with the awarding body allowing it to make direct claims for certificates at any time of the year (direct claims status). Inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses to those in the self-assessment report, but awarded the same grade as that given by BESTCO.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-designed introductory training
- ◆ good individual feedback to trainees and clients on quality of their work
- ◆ flexible training to meet individual needs

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ inadequate planning of training
- ◆ insufficient resources
- ◆ poor assessment practices
- ◆ insufficient involvement of placement providers

8. Most trainees and clients have no previous experience of working in an office environment. However, the training programmes are designed to enable absolute beginners to get off to a good start by providing patient, step-by-step guidance. Trainees of all ages and backgrounds are given every opportunity to gain both confidence and occupational skills. Mature people with no previous computer experience make good progress, and trainees and clients with language difficulties successfully tackle administration NVQs. The programmes are highly flexible in terms of completion times, patterns of attendance and progression routes. Programmes are often extended to meet trainees and clients' individual needs. The work produced by trainees and clients during their training programmes is of a high standard. Some work exceeds the expected standard, especially the spreadsheet assignments completed by those working towards NVQs at level 2. Trainers give detailed feedback to enable trainees and clients to improve their work. Trainees and clients take time and trouble over the claims to competence that they include in their portfolios. There is a purposeful atmosphere in the training rooms. Trainees and clients appreciate the efforts which BESTCO makes on their behalf and most

respond by adopting a positive attitude. Many show a great determination to succeed, often in the face of personal difficulties.

9. Most training takes place in workshops where trainees complete assignments at their own pace and ask for help when they get into difficulty. BESTCO has recently purchased some computer-based training packages, but otherwise they are using assignments that have not been designed for open learning. Staff have difficulty responding to all the requests for help as trainees frequently get into difficulty during classroom sessions. Background knowledge and theory are not generally provided through structured sessions. In administration in particular, trainees do not have sufficient reference materials to enable them to develop their knowledge and their information-gathering skills fully. There is a systematic approach to building NVQ portfolios, but no systematic approach to identifying training needs and planning training to meet those needs. Trainers and employers identify the skills that trainees need to gain, such as communication skills, but these needs are not responded to in a planned and systematic way. Some trainees do not attend day release at BESTCO and are dependent on the training provided in the workplace. Individual training plans are insufficiently detailed. There is a lack of planning of on-the-job training.

10. When asked how they are assessed, trainees either assume that reviews are assessments or talk about putting work in their portfolios. They have no clear sense of their competence being assessed. Observation of their performance does occur, but tends to be unplanned and poorly recorded. Only a small amount of evidence is gathered through observation and the lack of planning means that opportunities are missed. There is an over-reliance on work-product evidence and a tendency for assessment to be fragmented. There is insufficient emphasis on workplace assessment and no work-based assessors are used. Fifty per cent of information technology trainees are currently in work placements. Placement providers are generally very supportive and express a desire to get more involved in training and assessment but most are not fully aware of the requirements of the NVQ. Although trainees and clients receive regular progress reviews from BESTCO's staff, it is rare for their workplace supervisors to be involved. Targets are agreed and set at these reviews, but they are often too general to be of any real use. Trainees undoubtedly benefit from their placements, but the lack of planned involvement of their workplace supervisors means that the opportunities the placements offer for the development and assessment of competence are underused.

Retailing & customer service

Grade 2

11. There are 41 trainees and clients in this occupational area. Of these, 25 are clients on the voluntary sector option of New Deal, four are adults on work-based learning courses and the remaining 12 are young people on other training programmes. There are two retail training officers, who are responsible for training in this sector. Trainees and clients are variously pursuing NVQs in distributive operations at level 1, and in retail operations, or distribution and warehousing operations, at level 2. They are trained and assessed in the workplace by

BESTCO's staff in conjunction with employers. Adult trainees attend weekly job-search sessions in the training centre and benefit from the support of staff who are well aware of local labour market information. In 1997-98, 55 per cent of trainees and clients completed their programmes. In 1998-99, the proportion rose to 68 per cent. In the last 18 months, 33 trainees and clients have achieved NVQs. Twenty-two of these NVQs have been in distributive operations at level 1, seven have been in retail operations at level 2, and the other four were in distribution and warehousing operations at level 2. Five trainees have gained jobs. The self-assessment report identified only one weakness and failed to identify any strengths. Inspectors found additional strengths and weaknesses and awarded a higher grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-planned and integrated training and assessment
- ◆ state-of-the-art 'knowledge pack' for trainees
- ◆ supportive and motivated employers

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient accreditation of prior learning
- ◆ low progression rate to employment
- ◆ staff not occupationally up to date

GOOD PRACTICE

A retail trainee placed with a large, national, office supplies company won their national 'trainee of the week' award. The trainee achieved an NVQ, was employed by the company with which she had been on work placement and was recently promoted to branch staff trainer. The trainee feels she owes her success to the training she received from BESTCO and her employer.

12. All training in this occupational area is provided in the workplace. BESTCO's staff visit employers frequently and work closely with them to plan training and assessment. Training is generally of excellent quality. BESTCO's staff explain the assessment process clearly to trainees and employers. Assessment is carefully planned and structured, and is well integrated with training. Employers and workplace supervisors are fully involved in the assessment process. Trainees have a good understanding of what they have to do to achieve their qualifications. Staff take time to explain how evidence of competence can be collected in the workplace. The rapport between staff and trainees helps to build trainees' confidence, which is particularly important for those trainees who have been unemployed for a long time and are worried about returning to the workplace.

13. The resources provided by BESTCO are up to date and well used. All trainees receive a skills and knowledge pack, which is designed to develop their knowledge and understanding and to explain the legislation in the retail and distribution industry. It is very well written and contains all the latest information. The pack is well used and complements the training given by employers and BESTCO's staff. Employers are enthusiastic and motivated and committed to supporting trainees. For example, one employer arranged for a trainee to attend the training courses available to full-time staff. This clearly benefited the trainee, who is now employed. Employers work alongside BESTCO's staff and are involved in review and feedback sessions so that any further training needs can be discussed and concerns can be resolved in partnership.

14. There is little accreditation of prior learning, even though the company has a policy and appropriate documents. Some of the adult trainees have experience gained in other jobs. This is not accredited and trainees have to repeat the work in order to achieve an NVQ. Trainees are unaware that they can gain accreditation for previous experience. Staff have not had recent occupational updating in the industry and are unaware of new styles of assessment within retailing and distribution, such as the lead body's latest guidelines on simulation and occupational competency. Although staff have attended training sessions, they have not been given the opportunity to develop their workplace skills in line with recent changes. The number of trainees who have gone on to find jobs is comparatively low. Many work placements are in charitable organisations that are not in a position to offer employment.

Health, care & public services

Grade 5

15. There are six youth trainees in this occupational area. One is a modern apprentice working towards a level 3 NVQ in early years care and education. The other five are national trainees working towards level 2 NVQs in early years care and education. Four of the national trainees are employed. There are also 11 clients on the New Deal voluntary sector option who are gaining experience in care settings. BESTCO has one training officer who is responsible for training in early years care and education. New Deal clients are the responsibility of the organisation's New Deal programme manager. All New Deal clients are working towards specific milestones and units of the level 2 NVQ in early years care and education, and units of the level 3 NVQ in care. All New Deal clients are placed in residential care homes, nurseries and other community care facilities. Off-the-job training and assessment are subcontracted to a local training provider. Off-the-job training consists of a half-day session once a week during which trainees work through open learning packages, receiving assistance as necessary. The subcontractor is also responsible for key skills training and assessment. Two visiting assessors carry out workplace assessments. Registration and certification of NVQs are processed through the subcontractor's assessment centre. In 1997-98, 60 per cent of trainees completed their programmes. This proportion fell to 37 per cent in 1998-99. The self-assessment report identified no strengths and four weaknesses. Inspectors identified further weaknesses, and awarded the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective on-the-job skills training
- ◆ good matching of placements with trainees' interests

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient work-based assessment
- ◆ no planned or co-ordinated work-based training

- ◆ inadequate explanation of NVQ process to trainees
- ◆ insufficient theory training
- ◆ failure to ensure that placement providers are aware of their responsibilities to trainees
- ◆ low achievement rates
- ◆ some trainees' work below the required standard
- ◆ some trainees' jobs not matched to the level of their NVQ

16. BESTCO works hard to place trainees in jobs that match their interests and aspirations. Trainees feel that they benefit from the placement experience and appreciated the support offered by placement supervisors. They are well integrated into placement teams and perform a range of work-based tasks. They receive effective on-the-job training in the basic skills needed to carry out their job. Two trainees are included in staff training events. Most trainees say that they have gained in confidence as a result of their placement experience and now have more realistic expectations of work and their future options. However, although placements provide useful work experience and some skills training, they do not form part of an adequate programme of work-based training and assessment. Communication between BESTCO and placement providers is poor. Most placement providers are unclear about their responsibilities and would value more frequent contact with BESTCO's staff. They have insufficient understanding of NVQ standards or how they can help trainees to achieve their objectives. There are written agreements between BESTCO and placement providers but the terms of these agreements are rarely consulted. Some placement providers are unaware of the existence of any such placement agreements. BESTCO takes insufficient responsibility for ensuring placements provide learning experiences of the required standard. Work-based learning is not planned or linked to NVQ requirements and there are no reliable processes for monitoring the quality of the learning that takes place. Poor guidance of trainees and supervisors results in many valuable learning opportunities being missed. Trainees are given progress reviews every six weeks, which is more frequent than contractually required. These progress reviews are not effective and do not involve employers or workplace supervisors. Trainees have an unrealistic and inadequate grasp of NVQs and assessment requirements. Two trainees who are working towards a level 3 NVQ have a poor understanding of the requirements for that level. Two trainees are working towards units of a level 2 NVQ but their work does not meet the required standard. One trainee has progressed from level 2 to level 3, but her job does not reflect the standards for an NVQ at level 3. Most trainees have unrealistic expectations about how long it will take them to achieve part or all of an NVQ. One trainee is disappointed because she had believed she would be able to complete an NVQ in six months.

17. There are no work-based assessors. Visiting assessors spend insufficient time observing trainees' work to make reliable judgements about their competence. Visits by assessors are too infrequent, which prolongs the time trainees take to achieve their awards. Trainees are not assessed in the workplace until they have completed the open learning packages. One New Deal client who was two weeks

from completing her programme and had not had an NVQ assessment. The absence of workplace assessors means that opportunities to demonstrate competence are missed. The quality of placement supervision varies. Some trainees are supervised by an experienced but unqualified person while others are supervised at all times by a person with appropriate qualifications. Arrangements for the development of trainees' background knowledge are inadequate. Trainees can choose to attend half-day support sessions once a week, but there are no alternative learning opportunities. There is little key skills training and assessment and what there is is not integrated into the occupational training programme. Out of the 64 trainees who have started programmes in this occupational area over the last three years, only 11 have completed an NVQ. In the last six months, BESTCO has transferred most of its youth trainees on early years care programmes to another local training provider. Since New Deal training started, 10 per cent of clients have gained qualifications.

Foundation for work

Grade 3

18. BESTCO has six members of staff engaged, in this vocational area, all of whom work full-time. One provides basic skills training, and the other five provide prevocational training. Prevocational training is currently provided for both adult and youth trainees. The adult programme, which is called 'Basic Employability Training', has 61 trainees. The youth programmes, which are known as 'Options' and 'Initial Training', have seven and 21 trainees respectively. Trainees progress from the 'Options' programme to the 'Initial Training' programme. Trainees are referred to BESTCO primarily by the Employment Service and the careers service. Following a preliminary interview with BESTCO's staff, all trainees have an initial assessment to determine whether they require any additional learning support. Initial assessment for adult trainees is subcontracted to occupational training consultants. All trainees work towards foundation level awards and, where appropriate, wordpower and numberpower units. Individual training plans are agreed on with trainees. In 1997-98, 48 per cent of trainees stayed to complete their programmes. In 1998-99, the proportion rose slightly to 52 per cent. Many trainees who complete their programmes go on to join other vocational training programmes, but no detailed information on these destinations is available. Inspectors found additional strengths and weakness to those in the self-assessment report and awarded the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ experienced and well-qualified trainers and assessors
- ◆ good work placements
- ◆ opportunities to progress and achieve additional qualifications
- ◆ excellent off-the-job training

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ poor liaison with work placement providers

- ◆ some poor target-setting for trainees
- ◆ insufficient workplace assessment

GOOD PRACTICE

An international music celebrity has his roots in the area served by BESTCO and is a frequent visitor to the training centre, meeting with trainees to offer advice and to serve as a positive role model.

19. Staff responsible for foundation training and assessment are well qualified and have a range of appropriate experience and expertise. They operate as a team across the adult and youth programmes, sharing good practice, and offering each other support with problems and administration. Staff have a clear understanding of the needs and aspirations of trainees on foundation programmes. Young people joining the 'Options' and 'Initial Training' programmes often lack motivation. Some are reluctant to be on any training programme, and have personal problems arising from homelessness, criminal records or a sense of alienation. Foundation training staff work with such trainees to help them build their self-esteem and confidence, and to provide positive experiences, which will support the development of work-related skills and aspirations.

20. BESTCO has worked closely with local hospital trusts and a local museum of legal history to develop work placement opportunities appropriate to adult and youth trainees. The initiative with the local hospitals is designed to meet an identified need for auxiliary nurses. The initiative is still at an early stage in terms of the number of BESTCO's trainees in hospital placements, but there are good prospects of such placements leading to full-time employment, and hospital staff are supportive of the initiative. The placement project with a museum in the centre of Nottingham is designed to create a more positive attitude among young people towards citizenship, through an awareness and examination of current community and social issues. In the process of meeting these aims, skills relevant to employment are identified and developed. The policy document which outlines the purpose of the initiative is clear about what these skills are, and how they will be promoted within the project. The placement provides opportunities for gathering evidence towards foundation and NVQ units, and trainees from the 'Initial Training' programme view the placement, with interest and enthusiasm. All placements are of a high quality, and placement staff are supportive and sympathetic to the needs of foundation trainees.

21. Resources to support prevocational training are good. All trainees attend BESTCO's training centre for those programme elements, such as wordpower, numberpower, job-search guidance and confidence-building, which are taught exclusively in house. Trainees on placement attend for one day each week for job-search and, where appropriate, numeracy and literacy support. Training rooms are comfortable and well equipped, and training is of a high standard, in terms of the quality of teaching and relevance to trainees' needs. The opportunities provided for comment, feedback and reflection at the end of training sessions represent good practice. Training is appropriately structured and well prepared. The rapport which staff have with trainees, and their understanding of trainees' strengths and hopes, contribute to trainees achieving recognised qualifications, often for the first time. Good use is made of unit accreditation. One trainee has progressed through the 'Options' and 'Initial Training' programmes, and is gathering evidence for a business administration NVQ. Thirteen of the 61 adult trainees are gathering evidence for level 1 NVQs in occupational areas such as retailing and business

administration. Trainees also have opportunities to achieve qualifications in, for example, basic food hygiene, health and safety, and lifting and handling.

22. BESTCO fails to ensure that placement providers and trainees fully understand that placements are an integral part of the training experience. Placement staff are not aware of the training provided by BESTCO prior to placement, and so cannot build on it to develop work-related skills. Some of the targets set for trainees at reviews are too general. As a result, some trainees are unclear as to what is expected of them. Opportunities for the collection and assessment of evidence in the workplace are being missed. Most of the evidence in trainees' portfolios is generated through classroom-based activities and assignments, and does not fully reflect the range and diversity of evidence available in the workplace.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 2

23. BESTCO has a comprehensive equal opportunities policy which meets statutory and contractual requirements and is reviewed and updated regularly. Trainees and new staff are made aware of BESTCO's commitment to equal opportunities as part of their induction process. The organisation has been involved with local equal opportunities initiatives ever since it was started in 1988. An equal opportunities action group meets regularly. This group is made up of the senior managers and representatives from each department of the organisation. The chief executive is a member of the local TEC's development group for equal opportunities. BESTCO has a good record of recruiting trainees from minority ethnic groups and some 13 per cent of current trainees are from these communities, which make up about 9 per cent of the local population as a whole. The organisation also encourages those with disabilities to enter training and currently there are 12 people on training programmes who are registered as disabled. Out of a total of 258 trainees and clients, 110 (43 per cent) are women. The inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses to those in the self-assessment report and awarded a higher grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive policies and procedures
- ◆ good facilities for people with disabilities
- ◆ effective targetting of disadvantaged groups
- ◆ excellent staff training in equal opportunities awareness
- ◆ good equal opportunities practice in staff and trainee recruitment

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ failure to ensure that all promotional literature refers to equality of opportunity
- ◆ no central recording of complaints
- ◆ no routine monitoring of equal opportunities in work placements

GOOD PRACTICE

BESTCO's equal opportunities policy is translated into four other languages as well as English, and is available in large print and Braille. Trainees can have it read out to them if required.

24. BESTCO has effective quality assurance procedures and guidance notes to ensure the consistent implementation of its equal opportunities policy, both across the organisation internally, and for the external promotion of equality of opportunity. The equal opportunities action group meets regularly. All meetings are minuted and result in action points which are passed on to each department to raise awareness of equal opportunities developments across the organisation. As part of its self-assessment process, BESTCO has developed an action plan to increase the participation in training of people from minority ethnic communities and those with disabilities. This action plan has appropriate objectives and targets. All trainees and new staff are made aware of the equal opportunities policy and the complaints and grievance procedures at induction, as are placement providers when they are selected to take trainees. When trainees and staff are recruited, the application forms contain equal opportunities monitoring sections. The information thus obtained is analysed and used to help target future recruitment. If people have difficulty completing equal opportunities monitoring forms, they are explained to them by one of the organisation's two equal opportunities advisors. The staff application form's front cover is detachable, allowing personal information, such as age, gender and marital status, to be removed. This ensures that applications are judged only on merit and professional suitability for the post. As trainees complete their programmes, there is further monitoring of ethnicity to identify trends.

25. BESTCO has its own in-house equal opportunities awareness training programme, which all staff are required to attend. This is a one-day programme which covers the main concepts and principles of equal opportunities. The organisation keeps up to date with legislation and other developments on equal opportunities by subscribing to employment law updates and networking with the local TEC and other external agencies. BESTCO reaches out to minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities, ex-offenders, the homeless and lone parent families in order to widen their participation in training. There are many success stories of trainees from disadvantaged backgrounds who have progressed through the various levels of training and qualifications and into employment. The organisation employs training and placement officers who are themselves members of minority ethnic groups and who act as role models for others from those communities. It also has links with a mentoring organisation which assists trainees who encounter cultural difficulties while in training. All BESTCO's training centres provide good access for people with limited mobility, and have disabled toilet facilities and wide corridors and doors. The specification for work-placements includes access for people with disabilities. External agencies are used to assess the practical implications of specific problems and, if required, specialist equipment, such as illuminated magnifying glasses known as 'sight-readers', special keyboards and office seating,

is obtained. BESTCO has assisted profoundly deaf trainees and has five staff members who are qualified in sign language techniques.

26. The documents which BESTCO uses to promote its services and to inform its trainees do not always include reference to its commitment to equal opportunities. Although complaints are dealt with quickly and thoroughly, the details are not well recorded and trends are not monitored. There is no routine monitoring of equal opportunities in the work-placements. During progress reviews, opportunities are missed to discuss equal opportunities with trainees and employers.

Trainee support

Grade 2

27. All potential trainees attend an initial interview during which they are told about the opportunities open to them, and the process of assessing their needs begins. Programmes are available at a range of levels and using a variety of learning approaches. Trainees who are starting NVQs undergo formal initial assessment of their basic needs. This is carried out by a subcontractor. All trainees have an induction at BESTCO's premises which includes health and safety awareness. There are support facilities at each of BESTCO's three main training sites so that trainees can be given an appropriate induction at their nearest centre, whatever the occupational area in which they are intending to train.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ additional support for trainees who have personal difficulties
- ◆ high level of commitment to health and safety
- ◆ high level of support for socially excluded trainees
- ◆ well-resourced support arrangements

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ inadequate use of individual training plans

GOOD PRACTICE

A trainee had the opportunity to start a work placement in a care setting but did not have a uniform and could not afford to purchase one. Rather than risk losing a valuable learning opportunity and damaging the esteem of the trainee, BESTCO purchased the uniform for the trainee.

28. BESTCO works across the city, predominantly with socially excluded groups and individuals. The whole organisation is keenly aware of the difficult circumstances of many of its trainees. The environment is friendly and staff are supportive. They are experienced in helping trainees from diverse backgrounds who have complex social needs. During induction, the training agreement is read to trainees, ensuring that any who have reading difficulties are made aware of the requirements without being embarrassed. Although the quality of induction is generally good, initial assessment is not carried out consistently across all occupational areas. Staff value trainees' achievements and encourage them to consider further progression and to make the most of the opportunities to them. For example, a group of trainees were encouraged to enter a local competition linked to health and safety which they subsequently won. Staff frequently help individual trainees to overcome personal problems, continue training and complete

GOOD PRACTICE

A potential placement provider did not meet health and safety requirements. Free of charge, BESTCO's health and safety officer assisted the placement provider to meet health and safety requirements and helped with risk assessments and procedures.

qualifications. An unexpected death meant one trainee could not devote the time required to training. Rather than see them leave training, BESTCO negotiated an adjustment to their training plan which enabled the trainee to stay on their programme. A trainee who had overcome severe difficulties secured employment and could no longer get funding to complete an NVQ. A trainer continued to visit the trainee at home, outside working hours, until the trainee had completed their NVQ. The trust established with a trainer enabled one trainee to seek help when faced with harassment at work. The trainer and employer worked in partnership to protect the trainee from any further harassment or physical abuse. Disciplinary action against those causing the harassment followed and the trainee's rights were protected.

29. Trainers provide excellent pastoral support for disadvantaged trainees. Trainees also have access to external counselling services. BESTCO has three members of staff who are responsible for supporting New Deal clients. Every New Deal client is provided with a personal 'employment counsellor'. Individual training plans lack specific targets. They are not used effectively during reviews. With the exception of those in the retailing and customer service area, most review meetings do not include work-based supervisors, which limits supervisors' understanding of trainees' needs. BESTCO has a designated health and safety officer and all trainers have a recognised qualification in health and safety. At each review, trainers monitor the health and safety of the work placements. All trainees in the retail occupational sector complete an assessed health and safety course. BESTCO has invested heavily in new facilities with the intention of enabling more disadvantaged people to access learning opportunities and achieve their potential. The excellent support resources at the new training centre include industry-standard computer equipment housed in purpose-built accommodation.

Management of training

Grade 3

30. BESTCO has 32 members of staff, 25 of whom work full-time, while the remaining seven are employed part-time. Three senior managers report to the chief executive. One senior manager is responsible for government-funded training, assisted by two programme managers and a team of 13 training officers, three employment advisors and a recruitment officer. Another senior manager is responsible for training provided under the New Deal, and is assisted in this task by three employment counsellors. The third senior manager is responsible for general administration, and has six support staff. Currently, BESTCO subcontracts training in the care sector. Subcontractors include another training provider and a local college. Support for specialist tasks such as initial assessment is hired in as required. The organisation has three main premises. Vocational training staff are based in the main training centre and attend the other two locations, the city-centre site and the nearby 'training annexe', as required. The staff responsible for the New Deal are based at the training annexe. The organisation is currently working towards the Investors in People accreditation. Inspectors agreed with the strengths identified in the self-assessment report but found an additional strength and two weaknesses. They agreed with the grade given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ open and collaborative management style
- ◆ strong links with external agencies
- ◆ comprehensive management information systems
- ◆ staff commitment to working with disadvantaged trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ ineffective management of subcontractors
- ◆ lack of occupational and NVQ updating for staff

31. BESTCO has an open management style. Staff are encouraged to approach management with new ideas for programmes, systems or resources. Regular action group and department meetings, which are formally minuted, ensure sharing of information and best practice. The organisation has links with many external agencies and is involved in several local projects, including a liaison group working with hostels for the homeless. The organisation is also actively involved in groups working to make the New Deal accessible to disadvantaged potential clients. BESTCO recently secured money from a national fund to pay for a project to improve employers' attitudes towards homeless people. The extra funding has enabled a specialist member of staff to concentrate on bringing disadvantaged and homeless people into the New Deal. The result is that New Deal participation has increased and more people from the local community have the support they need to gain jobs and training.

32. BESTCO works extensively with disadvantaged trainees, who often need considerable encouragement as well as occupational training and additional learning support. BESTCO's staff show great commitment in tackling this work, demonstrating both patience and considerable expertise in providing the best possible learning experience they can for their trainees.

33. There are comprehensive computerised management-information systems which are easily accessible by staff and managers. BESTCO also has manual systems, including its quality assurance and verification records. The business plan is out of date. The staff recruitment procedure is appropriate and includes an interview plan, job specifications, a presentation skills test and an occupational skills test. There is an appraisal system which enables staff to speak openly and to ask for further development. There are staff development programmes to fill any gaps in health and safety and equal opportunities training. However, staff do not undertake occupational updating and are unaware of new assessment styles. They have not been able to go back into industry to see changes in technology, legislation and working practices.

34. Subcontracted training is not well managed, monitored or evaluated. The subcontractors have not been audited for quality assurance and there has been insufficient communication between them and BESTCO. This has resulted in inadequate training and poor levels of achievement by trainees. The subcontractors

include another training provider and a local college. Most of the trainees affected by this poor practice are in the care sector.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

35. BESTCO meets the quality assurance standards of the local TEC and the three awarding bodies with which it works. Overall responsibility for quality assurance within the organisation is held by the chief executive. There are comprehensive policies and procedures that support the quality assurance system, copies of which are held in each department. BESTCO monitors quality through questionnaires to trainees, staff and work-placement providers. Performance against TEC targets is also monitored. Inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses to those in the self-assessment report and awarded a higher grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective monitoring of performance against targets
- ◆ analysis and use of trainees' feedback as a basis for action-planning
- ◆ comprehensive written quality assurance policies and procedures

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no quality assurance of off-the-job training
- ◆ no regular audit of quality procedures
- ◆ some staff not fully aware of quality assurance system

GOOD PRACTICE

As part of its quality assurance procedures, BESTCO analyses the postcodes of all trainees starting training. It then notes when they leave training and analyses the resulting data to identify both recruitment and leaving patterns in its catchment areas.

36. BESTCO monitors its performance against a range of targets. The senior management team meets regularly to review its training programmes against a range of TEC and employment services contracts. The comprehensive management database supplies information which is current and accurate and allows managers to identify developing trends and to focus on areas of concern. For example, the system identified problems in one occupational area which resulted in the training being placed with a subcontractor. Performance against the organisation's own targets for recruiting people from minority ethnic groups and those with disabilities is also monitored at senior management meetings and the information is passed on to the equal opportunities action group. The organisation has a quality action group which has representatives from all departments and which evaluates the quality of training. The action plan devised by BESTCO as part of the self-assessment process includes quality targets which are monitored regularly. The quality assurance procedures and policies are comprehensive and clearly written. The organisation is currently in the process of rewriting its quality manual. All staff have access to the manual, a copy of which is held in each department. Quality assurance is included in the induction programme for new staff and is an agenda item at staff meetings. However, some staff are not familiar with the quality assurance procedures and do not fully understand how they work.

Although three members of staff are trained as internal quality auditors, there is currently no formal internal auditing of quality assurance systems taking place.

37. BESTCO treats internal verification as a check on portfolios, rather than as an instrument for improving training and assessment. A number of staff involved in internal verification are working towards internal verifier qualifications but any verification decisions made by such staff are countersigned by a member of staff who already holds the qualification. Internal verifiers do not share good practice, however, and failed, for example, to disseminate the good practice in the retail programme of documenting and recording assessments based on direct observation of trainees' performance. A number of occupational areas share the same external verifier, and while general feedback from external verification visits is received by all teams, specific feedback is not provided to each team. BESTCO has a subcontract with another training provider, the terms of which are formally specified in a service level agreement. Access to the external verifier's report for the subcontracted training has been negotiated with the subcontractor.

38. There is a comprehensive system for obtaining and recording feedback from trainees and work-placement providers. Trainees complete three questionnaires during their time in training. The first is completed one week after induction and focuses on the induction process. A further questionnaire is completed half way through the training programme and a final questionnaire is completed after trainees finish their programmes. The responses are analysed to identify trends and areas of concern. Work-placement providers complete a questionnaire to determine their understanding of, and satisfaction with, the training process. An employees' questionnaire is also completed to provide staff with an opportunity to contribute to the quality assurance process. The responses are analysed and condensed into a concise format for the senior management team to consider. Currently, BESTCO does not have a formal system to assure the quality of training carried out in classroom sessions in the training centre.

39. The self-assessment report was well written and showed BESTCO to be a self-critical organisation. It provided a useful foundation for inspectors to use in preparing for the inspection. They found additional strengths and weaknesses which were not mentioned in the self-assessment report. Inspectors found strengths and weaknesses in addition to those in the self-assessment report. They agreed with the grades given in the self-assessment report for three occupational and two generic areas. In all other areas, they awarded higher grades than those given in the report. BESTCO is using the self-assessment report and the action plans derived from it as a basis for the business plan which it is currently producing. Self-assessment is now included as a regular part of the organisation's quality assurance arrangements.