



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT NOVEMBER 1999

Three A's Training Limited

SUMMARY

Three A's Training Limited offers satisfactory training in all occupational areas. All trainees on occupational programmes are employed or have a work placement. The work placements are of a high standard providing good on-the-job training. Some trainees make slow progress. Trainees' targets are not always demanding. Key skills training is not yet fully developed. There is a high level of progression from the prevocational programme either to further training or employment. All the generic aspects are also satisfactory. Trainees and staff have a good awareness of equal opportunities but there is little monitoring of work placements. There is a high level of individual support for trainees. There is effective use of management information and some new initiatives to improve the quality of training. The company's internal verification procedures do not lead to improvements in assessment practice.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Manufacturing	3
Business administration	3
Retailing & customer service	3
Hospitality	3
Foundation for work	3

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

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good on-the-job training
- ◆ high quality of work placements
- ◆ wide range of learning opportunities
- ◆ good progression rates from prevocational programme
- ◆ open access to training programmes
- ◆ high level of individual support for trainees
- ◆ good staff development programme
- ◆ new initiatives to improve the quality of the training

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ little target-setting or action-planning
- ◆ trainees have little influence on their training programmes
- ◆ underdeveloped key skills training
- ◆ some trainees make slow progress
- ◆ initial assessment not used to inform training plan
- ◆ little monitoring of equal opportunities in the workplace
- ◆ no systematic assessment of trainees' prior achievements on entry
- ◆ internal verification not used to improve assessment practices

INTRODUCTION

1. Three A's Training Limited is a private company, formed in 1983 to provide training for young people with learning difficulties in rural north Warwickshire. Its name derives from the initial letters of the three villages near its first training centre. Following an expansion of its activities, the company moved to its present premises in Nuneaton in 1988. The company still offers training for young people with learning difficulties and prevocational training. It now also offers modern apprenticeships and national traineeships, as well as other training for young people across a number of occupational areas covering agriculture, construction, engineering, manufacturing, transportation, business administration, retailing and customer service and hospitality, care and media and design. Inspection covered manufacturing, business administration, retailing and customer service, hospitality and the prevocational programmes. The other areas were not inspected owing to the small numbers of trainees. The company has contracts with Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise (CCTE), Hampshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), Thames Valley Enterprise (TVE), Kent TEC and Birmingham TEC. Prevocational training receives combined funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) and the CCTE. The company operates from two sites. The head office is in Nuneaton. This site has two training rooms, an information technology room and a training kitchen and restaurant. The second site is at Fareham, Hampshire, and contains office facilities and a training room. There are 344 trainees in total, of whom 336 are in the occupational areas inspected. The latter number includes 41 modern apprentices, 16 national trainees, 32 trainees on prevocational programmes and the remainder are on other work-based training programmes. The contract with the CCTE covers 285 trainees; that with Hampshire TEC, 48 trainees; that with TVE, 10 trainees and that with Birmingham TEC, one trainee. There are no trainees on the contract with Kent TEC which is being wound down. There are 13 training staff, all of whom are occupationally experienced, while seven hold training qualifications. Twelve staff hold assessor qualifications, five are qualified as internal verifiers and six hold qualifications in the accreditation of prior learning.

2. In Coventry and Warwickshire, employment growth has been driven by medium and large employers and by the service sector. In the manufacturing and construction industries there has been a reduction in the workforce. Recruitment is higher than average in financial services, public administration, education, health and social work. A recent local employers' survey identified communications and customer care skills as being the most important skills needed by employees to run a business effectively. The same survey also revealed these as some of the skills required for hard-to-fill vacancies and that employers in the hospitality industry were least likely to have a training and development plan. In Hampshire, employers view skills and employee shortages as the second and third most important factors restricting turnover. The bulk of the hard-to-fill vacancies in the area are in the manufacturing rather than the service sector. In the Thames Valley area, the

hospitality industry shows a year-on-year decline in the number of employees in the sector. Unemployment in Coventry and Warwickshire is 3.4 per cent, and in the West Midlands it is 4.6 per cent compared with the UK average of 3.8 per cent. In the Hampshire TEC area it is 3.5 per cent and in the TVE area, 2.2 per cent. In 1998, the percentage of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 46 per cent in Warwickshire and 45.8 per cent in Leicestershire, compared with the national average of 46.3 per cent. Ten per cent of male and 8 per cent of female school leavers at age 16 in the Coventry and Warwickshire area go into work-based training either as a trainee or as an employee. A further 15.3 per cent of men and 7.9 per cent of women at this age enter employment which includes an element of training. In contrast, 63 per cent of male and 73.8 per cent of female school leavers aged 16 remain in full-time education. School leavers' achievements vary significantly across the area covered by Three A's Training's Fareham office. In Portsmouth, the proportion of those achieving five or more GCSEs at grade C and above is 30.7 per cent, in Hampshire it is 51.2 per cent, in Reading 42.7 per cent and in Wokingham 56.2 per cent. The proportion of the population from minority ethnic groups is 6.8 per cent in the CCTE area, 2.1 per cent in the Hampshire TEC area and 6.4 per cent in the TVE area.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

3. The company produced its first self-assessment report in June 1999. Staff participated in the collection of evidence and in discussions on the judgements and content of the report. The report itself was prepared by senior managers. The introduction to the report gives an overview of the training provided in the context of the social and economic factors of the geographical areas in which it operates. There is little detail of the training in the various occupational areas, nor any information as to how the company attempts to meet the requirements on the generic aspects of the training. The report identifies many strengths and few weaknesses.

4. A team of six inspectors spent a total of 24 days at Three A's Training and inspected modern apprenticeships, national traineeships and other training in manufacturing, business administration, retailing and customer service and hospitality. Prevocational training under foundation for work was also inspected. Inspectors visited both of the company's sites and interviewed 74 trainees, 38 workplace supervisors, two subcontractors and 16 of Three A's Training staff and managers. Trainees' portfolios and personal files were examined, along with assessment and verification reports, management documents and audit reports by external bodies. Inspectors observed two assessments, one progress review and 15 instruction sessions. The grades for the instruction sessions are given in the table below. In manufacturing, only one instruction session was observed.

Grades awarded to instruction sessions

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Business administration			2	1		3
Retailing & customer service			2			2
Hospitality		5				5
Foundation for work		1	3			4
Total	0	6	7	1	0	14

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Manufacturing

Grade 3

5. Three A's Training offers training programmes in manufacturing leading to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 1 and 2. There are 23 trainees. Four trainees are working towards an NVQ in machine, assembly and processing skills at level 2; 14 are working towards performing manufacturing operations, seven at level 2 and seven at level 1. Two trainees are working towards food and

drink manufacturing operations, two towards manufacturing textiles and one towards manufacturing sewn products, all at level 2. All trainees have work placements or are employed. The placements cover a wide variety of manufacturing industries including light engineering, carpentry and joinery, printing, leatherwork and clothing. All on- and off-the-job training and all assessment take place in the workplace. There are two members of staff responsible for training and assessment. Both hold appropriate qualifications in training, assessment and internal verification. The trainers visit the trainees in their placements at least every second week and in many cases weekly. During these visits the trainers carry out off-the-job training, assessments and progress reviews. In the year to March 1999, just over half the trainees who left had completed their programme, almost three out of every four had achieved an NVQ and two-thirds achieved an NVQ at level 2 or higher. The self-assessment process did not identify the key weaknesses of this area. Many of the strengths and weaknesses identified related to generic aspects, with most of the strengths representing no more than normal practice. The self-assessment report does not describe the training, nor provide any expansion on the strengths and weaknesses. The grade awarded by inspectors is lower than that given in the report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ thorough on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ high-quality work placements
- ◆ frequent assessment in the workplace

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ little target-setting or action-planning
- ◆ trainees have little influence on their training programme
- ◆ little knowledge of NVQs among employers

6. All the work placements and employers provide thorough, well-structured on-the-job training. The trainees' workplace supervisors are responsible for the on-the-job training. These supervisors have a high level of appropriate occupational skills. Three A's Training's trainers provide off-the-job training in the workplace. This is linked with the on-the-job training, which is closely monitored. Trainees carry out a wide range of different jobs. For example, some trainees have the opportunity to work as part of a team, installing the products they have helped to make at customers' premises. These jobs offer a variety of good evidence for the trainees' NVQs. Employers and work placement providers are positive about training. Equipment and materials at most placements are of a high standard. Assessment takes place in the workplace, often at weekly or two-weekly intervals. A mixture of assessment techniques is used including observation, questioning trainees and witness testimonies. Records of assessment are thorough. Trainees are aware of when they are being assessed.

7. Few achievement targets are set for trainees. There are no action plans covering the whole of a trainee's programme. Trainees are not aware of their target completion date. Trainers on one visit will agree with the trainee the work to be completed by the trainer's next visit. This is usually no more than two weeks in the future. Trainees have no knowledge of the work they will be required to complete beyond this date. Trainees do not know how far they have progressed towards their qualification. They have little input into the training they receive and rely on their trainer to take them through their training programme. The trainers, who also act as assessors, have no recent experience of working in manufacturing operations. The experience they do have is restricted in its scope even though the work placements cover a wide variety of manufacturing operations. Workplace supervisors are not familiar with the requirements of the NVQs. Many opportunities for additional evidence to be recorded are missed.

Business administration

Grade 3

8. Three A's Training offers modern apprenticeships, national traineeships and other training in administration, accounts and information technology. Any off-the-job training, assessment and verification for the accounts trainees is subcontracted to local further education colleges or private companies specialising in accounts training and assessment. There are 99 trainees in total. Sixty-six trainees are working towards qualifications in administration, 19 in accounts and 14 in information technology. Twelve of the accounting trainees and six of the administration trainees are modern apprentices. Five of the administration trainees and one of the information technology trainees are national trainees. Some administration trainees have completed customer service NVQs as an additional qualification. Three of the administration trainees and two of the information technology trainees have learning difficulties and receive additional support. In administration and information technology, most of the training takes place on the job, with training officers delivering some off-the-job training in the workplace. In accounting, five trainees are working towards NVQs at level 2. These trainees receive no off-the-job training. Two accounting trainees are working towards an NVQ at level 3 and attend local further education colleges on a day-release basis. Three of the modern apprentices in accounts are currently working towards a qualification at level 2, six at level 3 and three at level 4. Ten of the modern apprentices receive off-the-job training and assessment through private subcontracted training companies and two through local further education colleges. Between March 1997 and November 1999, 26 per cent of trainees leaving administration and information technology programmes completed their training. Forty-three per cent of those leaving achieved at least one NVQ. In accounts, 78 per cent of trainees complete their programme before leaving. Although grading for business administration was accurate, the judgements in the self-assessment report were not self-critical. There was no reference in the report to accounting training. Several of the strengths were considered to be no more than normal practice.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ diverse on-the-job learning opportunities
- ◆ high level of co-operation between training officers and workplace supervisors
- ◆ some good assessment practice in administration and information technology

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some trainees in administration not on appropriate training programmes
- ◆ no record of assessments in accounting
- ◆ lack of understanding of key skills by trainees

GOOD PRACTICE

This is a good example of integrated on- and off-the-job training. During a routine visit by a trainer, a trainee identified a need for additional off-the-job training to give a better understanding of the job being performed. The trainer immediately arranged with the employer for the trainee to take a break from the job. The trainer then provided the training straight away at the employer's premises.

9. Work placements offer trainees the learning opportunities they need to achieve their NVQs. Most employers can organise short-term job changes to facilitate this. There is little requirement for additional assignments or project work. Many trainees receive additional training arranged by their employers. Training officers have a good understanding of the training needs of the local businesses, and work closely with the workplace supervisors to support trainees. All employers receive information about the NVQs being followed by their trainees in order for them to oversee progress and offer appropriate help. Many supervisors have NVQs themselves and trainees benefit from their experience. Some employers allow trainees time to work on their evidence and portfolio building. Employers of accounts trainees, particularly those in accountancy practice, value the NVQ being followed as it fits well with other professional qualifications and traditional training routes.

10. Administration and information technology trainees gather naturally occurring evidence across all the NVQ units and are helped by their training officers to organise the evidence and identify the gaps in their portfolios. Trainees are encouraged to take an active role in this process, and to influence the timing of their assessments. They are able to contact training officers by telephone if they have a problem or if they feel ready for an assessment. Training officers respond to requests for assessment at any time, in addition to the regular patterns of assessment at intervals of four to six weeks. This flexibility extends to assessments out of normal hours for trainees who work shifts.

11. Some trainees in administration are either working at the wrong level or on the wrong programme. Trainees at the wrong level are able to do things required of them at work without additional training. They find their NVQ work too easy and insufficiently demanding. A trainee was following an unsuitable NVQ programme for over a year before being transferred to another programme. Accounts trainees receive help with building their portfolio of evidence but they have to ask for it and have to arrange to attend their evening sessions early or stay late. There are no records of the assessment being carried out. One subcontractor does not have any staff qualified to assess above level 2. There is no central record of trainees' progress. The trainees who are currently on the modern apprenticeship and national

traineeship programmes are aware of the need for key skills training but they have little understanding of what is required or how this will be integrated, taught or assessed.

Retailing & customer service

Grade 3

12. Three A's Training offers modern apprenticeships, national traineeships and other training programmes in customer service, as well as a variety of other training programmes covering retailing, distribution, warehousing, processing information technology and lift truck operations. There are 61 trainees. All but two are employed. There are 38 trainees working towards the customer service NVQ at levels 2 and 3. Thirty-four are working towards an NVQ in customer service at level 2, one is a national trainee and three are modern apprentices. The majority are employed in customer service roles, dealing with customers' queries over the telephone. There are six trainees working towards an NVQ in processing information technology at level 2. They are working in large call centres. Five trainees, all receiving additional support for learning difficulties, are working towards an NVQ at level 1 in distributive operations. These trainees enter their training programmes as a progression from Three A's Training's prevocational programme. They are working in large warehouses and charity shops. In addition to their NVQs, they have the opportunity to achieve qualifications in literacy and numeracy. Seven trainees are undertaking NVQs in distribution and warehousing operations at level 2. Five trainees are working towards NVQs at level 2 in retail operations, working in small to medium-sized shops. Three of these trainees have obtained the lift truck operators certificate and are now working towards an NVQ at level 2 in lift truck operations as an additional qualification. All the assessment takes place in the workplace by Three A's Training's own assessors who are also responsible for trainees' progress and reviews. The assessors all hold assessor qualifications and regularly update their occupational skills. There is no off-the-job training and assessors rely on the on-the-job training provided by individual employers. In the two years to March 1999, 29 per cent of trainees who left completed their training programmes; 55 per cent of leavers obtained an NVQ and 74 per cent continued in or entered employment. Eight per cent of trainees leave with two NVQs. The self-assessment report identified a large number of strengths. Many of them referred to generic aspects and some of them were considered to be no more than normal practice. The company clearly identified its major weaknesses. Some corrective actions have already been taken and an action plan has been developed to address the remainder. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good-quality work placements
- ◆ good assessment practice
- ◆ high level of occupational competence among customer service trainees

- ◆ opportunities for many trainees in distribution and warehousing to gain additional vocational qualifications

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of target-setting for trainees in retail
- ◆ insufficient planned or structured training
- ◆ poor involvement by employers in NVQ work

13. All trainees are employed in good-quality work placements which give them a wide range of opportunities to achieve their qualifications. Trainees work in pleasant and modern premises with good resources and facilities. Many of the employers have very good in-house training programmes and trainees are enthusiastic and keen to make progress with their NVQs. Trainees are working in jobs which are well suited to their qualifications, so are able to make good use of naturally occurring evidence. All assessment takes place in the workplace. Assessments are clearly planned and there is frequent and appropriate use of workplace observation. This is helped by the good working relationships between trainees, assessors and workplace supervisors. Assessment records are clear, with good links between the evidence and the appropriate part of the NVQ standard. Trainees are given comprehensive feedback on their assessments. Assessors visit by pre-planned appointment and try to see trainees every two to four weeks, depending on their individual needs for additional support. Assessors make additional visits for assessment when requested by trainees.

14. Customer service trainees all demonstrate a high level of occupational competence. Level 2 trainees are working in demanding and responsible jobs where their performance is monitored on a regular basis by their supervisors. Level 3 trainees have responsibility for monitoring and giving feedback to members of their teams. They are able to produce a good variety of performance evidence. Trainees are introducing improvements to customer service which provide positive business benefits, as well as making them more confident and competent in their work. Some trainees have achieved promotion while working towards their qualifications. The trainees working towards the processing information technology NVQ are making good progress. All trainees working in warehouses are given the opportunity to achieve an additional NVQ at level 2 in lift truck operations. Many trainees attend a five-day course covering lift truck operations and health and safety leading to the lift truck operators certificate. When trainees return to work they are visited and assessed in the workplace by a subcontracted assessor, with additional support from their own training officers.

15. Some trainees working towards NVQs in retailing are making slow progress. They are not set clear targets, either at the beginning or during their programme. Trainees joining the programme who are already in employment do not receive their NVQ portfolios for at least eight weeks. They follow assessment plans and gather a lot of evidence but this evidence is not linked to units in their NVQ during

assessors' visits. For example, one trainee has been on the programme for 26 months without any of the evidence in the portfolio being cross-referenced to the requirements of the NVQ. Trainees feel that they are achieving their targets by collecting their evidence, and are disappointed by the lack of progress with their qualifications.

16. Three A's Training does not provide off-the-job training in retail. Trainees feel that working towards their NVQs has not given them any new skills or knowledge. Assessors give one-to-one coaching as part of assessment planning in the workplace. In a few cases this is difficult, as there are no suitable locations for the assessor to sit in private with their trainees. Trainees are invited to come in to the training centre for help with building their portfolios. However, some employers are reluctant to release trainees during their working day. Several employers have excellent on-the-job training available to all members of staff. However, there is poor identification of trainees' development needs and personalised training plans are not used. An occupational initial assessment has been recently introduced but it is too early to evaluate its effectiveness.

17. Employers do not understand the requirements of the NVQ, nor the process through which it is achieved. They are not involved in assessment planning and see the NVQ as being the responsibility of Three A's Training. They are not clear about how they can become more involved or how they can link their own training to the NVQ programme. Some workplace supervisors do get involved in helping trainees to gather their evidence, but this is not systematic. During the review process, employers comment on trainees' performance in the workplace, but this is not linked to the NVQ standards. Employers allow trainees insufficient time to gather evidence towards the NVQ and trainees feel under pressure, due to their hectic jobs, to find the time to work towards their qualifications.

Hospitality

Grade 3

18. Three A's Training offers modern apprenticeships and national traineeships in hospitality. It also offers other training programmes in food preparation and cooking at NVQ levels 1 to 3; housekeeping at levels 1 and 2; quick service, food and drink service and bar service at level 2; and front office supervision, restaurant supervision, kitchen supervision and on-licensed premises supervision at level 3. There are 121 trainees, of whom 20 are modern apprentices and 10 are national trainees. Three A's Training operates a training kitchen at its Nuneaton site and runs a small restaurant, also on the Nuneaton site, which is open to the public, usually on one evening and two lunchtimes each week. Seven trainees are working towards food preparation at level 1 in Three A's Training's training kitchen. Most of these trainees have progressed from its prevocational programme. Many trainees are full-time employees of companies in the hospitality industry in and around Coventry, Warwickshire, Northamptonshire, Southampton, Portsmouth, Aldershot, Newbury, Reading and Wokingham. Almost all trainees who are not employed have work placements. Those few who are not employed and without a work

placement work in the training kitchen at Nuneaton. There are four training officers who also act as assessors. All have the appropriate assessor qualifications and relevant occupational experience. Two training officers are based in Nuneaton and two in Fareham. All off-the-job training at levels 2 and 3 takes place in the workplace. In the two years to March 1999, 49 per cent of trainees who left completed their programme while 68 per cent of those leaving left with an NVQ. Seventy-nine per cent of leavers remained in, or went into, employment. The self-assessment report identifies many strengths and a number of weaknesses. Many of the strengths and some of the weaknesses relate to generic aspects rather than to hospitality. Many strengths also represent no more than normal practice. The key strengths identified by inspectors are recognised in the self-assessment report. All but one of the key weaknesses were missed by Three A's Training. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ work placements well matched to trainees' needs
- ◆ good on-the-job training
- ◆ effective progress reviews for many trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ underdeveloped training materials
- ◆ missed opportunities for assessments
- ◆ no demanding targets set for quick service trainees

19. Trainees work in a variety of work placements, which are well matched to their training requirements. All trainees are enthusiastic about their programmes and the working relationships between work-based supervisors, training officers and trainees are excellent. Most workplace supervisors understand the NVQ requirements and in some cases are themselves working towards an NVQ. Many of the training programmes offered by employers at quick service restaurants are well developed. In some cases, trainees at these restaurants hold supervisory positions. The training centre at Nuneaton includes a kitchen and small restaurant that provides a realistic work environment for the trainees, particularly those requiring additional learning support. Three A's Training provides these trainees with appropriate work clothing and professional knife sets. There are frequent and effective progress reviews for all trainees. Trainers visit trainees at approximately two-weekly intervals. Work done since the previous visit is discussed and, if appropriate, assessed. A work plan for the period to the next visit is agreed with the trainee and the workplace supervisor. The frequency of the visits is matched to individual trainees' needs. Trainees requiring additional support, or who are nearing the end of their programme, receive more frequent visits, usually weekly.

20. Training materials for trainees working towards some NVQs are underdeveloped. Examples include food preparation and cooking at level 1,

restaurant supervision, and on-license premises supervision at level 3. Three A's Training has identified some of these deficiencies and has introduced some new materials. Where this has been done, the new materials are adequate. There are few work-based assessors. Assessment is carried out by Three A's Training's training officers during visits to workplaces. Naturally occurring assessment opportunities are missed. The assessment opportunities presented by the employer-sponsored training programmes undertaken by trainees are also often missed. Trainees on the level 1 programme are assessed in the training kitchen at the Nuneaton training centre which represents a realistic working environment. Trainees in quick service restaurants are not set demanding targets and progress for some trainees is slow. Many of these trainees feel capable of making faster progress.

Foundation for work

Grade 3

21. Three A's Training provides a prevocational programme for young people to help them to prepare for and obtain employment. The programme is offered only at the Nuneaton centre. It provides training in finding and applying for job vacancies, interview techniques, personal and social development, confidence-building and basic computer skills. There are also opportunities for trainees to experience some of the vocational programmes offered by Three A's Training to help them to select the occupational area for which they feel best suited. The programme is scheduled to last for 20 weeks. This can be reduced or extended to meet individuals' needs. There are 32 trainees. One trainer holds an appropriate trainer award. All training takes place at the Nuneaton training centre in a dedicated training room. There is also an adjacent room equipped for information technology training. After trainees have successfully completed the programme, they can progress to work-based training, employment or further education. Trainees also have the opportunity to gain the national skills profile. This accredits achievement of practical, work-related skills. Few trainees complete the programme, as many progress to another training programme at level 1. Sixty-five per cent of trainees who leave the programme enter employment, go onto a work-based training programme or return to full-time education. The self-assessment report identified many strengths. It also identified many strengths and some weaknesses which relate to generic aspects. The self-assessment process revealed that the prevocational programme is underdeveloped in some areas which was consistent with the findings of inspectors. However, the self-assessment report does not break down this general weakness into specific issues which can be addressed in an action plan. The grade awarded by the inspectors is the same as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ wide range of learning opportunities
- ◆ effective use of work sampling
- ◆ high quality of work placements
- ◆ good progression rates

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ reviews not used to maximise learning opportunities for some trainees
- ◆ lack of planning and target-setting
- ◆ initial assessment not used to inform training plans
- ◆ no basic skills training

GOOD PRACTICE

Many trainees on the prevocational programme have little confidence but demonstrate high levels of skill, for example, in computer literacy. Trainees are constantly encouraged to use their skills and expertise within the supportive environment at the centre. One trainee was asked to produce a poster heading for all the trainees' work, using a graphics programme and the colour printer. The work produced was well designed and colourful and was praised by the tutor and the trainees. It was then displayed on the wall.

22. Trainees derive great benefit from the variety of activities available. Many trainees lack confidence and self-esteem. This is addressed effectively during the initial phase of the programme, the main aim of which is to foster positive thinking and personal goal setting. Job-search facilities include the use of telephones, stationary and stamps, access to newspapers and other information on job opportunities, help with filling in application forms and completing curricula vitae. Regular contact is maintained with the careers service which offers impartial advice and guidance and a weekly drop-in facility. There is a well-equipped computer suite where trainees can work towards a level 1 NVQ in information technology. The centre has a well-equipped and -staffed catering training centre which trainees use to try out the work if they are interested in a career in catering. In order to prepare trainees for the rigours of the workplace, trainees learn about employers' expectations, working in a team, the importance of timekeeping, how to get to work using a journey plan and interview skills. Most of the trainees obtain the national skills profile certificate during the programme.

23. A key feature of the programme is the availability of short-term work placements where trainees have the chance to try out work without commitment. It is a valuable opportunity for them to gain work-related skills as part of their continuing development and progression towards their goals. Employers are enthusiastic about the programme, as it gives them the opportunity to assess the trainee's potential before offering them a longer-term placement or permanent employment. Trainees who join the programme have little experience of work. To address this, there is a wide range of placements on offer. These include retail, printing, administration, greenkeeping, carpentry, packing, housekeeping and upholstery. These placements usually last for four weeks, but can be shorter or longer, depending on the trainees' needs and circumstances. Account is taken of trainees' interests when placements are selected. Placements are carefully matched to provide good learning opportunities and an appropriate working environment as well as being accessible to where trainees live. Most trainees have a positive experience of the workplace. This is important, as many have come to Three A's Training with a bad experience of work. The main purpose of the prevocational programme is to equip all the trainees with the confidence, necessary experience and knowledge to embark on a chosen career path. The proportion of trainees who progress to a job, further education or work-based training is 65 per cent.

24. Trainees receive one-to-one counselling at the start of their programme and thereafter when needed. Impartial advice and guidance is available to trainees at all

times. However, there is little opportunity for them to discuss progress, problems or future work with their tutors. The progress review consists of trainees filling in a review form, signing it and handing it in to the tutor. The tutor then completes the form, which is filed. Trainees do not see the completed review sheets or have any feedback on the supervisor's comments. Trainees have little influence in planning their training or setting future targets for themselves at the centre. They are told what they are going to do next. They have little idea of what they will be doing for the next session or the coming days. Some interviews are planned at short notice, giving the trainees little time to prepare. The time taken to do certain tasks can be longer than is necessary, sometimes leaving trainees at a loose end. For example, when trainees undertake project work unsupervised away from the centre, the project can take an hour but trainees are given the whole day to do the work. In order to gather a rounded picture of trainees at the start, trainees complete a self-assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. This provides a useful pointer to identifying the area of work they are interested in. A basic skills assessment is undertaken by all trainees to identify any training needs. Trainees also have an assessment to identify their level of key skills attainment. However, many trainees do not receive any feedback on the results of these tests, nor do they understand why they were doing them. The information gathered is not used to construct an individual learning plan for their prevocational programme. Trainees who have been assessed as having difficulties with literacy or numeracy do not receive basic skills training until they progress to mainstream vocational training.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

25. Three A's Training has an equal opportunities policy and procedures for its implementation. The policy and procedures meet legal and TEC contractual requirements. Trainees have a copy of the statement. Equal opportunities is a standing agenda item at staff meetings, but the issues discussed under this item are to do with monitoring trainees' achievements. A senior member of staff has responsibility for equality of opportunity. The proportion of those from minority ethnic groups in the areas served by Three A's Training varies. For example, it is 8 per cent in Nuneaton, 9.6 per cent in Reading and 2.1 per cent in Fareham. Three A's Training is involved in an initiative led by Hampshire TEC to devise new methods for attracting trainees from minority ethnic groups to training. In Nuneaton, the proportion of trainees from minority ethnic groups is considerably higher than the local population, at 14 per cent. There are no staff members from minority ethnic groups. In general, there are more young women following retail and office-based training programmes, and more young men in engineering manufacturing. However, the proportions have varied over the last few years. In catering and accountancy the numbers are fairly equally divided between men and women. The self-assessment report for this area lacks rigour. Strengths given are no more than normal practice, no weaknesses are identified other than a shortfall against its

targets for recruiting from minority ethnic groups and people with disabilities in its Hampshire and Thames Valley contracts. The grade awarded by inspectors is lower than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good understanding of equal opportunities among staff and trainees
- ◆ good monitoring of progress against targets set for under-represented groups
- ◆ good equal opportunities practice at employers
- ◆ open access to training programmes for all

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no strategy for staff training in equal opportunities
- ◆ little monitoring of equal opportunities in the workplace or at subcontractors
- ◆ little access to training centre for those with disabilities

26. Trainees and staff have a good understanding of trainees' rights and responsibilities. Trainees are aware of the complaints system and of the NVQ appeals procedure. The organisation sets targets for the number of minority ethnic trainees and people with disabilities joining programmes and achieving qualifications. Most, but not all, are exceeded. Achievement against these targets is closely monitored and regularly discussed at staff meetings. The organisation checks that employers have an equal opportunities policy when trainees are first taken on. However, there is no explanation of what action should be taken with employers without a policy, or how training officers should check its adequacy. Three A's Training contracts with many enlightened employers, including minority ethnic clothing manufacturers who are working with mixed groups of male and female, white and Asian staff and trainees, and other employers with the capacity to support dyslexic trainees. Three A's Training offers open access to its training programmes, to any trainee eligible for the programmes for which it has a contract. It makes considerable efforts to persuade trainees to stay on the programme, and early leavers are followed up by letter and in person to try and find a way for them to complete their qualification.

27. There is no strategy to implement the equal opportunities policy, or to increase staff and trainees' awareness of it. The policy is not regularly updated or reviewed. There is a general awareness of the need to respond to recent legislative changes, but this has not been planned or implemented. There is no overall strategy for staff training and development in equal opportunities issues, although some staff attend some TEC training events. There has been no planned and structured training for either staff or trainees on subjects such as workplace harassment or bullying. Once trainees are placed or employed, there is no arrangement for checking their employers' equal opportunities practice, apart from general enquiries about

trainees' welfare at their quarterly review. There is no expectation that visiting training officers will promote equal opportunities to employers. The standard contract for use with subcontractors contains a requirement that the subcontractor will conform to Three A's Training equal opportunities policy, but there is no mechanism for monitoring this, or for requiring training materials to be free of bias, or for trainers to use inclusive language.

28. There is some wheelchair access to the training centre in Nuneaton, but only to the ground floor, where the catering training takes place. There is no access to the information technology facilities or the prevocational training on the first floor. There is a toilet that can be used by trainees in wheelchairs, but there is little turning space, and no grab handles fitted.

Trainee support

Grade 3

29. All the training and marketing staff at Three A's Training have a responsibility for the recruitment of trainees. Many trainees are referred by the careers service. Others apply directly for a training place. Also, trainees who are already in employment are recruited to undertake NVQ programmes. Recruitment consists of three stages. Firstly, trainees attend an initial interview, at which they complete an application form. They then return to carry out a key skills assessment and finally are matched to the appropriate occupational programme. Trainees receive a one-day induction covering form filling, health and safety, rights and responsibilities, and information on training, assessment and NVQs. Trainees then undergo further assessments as appropriate, including a basic skills assessment. Trainees are issued with folders containing NVQ standards and other relevant information such as contact names and telephone numbers. Trainees who are employed receive an occupational assessment. Six members of staff are qualified to accredit prior learning. Progress reviews are conducted quarterly for trainees on vocational training programmes, every six weeks for trainees with learning difficulties and every two weeks for trainees on the prevocational programme. Careers advice and guidance is given to trainees who need additional support and is available to all trainees. The self-assessment report accurately reflects the strengths identified by inspectors but fails to identify any of the weaknesses. The self-assessment process identified induction and initial assessment as strengths without giving consideration to their effectiveness. The grade awarded by inspectors is lower than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ high level of individual support for trainees
- ◆ effective links with external agencies
- ◆ priority given to finding all trainees employment

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ unstimulating and unmemorable induction programme for most trainees
- ◆ no systematic assessment of trainees' prior achievements on entry
- ◆ many training plans not individual or complete

GOOD PRACTICE

Three A's Training has a system to record anything that happens to a trainee which is untoward or unforeseen. It is used to address any issues which may affect trainees' progress, such as travel problems, non-attendance, personal problems or work-related issues. All relevant information and actions are recorded on a standard form and this automatically involves all parties to help resolve the problem. All records are logged on to a central database and monitored through to completion, at which point a director signs off the action sheet.

30. A key feature of Three A's Training is the excellent pastoral support it provides for trainees. A dedicated careers advisor for trainees with learning difficulties has been working with the company for a number of years. This advisor has built up a strong relationship with both the staff and trainees to provide impartial individual advice and guidance. A counsellor with many years of experience provides a confidential service to all trainees. Well-established mechanisms are in place to identify learning difficulties, social and behavioural problems. The response to problems is positive, prompt and effective. All relevant actions are followed through and are well, but sensitively, recorded. Case conferences, involving all relevant parties such as parents, social workers, and specialist support agencies, are arranged when appropriate, to help trainees who are at risk of not completing their training programmes. The frequency of visits by training officers to trainees in work placements is determined by each trainee's individual needs. For example, some trainees are visited daily when necessary. Training officers plan visits to employers in such a way that time can be allocated to respond to any additional support needed. Assessment visits are sometimes organised out of normal working hours to accommodate shift work. Trainees grow in confidence throughout their training and appreciate the high level of support from their training officers and employers. Within the community, Three A's Training has many well-established links with schools, the careers service, social services, the police and the Employment Service. Special arrangements have been made with other support agencies, such as those offering advice and counselling on contraception and pregnancy, drugs and housing to provide urgent help promptly for trainees. The company places a high priority on finding trainees employment. Eighty-eight per cent of all trainees are employed. Forty-five per cent of trainees with learning difficulties are employed. Over the last four years, two-thirds of all trainees leaving the various training programmes have remained in or entered employment.

31. The induction programme has well-recorded aims and objectives and covers information on career opportunities, training and assessment, hours of work, rights and responsibilities, training officers' details and support services on offer. However, trainees have a poor recollection of their induction to the programme, particularly the key elements of training, assessment and the structure of NVQs. There is no systematic approach to the assessment and accreditation of trainees' prior achievements, even though a significant number of trainees starting their training already have nationally recognised qualifications. Some trainees' previous knowledge and experience is taken into account when the training plan is constructed, so that they have the potential to progress more quickly through the training programme. However, accreditation of prior learning is not extended to all trainees. Training plans are used merely as administrative documents. Some plans

are incomplete, sketchy, showing little differentiation and providing limited information. Training plans for trainees in the foundation for work programme do not reflect the training undertaken. The plans are not used as working documents.

Management of training

Grade 3

32. Three A's Training has an organisational structure in which responsibilities are clearly defined. All staff have job descriptions. Staff have an annual appraisal, the results of which are fed into a development plan for each individual. There is a weekly staff meeting to discuss various issues including training, assessment and staff development. Managers meet monthly on a formal basis and informally with each other and with staff on a daily basis. Minutes are kept of management and staff meetings. These include actions, responsibilities and due dates. The company has procedures covering staff recruitment, selection and induction. Three A's Training has a computerised database for management information. This includes information on trainees' progress and achievements. The company has held the Investors in People Standard for over five years. The self-assessment process identified the lack of development of key skills but not the issues relating to the ratio of trainers to trainees or the review process. The strength of the management information system was recognised. The self-assessment report does not expand on the strengths and weaknesses it identifies. Actions are proposed to address the weaknesses. There are no actions identified to build on the strengths. The grade awarded by inspectors is the same as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good communication among managers, staff and work placement providers
- ◆ wide variety of staff development programmes
- ◆ effective use of management information

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ low ratio of trainers to trainees
- ◆ weak management of key skills development
- ◆ little management of review process
- ◆ little management of off-the-job training

33. There is a good team spirit between staff and managers. Staff meetings are used for two-way communication between managers and staff and among staff themselves. Managers encourage staff to give their views on all issues relating to the company. Minutes of the staff meetings are kept. These contain agreed actions, responsibilities for the actions and dates by which the action must be taken. Actions are followed up at subsequent meetings to ensure completion. Employers are

consulted frequently during training officers' visits to work placements and employers. Feedback from employers is discussed at the staff meetings. Staff feel that they are well informed and have the opportunity to influence the development of the business. Every member of staff has a personal development plan. This combines the requirements of the business with the personal aspirations of the individual. The implementation of the development plans for all staff is monitored regularly at the monthly management meetings. Staff have the opportunity to influence their own personal development. However, there is little emphasis given to staff maintaining their occupation skills. Managers and staff have access to a wide range of data on trainees, their progress and achievements. These data are kept up-to-date and used by managers at their monthly meetings to track progress and identify necessary actions.

34. Training officers are responsible for providing off-the-job training, assessment and progress reviews for trainees. Some are also internal verifiers. Each training officer is responsible for approximately 60 trainees. Key skills training is inadequate. Training and assessment in key skills is provided but is not integrated into the occupational training in any area. There is an initial assessment of trainees' key skills during recruitment, but there is no systematic way of ensuring that the results from this are used to develop individuals' training plans. The introduction of key skills has not been managed to the same degree as other developments in the company. There is little monitoring and control of the review process. Reviews are not consistent across the company. Recording of reviews is not always complete. There is little management of off-the-job training. Each training officer determines the content and quantity of the training. There is no consistency across the company.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

35. Three A's Training has a relatively new, recorded quality assurance system, which has been developed in response to *Raising the Standard*. It has a quality assurance manual, which is regularly updated and includes procedures for internal audit of the quality assurance system. A senior member of staff has responsibility for quality assurance. Internal verification procedures are recorded and eight staff are qualified as internal verifiers. Internal verifiers and assessors meet monthly. Questionnaires are used to obtain feedback from trainees and employers. All staff contribute to the self-assessment process, which is led by the company's senior managers. The self-assessment report identifies only one of the main areas of weakness in this area, and overstates its strengths, which are no more than normal practice or represent contract compliance. Inspectors awarded a lower grade than that given by Three A's Training.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ new initiatives to improve the quality of training
- ◆ close monitoring of trainees through structured interviews
- ◆ targets set and monitored consistently

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no monitoring of training
- ◆ internal verification procedures not yet improving assessment practices
- ◆ self-assessment report not self-critical

36. Three A's Training has developed new initiatives to create a quality assurance framework. These include a good internal audit system, the setting up of quality standards and a systematic approach to making continuous improvements. The structure for the visits, which include interviews with trainees, work-based supervisors and employers, has been designed to include the quality statements from *Raising the Standard*. The results of the interviews are analysed and acted on. Radical changes have taken place as a result of findings. For example, a new office with additional staff has been established in the south of the country to improve the service given to trainees and employers in that area. The company's staff are aware of their own targets, which are set and monitored closely. Staff meetings focus on reasons for variance from trainees' profiled achievement date, and every effort is made to help trainees complete their qualification. Training officers or placements with a history of trainees not completing their qualifications on time are identified, and strategies put in place to improve performance. Documents are generally well controlled and monitored.

37. There is no procedure or quality standard for on- or off-the-job training. The procedures cover only the assessment and verification roles of the training officers. There is a procedure in the quality assurance manual to select and monitor subcontractors, but it is not systematically applied. Some subcontractors have supplied no details of their training, and some contracts have not yet been issued, even though training has been started. Files show no information about some of the subcontracted training, and there is no information about the qualifications, experience or reputation of staff members who are delivering the training or providing assessment and internal verification. Poor training at some subcontractors is addressed through meetings and discussion with the subcontractor, but no significant improvements have been made. Three A's Training's internal verification procedures have been tightened up, and recent refresher training for internal verifiers provided by one of the awarding bodies has raised internal verifiers' awareness of the responsibility of their roles. These developments, however, are not yet resulting in improvements being made to assessment practice. Internal verifiers are encouraged to work in pairs with assessors in the same workplace, rather than taking a more objective view of the assessment practice. Although there is now a central framework for internal verification sampling, this

has only recently been established. There is little control of interim internal verification. There is no central record of the feedback given to assessors and no analysis of patterns of good or poor practice.

38. The self-assessment report was developed through discussion with all managers and members of staff. Trainees and employers' views were not sought specifically to contribute to the self-assessment process. In general, the weaknesses represent an accurate assessment of the provision although some key weaknesses have been missed. Many of the strengths identified in the occupational areas relate to generic aspects. Also, many of the strengths are no more than normal practice. Some key strengths are not identified. The self-assessment grades are not consistent with the balance of strengths and weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report according to the guidelines in *Raising the Standard*. The self-assessment grades are the same as those awarded by inspectors in just over half of the areas inspected. The remaining self-assessment grades are higher than those awarded during inspection. The organisation has produced an action plan following its self-assessment, but many of the actions identified are focused on improvements which will have little impact on trainees. Several of the actions have already been implemented.