



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT JULY 2000

Army Base Repair Organisation Donnington

SUMMARY

Army Base Repair Organisation Donnington provides good training in engineering. Resources are excellent. Retention and achievement rates are high and most trainees gain employment with the organisation on completing their training. Apprentice masters provide effective work-based training. However, inadequate planning of on-the-job training and assessment makes co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training difficult. The organisation promotes equality of opportunity strongly but there are lapses in monitoring activities in the workplace. Trainees benefit from strong support systems and well-trained, occupationally competent staff. The management of training is satisfactory, but managers make little use of data for strategic planning. Quality assurance is less than satisfactory. Although the organisation has a comprehensive set of policies it lacks systematic arrangements for assuring the quality of training.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Engineering	2

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	3
Trainee support	2
Management of training	3
Quality assurance	4

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ high retention and achievement rates
- ◆ excellent resources
- ◆ wide range of opportunities for learning in the workplace
- ◆ highly effective work-based training
- ◆ strong promotion of equality of opportunity
- ◆ strong support systems for trainees
- ◆ rigorous selection process
- ◆ good staff development
- ◆ comprehensive, audited policies for training

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ inadequate planning of on-the-job training and assessment
- ◆ inadequate monitoring of equal opportunities in the workplace
- ◆ underdeveloped progress reviews
- ◆ failure of management to use data effectively
- ◆ lack of systematic arrangements to assure the quality of training
- ◆ lack of rigour in conducting self-assessment
- ◆ inadequacies in internal verification procedures

INTRODUCTION

1. The Army Base Repair Organisation Donnington (ABRO Donnington) is part of the national Army Base Repair Organisation (ABRO) team, which is an executive agency of the Defence Logistics Organisation. ABRO's role is to repair, maintain and overhaul military equipment for the British Army and Defence Organisation. The Donnington site contains two production areas, mechanical and electronic, and there is a workforce of more than 1,000. The training centre at Donnington trains apprentices in three disciplines: mechanical, electrical and electronic engineering. There are 78 trainees, all on engineering modern apprenticeship. Training is provided on site and at local colleges and is partly funded by Shropshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise (CCTE).

2. The training centre employs eight staff, including a training manager with overall responsibility for apprentice training. The organisation recruits between 18 and 35 apprentices each year from the local area. In Shropshire, the main employment sector is manufacturing, which accounts for more than 27 per cent of jobs. At the time of the 1991 census, minority ethnic groups formed 1.6 per cent of the population of Shropshire. In May 2000, the unemployment rate was 2.5 per cent compared with a national average of 3.8 per cent. In 1999, the percentage of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 55.4 per cent, compared with the national average of 47.9 per cent.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

3. The training manager was responsible for producing a self-assessment report in preparation for the inspection. He was helped by two training supervisors, but no other member of staff was involved. The report is clearly laid out and gives useful information about the organisation and the role which it performs. However, there is little about methods of training, assessment and off-the-job elements required by the modern apprenticeship framework. The report is not sufficiently self-critical. Only two weaknesses are identified and no evidence is produced in support of the strengths which are listed. The action plan fails to show how the weaknesses are to be addressed or how the organisation intends to build on the strengths identified.

4. Four inspectors spent a total of 16 days with the organisation during July 2000. They visited the sites of two subcontractors, interviewed 17 trainees, three apprentice masters and four subcontractors' staff, and carried out 15 interviews with ABRO Donnington's staff. They examined assessment records, trainees' portfolios, internal and external verifiers' reports, and CCTE documents. They also observed one assessment and one trainee's progress review.

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Engineering

Grade 2

5. ABRO Donnington has 78 trainees, all following a modern apprenticeship programme. Trainees are employed by the organisation on a three-year contract. The apprenticeship is divided into three phases each lasting a year. In the first year, apprentices undertake off-the-job training in the training centre to acquire basic engineering skills and key skills as part of their progress towards NVQs at level 2. Additional evidence for key skills is obtained during the outdoor pursuit course which trainees attend soon after starting their apprenticeship. During the second and third phases, they work in the production workshops under the guidance of apprentice masters maintaining and refurbishing a wide range of military equipment including tanks, armoured personnel carriers, small arms, communications equipment and robotic systems. The apprentices move to a different area of the workshops approximately every eight weeks. They attend college one day a week to study the theory and practice of engineering and to work towards an appropriate academic qualification. Trainees decide from the outset whether to follow an electrical engineering or mechanical engineering programme, but there is some flexibility to transfer during the first year. Some trainees progress to higher national diploma (HND) or beyond. Assessment for NVQs at level 3 is carried out by training staff using evidence gained in the production workshops. Staff at the training centre have appropriate assessors' qualifications. Regular reviews take place in the training centre or workplace. On completing the apprenticeship, trainees may be offered employment in one of the production

areas. The self-assessment report for the occupational area listed many strengths and only one weakness. Inspectors considered most of the strengths to be no more than normal practice or to relate more appropriately to generic areas. Inspectors found additional strengths and weaknesses and awarded the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ high retention and achievement rates
- ◆ good opportunities for trainees to achieve additional skills and qualifications
- ◆ good resources
- ◆ wide range of opportunities for learning in the workplace
- ◆ highly effective work-based training
- ◆

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of familiarity with NVQ process among some apprentice masters
- ◆ inadequate planning of on-the-job training and assessment

6. Retention and achievement rates are high. The average retention rate over the past four years is 90 per cent. Ninety-five per cent of trainees have achieved an NVQ at level 2 and 80 per cent have completed their modern apprenticeship.

7. Many trainees achieve qualifications in addition to the modern apprenticeship certificate. The organisation encourages trainees to undertake additional professional and management courses as a means of developing their full potential. It also organises training courses to enable trainees to acquire additional skills, for example, in operating hydraulic systems. Some of these skills may not be required during the apprenticeship, but they help to ensure that trainees are adequately prepared for employment.

8. The training centre is well equipped. There is sufficient equipment in the electronics training area to ensure that trainees do not need to share facilities. The workshops are well organised and clear. On-the-job training takes place in extremely well-resourced workshops supervised by individually assigned apprentice masters.

9. The abundance of tools, equipment and test rigs in the production areas, and the constant dismantling and reassembling of equipment, provide trainees with a range of experience which is more than sufficient to meet the requirements of the NVQ units in mechanical and electrical engineering. Trainees also have ample opportunity to engage in production tasks which enable them to develop their skills and collect evidence of their competencies.

10. In all production areas, trainees work under the supervision of an apprentice master who is a qualified engineer. The apprentice masters provide strong support for trainees, helping them to carry out their production and maintenance tasks and to develop the skills and knowledge required. The roles and responsibilities of the apprentice master are set out clearly in a published handbook. They play a substantial role in witnessing trainees' competencies. However, some know very little about NVQs or the mechanics of gaining an NVQ.

11. There is inadequate planning of on-the-job training and assessment. Trainees' placements are not arranged in advance. During each eight-week placement, training staff identify the next placement on the basis of the work the trainee has already done and the availability of suitable placements and apprentice masters. Because there is no plan of future placements it is not possible to co-ordinate on- and off-the-job training effectively.

12. Trainees ask for appointments with the NVQ assessor when they have enough evidence to be assessed. This gives trainees some control of the process, but trainees experiencing difficulties who do not come forward for assessment may not receive the support they need as quickly as they should. Procedures for monitoring trainees' progress towards their NVQ are not rigorous enough.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

13. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) has an equal opportunities policy with which all staff are required to comply. A booklet, *Civilian Equal Opportunities in the MOD*, is issued to all staff and trainees when they are first employed at the Donnington site. It explains in detail the scope of the policy and also provides practical help and information for staff. The Donnington site has a nominated officer responsible for equal opportunities issues, who is required to monitor the implementation of the policy and collect statistical data. The booklet was last updated in 1999 by the MOD's central equal opportunities unit, which is responsible for its revision. The Donnington training centre, work-placement premises and canteen facilities are all accessible to wheelchair users. At the time of inspection, there were no trainees with disabilities, 3.8 per cent of trainees were women and 1.3 per cent came from minority ethnic groups. Inspectors awarded a lower grade than the self-assessment grade.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective training for all staff
- ◆ positive promotion of equality of opportunity
- ◆ effective collection and use of data on equal opportunities

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no monitoring of equality of opportunity in the workplace
- ◆ no systematic monitoring of subcontractors' policy and practice on equal opportunities

14. All staff in the training department have received at least a one-day training course to update them on equal opportunities issues. ABRO's chief executive has issued instructions to provide training for all those employed on the Donnington site by the end of the year.

15. The organisation promotes equality of opportunity in the literature which it publishes. Advertisements for apprenticeships in local newspapers include photographs of female engineering trainees. There is also a written commitment to equal opportunities within the advertisements stating that the organisation welcomes applications from individuals, irrespective of ethnicity, gender or disability. Other promotional materials distributed to local schools and circulated at careers events for parents and pupils include a picture of a woman working on an engine unit. Representatives of the organisation attending recent careers events have included a woman and a training instructor of Asian descent, which has also helped to promote a positive image of equality within ABRO's apprenticeship programmes.

16. The organisation has a nominated person within the personnel department on the Donnington site who is responsible for collecting data relating to equal opportunities. Information on the number of people from under-represented groups applying for apprenticeships, passing selection tests and succeeding at interviews is routinely analysed to try and identify if there are barriers to fair recruitment. Targets have been set for recruitment from under-represented groups and performance at Donnington is measured against national recruitment from under-represented groups within the organisation. The nominated person for equal opportunities on the Donnington site produces an annual statistical report, which is sent to ABRO's headquarters for further analysis.

17. The report sent to headquarters is used to draw up an improvement plan for the subsequent year. The current improvement plan, for January to December 2000 includes training, updating and distribution of policy booklets to staff. It also specifies arrangements for implementing the plan and monitoring outcomes.

18. There is no day-to-day monitoring of equal opportunities in the production work areas at Donnington. Potentially offensive calendars and posters were being displayed in some work areas. Managers took immediate action to have the material removed after inspectors brought the matter to their attention.

19. There is no monitoring of training subcontractors' policy and practice on equal opportunities. At present, the organisation has no means of assuring itself that subcontractors are protecting ABRO's trainees in line with its own minimum requirements for equality of opportunity.

Trainee support

Grade 2

20. All applicants for apprenticeship training complete an aptitude test to assess their suitability for modern apprenticeship training at ABRO Donnington. Independent MOD assessors from the MOD's policy branch carry out and mark the tests. Candidates who pass the test are then interviewed. Members of the interview panel question candidates on their interests, hobbies, attitudes and achievements, and score their responses. A medical examination is arranged for those who are selected. If the results are satisfactory, they are offered a modern apprenticeship with the company. All trainees receive induction covering the nature and conditions of employment, the modern apprenticeship framework and the qualifications open to them. They are also told about the role of the trade union and encouraged to become members. The trade union is represented on various committees which meet to discuss training issues. A welfare officer is employed on the site to help and advise employees and trainees as required. Trainees receive progress reviews at the end of each training segment. Staff involved in the interviewing, training and assessment of trainees receive training for these roles, and, where necessary, they are qualified to conduct NVQ assessments and verification. The self-assessment report mentioned no weaknesses. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths identified in the report and with the grade given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective personal development of trainees
- ◆ strong support systems
- ◆ comprehensive community and school links
- ◆ good incentives and rewards for achievement
- ◆ rigorous selection process

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ failure to take account of initial assessment in drawing up training plans
- ◆ no recognition of trainees' previous achievements
- ◆ underdeveloped reviews of progress

21. All trainees attend a one-week residential course in Wales soon after they begin their training programme. Outdoor activities are designed to develop personal skills, including the ability to work effectively with others. Trainees value the course and talked of their increased confidence and tolerance of others, the benefits of working as a member of a team and opportunities to develop key skills.

22. Trainees receive strong support throughout their training programmes. In each work area, they are allocated to an apprentice master who has volunteered for the task of training apprentices and providing them with the support and guidance they require. The apprentice masters are fully briefed about their role and have a guidance handbook. The organisation also has a full-time welfare officer who is introduced to the trainees during induction, and who provides information on the type of help available and a telephone number they can use at any time. The welfare officer's main role is to help employees remain effective in their work. The type of help and advice available to trainees covers sickness, accommodation, substance abuse, finance and debts, pay and bereavement. Trainees are directed to other specialist agencies where this is appropriate. Further support for trainees is provided by the organisation's personnel department and the trade union of which they are members. The subcontracting colleges which provide off-the-job training have comprehensive student support services which are freely available to ABRO Donnington's trainees. Two trainees are currently receiving additional support in mathematics at one of the colleges.

23. Good links have been made with local schools and the community. Pupils who are potential trainees are offered work experience at ABRO Donnington. A member of the training department acts as a mentor for some of these pupils and teaches them how to prepare for an interview. The numerous examples of community links include the local hospital. The hospital benefited when an apprentice manufactured specialist stainless steel hip replacement equipment as an engineering project. The apprentice went on to win the MOD's apprentice-of-the-year award with the project and the hospital gained important equipment free of charge. The handing over of the equipment was featured in local newspapers to promote effective community links.

24. The organisation offers various rewards and incentives to encourage trainees to succeed. There are award ceremonies at which trainees are presented with their certificates. Additional memorial awards and apprentice-of-the-year awards are open to all trainees and the winners attend presentations at prestigious venues where well-known people present the prizes.

25. The inspection team was not given access to the MOD's selection test and is unable to comment on its content and suitability. Information about individuals' training needs obtained from the initial assessment is not entered on training plans and is not used to help shape trainees' development.

26. No account is taken of trainees' previous achievements and there is no initial assessment of trainees' key skills. Although the rate at which trainees acquire skills during the training programme is taken into account by trainers, the absence of a systematic assessment of prior achievement makes it difficult to plan individuals' development effectively.

27. Trainees' progress reviews do not always take place within the contractual timescales required by the CCTE. Reviews are conducted when a trainee has completed a particular training segment and the time spent on these segments

varies. The reviews focus on work the trainees have done while completing the training segment only and are not linked to their training plan. Trainees work to targets which are common to all trainees, not to individual targets.

Management of training

Grade 3

28. ABRO Donnington is part of the national ABRO team, which is itself an executive agency of the Defence Logistics Organisation. The ABRO site at Donnington contains two production areas, mechanical and electronic, and the training unit. The training unit has a training manager with overall responsibility for all aspects of training, assisted by two training supervisors, who are both internal verifiers. One supervisor is responsible for the training centre, including all first-phase, off-the-job training and liaison with schools. The other supervisor is the NVQ co-ordinator who also has responsibility for the second and third phases of apprenticeship training. There are four full-time instructors and one visiting assessor. An administrative officer supports the training manager and training supervisors. Staff recruitment and induction procedures are clearly recorded. Staff have job descriptions and understand their roles and responsibilities in fulfilling the organisation's objectives. There is an annual assessment of staff training needs linked to the business needs of the organisation. The organisation has the Investors in People Standard. Staff on higher grades are subject to performance appraisal in line with MOD's policies. The self-assessment report listed a number of strengths but no weaknesses. Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths and identified some weaknesses. They awarded a lower grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective communication system
- ◆ good staff development to meet business needs

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ underdeveloped use of data to influence management decisions
- ◆ lack of formal service level agreements with subcontractors

29. The relatively small number and close proximity of staff within the centre allows training to be managed with a level of informality. Staff work in an open atmosphere where all those involved in training feel able to raise issues and present new ideas. More formal methods of communication include a monthly briefing for all staff. The training manager passes information to senior staff, who pass it to the training staff, who in turn brief the trainees. Notices are displayed on notice boards throughout the organisation and in all training areas. Trainees' progress reviews are used as an opportunity for trainees, apprentice masters and

instructors to raise issues about training and progress. Communications with external agencies are effective. Staff from the training centre attend college staff meetings and course reviews. They also sit in on classes. The college supplies copies of trainees' weekly attendance sheets and progress reports twice a year. Staff at the training centre represent ABRO Donnington on national training committees.

30. There are policies for all personnel issues including staff recruitment and induction. There is a strong commitment to staff development. Annually, staff-development needs are determined in line with the aims and objectives of the organisation. The staff-training plans include criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of training. There is an evaluation immediately after the training and again after three months. All staff training is recorded and the records regularly updated. Current priorities for staff development include assessors and verifiers' awards, health and safety, equal opportunities awareness and occupational updating. The staff training plan is displayed openly.

31. Data collected and analysed at various stages in the training process include the number of applications, the number of those successfully completing the aptitude test, the number of trainees achieving places on programmes, and trainees' retention and achievement rates. Early leavers are also followed up to determine their reasons for leaving and their destinations. There is little use of data for strategic planning. Management is reactive. One example of the constructive use of data relates to marketing. As a result of asking all trainees where they had seen the advertisement for apprenticeships when they were applying, the organisation has altered its pattern of advertising. Trainees' recruitment is based on the needs of the workforce. The organisation does not have a target-setting culture.

32. Off-the-job training is subcontracted to two colleges of further education. Relationships between them and the training centre are good. But there are no contracts or service level agreements identifying standards and expectations against which the organisation can make judgements about the colleges' performance.

Quality assurance

Grade 4

33. The civilian management, industrial and vocational training branch of the MOD in Glasgow provides the policies and procedures for training apprentices and regularly audits ABRO's compliance with policy. ABRO Donnington has ISO 9002, a quality standard. The training manager is a member of the MOD's national apprentice management committee, and one of the training supervisors represents ABRO on the national apprentice training committee and the national apprentice competitions committee. The manager and training supervisors, along with the personnel manager, the two workshop managers and trade union representatives, are members of ABRO Donnington's apprentice board. This board meets every

two months, or more frequently if required, and reports back to national committees. Quality assurance arrangements for apprentice training are not fully recorded. Feedback is not sought from all who use the services of the organisation. The self-assessment report identified a number of strengths and no weaknesses. Many of the strengths relate to one issue and are not evaluative. Inspectors identified an additional strength and four weaknesses. They awarded a lower grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive, audited policies for training
- ◆ strong commitment to improvements in training

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no detailed arrangements to assure quality of training
- ◆ lack of rigour in self-assessment
- ◆ inadequate action-planning
- ◆ inadequacies in internal verification procedures

34. ABRO's aims and values are advertised in posters spread throughout the training centre. The organisation works to comprehensive policies covering most aspects of training. A standards-based training package identifies all the skills required to complete the apprenticeship. The policy unit in Glasgow regularly audits ABRO's compliance with the policies and the training package. Until April 2000, when ABRO Donnington was reorganised, the organisation's own quality assurance department carried out frequent internal audits.

35. All recommendations for improvements to apprentices' training are considered and discussed by the training staff, either at one of the monthly briefing meetings or as appropriate. Ideas are usually put forward by the training centre's staff, but apprentice masters, apprentices and staff from subcontracting colleges are all encouraged to make suggestions. Examples of improvements include a revision to the planned programme for the first phase of training to avoid duplicating college training. The space created in the college's programme will be used to cover additional theory or to introduce new skills.

36. Although there is a comprehensive range of policies, the policy document itself is difficult to follow and arrangements for putting policies into practice are not specified. For example, there is a policy that trainees' progress be reviewed but no information on how often, the format or the expected outcomes. The usual quality assurance cycle of policy procedure, practice, monitoring, evaluation, action-planning and amendments does not exist. Quality assurance arrangements are informal. There are no established systems or mechanisms to ensure that the quality of training is sustained and that improvement is continuous. Little use is

made of data to drive change. Feedback from trainees is sought informally, and rarely recorded. Trainees are not represented on any committees at the centre. There is no systematic feedback from other participants in the training process. The small size of the organisation and the close proximity in which staff work make formal procedures less of a necessity than for larger organisations. However, the lack of formal procedures makes it difficult for the organisation to assure the quality of provision on a systematic basis.

37. The first self-assessment report was rewritten in preparation for the inspection, with little contribution from outside agencies involved in the training. The training manager and training supervisors wrote the report, and then issued copies to instructors. Trainees, apprentice masters, subcontractors and members of the apprentice board were not consulted during the process and have not been given copies of the report. The self-assessment report lacked rigour, particularly in its failure to identify weaknesses.

38. Where action-planning takes place, it is generally carried out on an informal basis. Action points are established but the responsibility for taking action, the timescale for completion, and the criteria for evaluating outcomes are rarely recorded.

39. Guidelines on internal verification produced by the awarding bodies are not included in the organisation's quality assurance manual and there are no procedures for implementing the guidelines. There are regular NVQ assessors' meetings chaired by the NVQ co-ordinator, but they are not minuted. Both training supervisors carry out internal verification but their records are kept independently and are not readily available. Verifiers observe assessors at work, but there is no planned programme of observation and no agreed sample. Sampling of evidence in portfolios occurs only on completion of the trainees' portfolio.