



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT JULY 2000

Sandwell Training Association

SUMMARY

Sandwell Training Association offers satisfactory training in all of its training programmes. It has an active equal opportunities group, which monitors and analyses data and produces an annual action plan. However, little use is made of the company's marketing material to promote equal opportunities. The company does not have a systematic approach to the initial assessment of trainees but does provide good levels of individual support. The management of training is satisfactory with a high level of responsiveness to the needs of the community and of individuals. The company has been slow introducing training and assessment in key skills. Quality assurance is weak. Although there are well-written procedures, there is no quality assurance strategy or plan which incorporates all of the company's quality assurance arrangements. The views of trainees and employers on training are sought and analysed, but no specific action is taken to address the issues identified.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Engineering	3
Business administration	3
Retailing & customer service	3

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

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good work placements in engineering
- ◆ tasks for trainees in business administration work placements well matched to NVQ standards
- ◆ effective action-planning with trainees
- ◆ good instruction in fork-truck driving skills
- ◆ detailed monitoring and analysis of equal opportunities data
- ◆ effective annual action-planning on equal opportunities
- ◆ influential strategic links with external organisations
- ◆ good response to local community and individuals' training needs
- ◆ well-written and regularly evaluated procedures and policies

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ weak assessment practices in engineering and business administration
- ◆ poor achievement and retention rates
- ◆ no use of marketing material to promote equal opportunities
- ◆ no monitoring or reinforcing of trainees' awareness of equal opportunities
- ◆ inadequate training and assessment in key skills
- ◆ no sharing of good practice
- ◆ poor internal verification in some areas
- ◆ no overall quality assurance plan
- ◆ no quality assurance agreements with some subcontractors
- ◆ little use of statistical data for continuous improvement

INTRODUCTION

1. Sandwell Training Association (STA) is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. It was founded in 1963 as an engineering employers' training association. Although engineering training has remained a core activity the organisation has expanded and diversified to include other occupational areas and commercial activities. The company has 37 staff. There are four training sites: two are in Cradley Heath and both the main training premises for engineering and the headquarters are in West Bromwich. One of the sites in Cradley Heath is used mainly for private training. The organisation provides training for the Black Country in the West Midlands and the City of Birmingham. It contracts with Sandwell Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) to provide youth training and adult work-based learning in engineering, business administration, retailing and customer service, security and transportation. Specific programmes include a wide range of engineering disciplines, administration, information technology, retailing, warehousing, customer service, fork-lift truck driving, security, heavy goods and public carrying vehicle and approved driving instructor training. Security and transportation programmes were not inspected owing to low numbers of trainees. The total number of trainees is 297. STA is a subcontractor for the Black Country New Deal Unit of Delivery. There are 19 New Deal clients across all of the occupational areas on the full-time education and training option.

2. In Sandwell, small and medium-sized enterprises predominate. Over 70 per cent of companies employ fewer than 20 people. The main industrial sectors are manufacturing, wholesaling, retailing and business services. Other important areas relate to the motor trades and the service sector. Thirty-five per cent of jobs in West Bromwich, an area within Sandwell, are in manufacturing. Although manufacturing has declined significantly over the past 20 years, West Bromwich still has almost double the national figure of 18 per cent of jobs in manufacturing.

3. The local unemployment rate in the borough of Sandwell is 7.5 per cent, which is above the national average of 4.2 per cent. Unemployment is much higher among minority ethnic groups, which make up 15 per cent of the population. Long-term unemployment is also higher than the national average. Almost 28 per cent of those who are unemployed have been out of work for over one year, and 44.7 per cent for over two years. In 1999, the percentage of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 29.6 per cent, compared with the national average of 47.9 per cent.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

4. STA produced its first self-assessment report in 1998 with guidance from an external consultant and the local TEC. The report for inspection was produced in May 2000. A manager wrote the report after consulting senior colleagues. It was then sent to all staff for their comments and contributions. The report and its associated action plan are updated every six months.

5. A team of five inspectors spent 20 days at STA in July 2000. They interviewed 55 trainees, visited placements and talked to employers and supervisors. They visited STA's three premises where work-based training is provided, in West Bromwich and Cradley Heath, and conducted 32 interviews with STA's managers and staff. Inspectors looked at a wide range of records, agendas and minutes of meetings and reports. These included council, management, staff and departmental meeting papers, internal and external verifiers' reports, trainees' portfolios, records of support provided for trainees and training materials. Inspectors observed four training sessions held as part of new trainees' induction to their training programmes.

Grades awarded to instruction sessions

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

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Engineering

Grade 3

6. STA was originally a group of engineering companies created to share training services between its member companies. Group member companies are still used, along with other local employers, to place trainees in on-the-job training. There are 102 trainees working towards national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3 in engineering, including programmes in manufacturing, production, fabrication and maintenance. There are eight adult trainees, 75 modern apprentices, four national trainees and 15 other youth trainees. In addition there are two New Deal clients. Trainees spend up to 36 weeks in one of STA's two engineering training centres, where they undergo training in basic engineering skills before joining their employers or placement companies. Modern apprentices

and national trainees work towards foundation level 2 NVQs before starting on-the-job training with their employers. Trainees who progress through their NVQ ahead of schedule are given the opportunity to take an additional NVQ at level 2 in information technology. On completion of their off-the-job training, modern apprentices and national trainees start training towards an NVQ at level 3 in a specialist area, which their employer determines. They attend day-release studies at local colleges of further education on courses which complement their work-based training. Adult and youth trainees move from STA's engineering workshops when suitable placement companies are found. Thereafter they attend STA's premises one day each week to complete their NVQs at level 2. Some trainees on other training programmes have progressed onto modern apprenticeships and national traineeships. STA's staff assess trainees in the workplace.

7. Fifty-one trainees started a modern apprenticeship programme in 1997-98. Forty-one achieved NVQs at level 2, one achieved level 3 and 19 trainees left before completing their programme. In 1998-99, 36 trainees started modern apprenticeships. Twenty-five trainees achieved NVQs at level 2 and 18 left before completing their programme. Ninety-nine trainees joined the adult programme in 1997-98. Thirteen achieved NVQs at level 1 and six achieved NVQs at level 2. Seventy-three trainees gained employment and 26 left before completing the programme. In 1998-99 forty-one trainees joined the adult programme, of whom five achieved NVQs at level 2, 16 gained employment and 24 left before completing the programme. In 1997-98, nine trainees joined other training programmes, of whom two achieved NVQs at level 2 and four left before completing their programme. In 1998-99, 31 trainees started training, of whom 17 achieved NVQs at level 2 and 13 left their programme early. In 1998-99 three national trainees started their programmes, of whom two achieved NVQs at level 2 and one left early. Inspectors regarded most of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report as no more than normal practice. Inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses to those cited in the self-assessment report. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that given by STA.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ frequent monitoring of agreed goals
- ◆ additional training opportunities available
- ◆ significant influence on training programmes by trainees
- ◆ good work placements

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some weak assessment practices
- ◆ some poor progress reviews
- ◆ some low achievement and retention rates

8. STA's assessors visit trainees in their companies frequently to provide guidance and support. Many trainees are visited every two weeks. Action plans are agreed which clearly define and schedule tasks to be completed by trainees, usually before the next visit. This encourages them to collect evidence from their workplace and to maintain their progress towards their NVQ. STA's staff offer good support and there are well-established and effective working relationships among trainees, employers and trainers. One trainee completed the modern apprenticeship programme and was then made redundant. Staff at STA kept in contact with the trainee and found him new employment.

9. Trainees are encouraged to take advantage of additional training opportunities. Two trainees have progressed to higher education and are scheduled to start their degree courses later this year. Other trainees have attended specialist short courses, including computer-controlled machining, class 1 welding and the fork-lift truck driver certificate. STA also provides additional NVQs for trainees who are progressing ahead of schedule. Many trainees achieve a second NVQ at level 2 in information technology, which is highly valued by trainees and their employers.

10. STA offers solutions to any problems and concerns which trainees identify related to their training. One trainee, after raising concerns about her ability to cope, had been given additional support to help improve her level of numeracy. Training was arranged by STA's staff and provided by a local college of further education on an individual basis. Some trainees have requested that significant changes be made to their programmes of training. These have been implemented by STA and employers and have resulted in trainees being given opportunities to improve their career prospects. One trainee recruited to work in a machine tool workshop requested a transfer to the design drawing office. STA's staff arranged for this to happen, which involved changing the trainee's work-based training programme to one leading to a different NVQ and rearranging his day-release studies at a local college.

11. STA has well-established links with employers through the member companies of its group training association. Employers are involved in training, the work placements provided are of good quality, and good opportunities are provided for trainees to gain a wide range of high-level occupational skills. Some employers have formulated comprehensive, written training plans which specify the skills to be acquired by trainees in each department. Many companies used by STA have systems for informing trainees about their performance in writing during and at the end of their training in each section or department. Feedback from managers has resulted in action being taken by STA to improve training. One employer requested that time constraints be applied to work undertaken by their trainees. This greatly improved trainees' understanding of real work requirements. Several employers use simple skills matrices which show employees', including trainees, levels of skills against business requirements. Any gaps between the two are used to identify and plan training. Trainees working in most companies have been given training over and above NVQ requirements. Senior managers in some companies

are former trainees from STA and make excellent role models. At one company, both the managing director and the general manager are former STA trainees.

12. Approaches to assessment across engineering vary, and there are some long-standing cases of poor practice. For example, one trainee produced work which had not been assessed after six months. Delays in assessing evidence have caused unnecessary duplication of work. Records of assessment are incomplete and credit has not been given for the work done by some trainees. Trainees are working through NVQ units one at a time and sometimes miss opportunities to use evidence for more than one unit. Some trainees do not have access to the NVQ standards and are unsure whether work they have completed meets NVQ requirements. One trainee had waited for a set of standards for eight months. Some trainees find it difficult to distinguish between reviews and assessments. Work completed by one trainee had been assessed and signed off but did not meet the minimum evidence requirements of the awarding body. Workplace supervisors are not fully aware of the assessment process and are not involved in planning and providing opportunities for trainees to gather and use evidence from the workplace. There is an over-reliance on assignments for providing key skills evidence. Assessment records for key skills are incomplete, with credit given in some instances for evidence which does not meet performance requirements. Some trainees' portfolios of evidence show that all units within a qualification have been assessed on one day. In such cases internal verification is also carried out all at once, with no opportunity for the trainers and the trainees to correct any problems which may have occurred during the training period for that unit.

13. Although most trainees know the date on which they should complete their programme, few are sure of the progress they have made towards achieving their qualification. Since assessment records are not usually produced during meetings, trainees and their workplace supervisors are not aware of what still needs to be done by trainees to complete their programme. Employers receive insufficient information to participate fully in the training leading to NVQs. They are not always given regular and timely information on trainees' performance and attendance at college. One employer changed the college used by its trainees in an effort to improve communication. The employer is now informed of any absences from the college or any incidents in which its trainees are involved on the day that they occur.

14. There are poor rates of achievement and retention for some programmes. The average proportion of trainees remaining on modern apprenticeship programmes was 63 per cent in 1998 and 50 per cent in 1999. However, 80 per cent of trainees achieved an NVQ at level 3. The highest number of trainees was on youth programmes, with approximately twice the number of modern apprentices. Although only 14 per cent of these trainees achieved an NVQ at level 1, 74 per cent secured employment and only 26 per cent left their programme early. On other training programmes, the retention rates were 55 per cent in 1998 and 58 per cent in 1999, with 22 per cent and then 55 per cent of trainees achieving an NVQ at level 2. There were far fewer national trainees in 1998-1999 but 66 per cent did achieve an NVQ at level 2.

Business administration

Grade 3

15. STA offers training leading to NVQs in administration and in information technology at levels 2 and 3. There are 90 youth and adult trainees. There are 17 modern apprentices in administration, two modern apprentices in information technology, 16 national trainees in administration and 33 other youth trainees, 17 of whom are in work placements. All trainees are offered the opportunity to take additional NVQs in customer service at levels 2 and 3 and the majority take advantage of this. There are also 22 adult trainees and five New Deal clients. Members of both groups take a variety of qualifications in administration, information technology and customer service, with several clients taking more than one qualification at the same level. All modern apprentices and national trainees are employed with local companies ranging from large manufacturing and engineering firms to recruitment agencies. Other youth trainees start their training in work placements with an allowance paid by STA. Most gain employment and convert to national traineeships or modern apprenticeships. Trainees are assessed both on and off the job. The self-assessment report did not include strengths and weaknesses which accurately reflect this occupational area. Two strengths were regarded as no more than normal practice. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that given by the company.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good matching of work placements and jobs to NVQ standards
- ◆ frequent assessment opportunities
- ◆ effective action-planning
- ◆ comprehensive recording of assessment observations

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some weak assessment practices
- ◆ inadequate resources
- ◆ some poor achievement and retention rates
- ◆ lack of involvement by employers in reviews

16. STA has well-established relationships with a number of local employers, mainly from the engineering and manufacturing industries. These links are used effectively to provide a variety of relevant work placements and job opportunities for trainees on both youth and adult training programmes. Trainees who are working towards level 3 NVQs are in jobs which involve them in supervisory roles. Some trainees are placed with voluntary organisations and others are working in large national and multinational companies in administrative roles which have the variety and scope for career development. In some cases, assessors

and employers work together to change trainees' job roles to ensure that trainees get to work on a variety of tasks to meet the requirements of their NVQ.

17. A designated assessor, mostly on a weekly or fortnightly basis, visits trainees frequently in the workplace. During these visits, assessors endeavour to speak to the trainees' supervisors to keep them up to date with their progress and also attempt to link the NVQ requirements to the workplace requirements. In addition to the work-based assessor, every trainee is allocated an assessor from STA, who is responsible for assessing them when they attend STA's premises. If one assessor is not available, trainees know how to contact the other. Trainees are invited to attend STA's premises for day-release training sessions on a day which is negotiated between trainees and their employers. Some employed trainees do not take up this option and are trained and assessed only in the workplace. Those who do attend STA's premises receive coaching and use the time to work on their portfolios and broaden their theoretical knowledge. Trainees are also invited to attend a series of specific training workshops such as telephone techniques, customer care and basic word processing. They book themselves onto the workshop they wish to attend and on successful completion receive a certificate, which is used towards their NVQ evidence.

18. Each time trainees meet with their assessors they discuss what they need to achieve within the coming week. This information is recorded in detail on an action/assessment plan in a way that the trainee can understand. The trainee and assessor sign and date the action plan and use it as a checklist for the next meeting. This plan is also used to inform other assessors of the work currently being undertaken.

19. Assessors make good use of observing the performance of trainees in the workplace. Their performance is recorded in detail and gives a very clear picture of the activities they are carrying out at the time. In addition, the assessor also cross-references the observation record to the NVQ standards, accurately covering not only the performance criteria, but also the theoretical understanding which the trainee has demonstrated. A copy is provided for the trainee's portfolio.

20. Some trainees attend STA's premises for a period of time before they become employed or obtain a work placement. During this time, they start work on their chosen NVQ using training materials, exercises and work set by STA's staff. Trainees are given an action plan for the first week, which lists the work they need to complete. In each of the following weeks, assessors work with individual trainees to produce evidence for their NVQ. There are some examples of poor assessment practice. Trainees taking information technology NVQs at level 2 have been assessed on evidence produced only on STA's premises, with little or no use of evidence from the workplace. There are instances of assessors predetermining the evidence to be used towards specific units and of assessors pre-signing and dating units before they have been completed and signed by the trainees. Written theory questions are used to test knowledge but assessors do not always mark or provide trainees with the results of these. Some workplace evidence is assessed on STA's premises and its authenticity is not checked. Most employers are not asked

to produce witness testimonies and trainees do not sign and date their work, or provide an explanation of how it was produced in the context of their job.

21. All administration and information technology training takes place at the company's main West Bromwich site, which was burgled in April 2000 when much of the computing equipment was lost. There are now insufficient computers for trainees. Some of the remaining machines do not currently meet the needs of the trainees attending the premises. The machines available do not use up-to-date operating systems and software packages. This causes problems for trainees when they need to transfer to other machines. In one training room there are no printers, and so trainees have to save their work to disk and move to another room to print it. Trainees are only able to book the use of a computer for an hour and a half at a time during each morning or afternoon session. Trainees undertaking a course in computing find it particularly difficult to prepare for their timed assessment under these conditions. Two members of staff left STA very recently, leaving only one in-house assessor, who is sometimes required to support around 30 trainees, all requiring different types and levels of support. In addition, these trainees are spread across three separate rooms, and although other members of staff may be available occasionally to advise them this is not part of the timetable. In computer training, materials are not provided to meet the individual needs of trainees. All trainees used the same standard worksheets, exercises and workpacks, regardless of the level of the programme or the occupational area they are following.

22. STA records retention and achievement data only for the whole of the business administration occupational area generally and this includes trainees taking additional NVQs in different occupational areas. This makes it difficult to determine trainees' precise levels of achievement on the main NVQ programmes being followed and their individual training plans. However, the company's data indicate that the proportion of trainees remaining on their programmes for 1999-2000 varies from between 60 per cent for modern apprentices to 42 and 43 per cent for youth and national trainees respectively. Over the past three years the highest level of achievement of NVQs at level 2 has been 66 per cent from modern apprentices and those on other training programmes, with an average achievement rate of around 40 per cent of those who started on a training programme.

23. Reviews for each trainee are carried out regularly, between every six weeks and quarterly, meeting contractual requirements. Some reviews are extremely detailed with the NVQ units achieved to date recorded and targets negotiated for the next review period. However, in the majority of cases, the reviews are not used to record progress towards NVQs, or employers and trainees' comments and experiences. The majority of supervisors are not involved in the review meeting. They are not asked to participate in this process, or to sign to say they have read the review form. In one case a trainee had been employed since August 1999 and had been reviewed four times, but none of the reviews had involved the supervisor. The record of the reviews indicated that the trainee was making poor progress but there was no evidence to indicate whether the employer was aware of this problem or that he was aware of his responsibilities in the training process. The training action-plan booklet for adult trainees is poorly designed and there are insufficient

carbon copies to ensure that the employer receives a copy. Furthermore, the back of the review form contains employers and trainees' comments but this side cannot be copied onto the forms provided for the trainees and their supervisors.

Retailing & customer service

Grade 3

24. There are 59 trainees on programmes in retailing, customer service, warehousing and distribution, and fork-truck driving instruction. There are 11 trainees following NVQs at level 2 in retailing, 10 of whom are adults. There are 17 trainees following customer service NVQs at level 2 and 11 at level 3. Eight of these trainees are modern apprentices and three are national trainees. Thirty-one of the trainees are working toward units of the customer service NVQ taking additional units required for modern apprenticeships and national traineeships. There are 12 New Deal clients across retailing, customer service, security and warehousing programmes. Most training is carried out in the workplace. A team of four visiting assessors carries out assessment in the workplace. On these visits trainees are assessed by a mixture of direct observation and the use of portfolio evidence. There are 14 trainees taking NVQ at level 2 or 3 in warehousing, comprising seven adults, three modern apprentices, one national trainee and three other youth trainees. A further six adult trainees are on fork-truck training. Adult trainees on the warehousing programme are working towards NVQs at level 2 in distribution and warehousing operations. Training is provided over a 12-month period, primarily in the workplace, by a member of STA's staff or by a workplace supervisor. Some off-the-job training is provided at STA's premises. A qualified member of STA's staff carries out assessment in the workplace. Placements include a variety of distribution organisations ranging from small employers with five employees to larger employers with over 100. Trainees can also work towards a fork-truck driving licence. Modern apprentices and national trainees are employed, while adult and other youth trainees are not. Fork-truck training takes place at two of STA's training premises. The adult trainees take part in a three-week course. The first week involves induction and an introduction to job-search techniques. The second week is devoted to the theory and practical training required for achieving the fork-truck licence. The third week is used to consolidate the practical training and job search. Eight out of the 52 trainees who started the programme during 1999-2000 acquired a job. During the past four years the average rate of achievement has been 45 per cent for adults and 18 per cent for young people. Out of the 67 trainees who started training during 1999-2000, 11 completed their individual training plans, 37 left without completing their training and 19 remain in training. The self-assessment report included strengths which were considered to be no more than normal practice and others which were more appropriate to generic areas. The self-assessment report concentrated on providing quotes from external verifiers' reports. No significant weaknesses were identified. Inspectors awarded a lower grade than that given by the company.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ extensive use of diverse evidence and assessment methods
- ◆ frequent assessments and action planning
- ◆ well-planned, flexible training to meet trainees' and employers' needs
- ◆ additional qualifications available for warehousing trainees
- ◆ good instruction for trainee fork-truck drivers

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ unsuitable training materials for retail theory work
- ◆ poorly designed programme for trainee fork-truck drivers
- ◆ customer service level 3 NVQ inappropriate for some work placements
- ◆ poor retention and achievement rates

25. Most assessment takes place in the workplace. Assessments are well planned and opportunities are taken to gather evidence from workplace activities as they occur. Where trainees cannot routinely demonstrate competence in a particular activity, plans are drawn up with the workplace supervisor for the trainee to be assessed carrying out the appropriate tasks. For example, in the case of warehousing the receipt of goods may happen during a different shift from the one on which trainees usually work. Arrangements are therefore made for trainees to undertake the tasks associated with the receipt of goods at the relevant time and for the assessor to be present. Trainees collect a diverse range of evidence from their workplace activities and have interesting portfolios, which reflect their individual jobs and abilities. Assessments are carried out frequently, often weekly in retailing and customer service, and normally every two weeks in warehousing. The results of assessment are written up and used to form clear action plans detailing the learning and evidence required for the next assessment.

GOOD PRACTICE

A good system of internal verification has been designed. The system ensures that the verification is continuous, objective and thorough. Every trainee is allocated two internal verifiers and their names are recorded against that of the trainee on a database. One internal verifier is responsible for regular internal verification during the programme. The other is charged with verifying assessments at the end of the process.

26. Training is well planned, with trainers, trainees and workplace supervisors all involved in the process. Trainees who prefer to learn in the workplace have their needs catered for. Where trainees prefer to learn in a group, sessions are planned at STA's premises. Where employers have a number of trainees whose absence would have an adverse effect on the business, training is arranged either in the workplace or on different days of the week. Training at STA's premises involves trainees using written materials or a programme of workshops which concentrate on the common areas of activity within retailing, warehousing and customer service.

27. Trainees working towards NVQs in warehousing are offered additional training leading to a licence in fork-truck driving. Trainees can be trained on two different types of truck, depending on the type used by their employer. Some trainees receive instruction on both. The use of a fork-truck by trainees enables the evidence for the main qualification to be gathered more easily, since many of the competencies in this occupational area relate to this. If a trainee is unable to reach

the level of competence required to pass the fork-truck driving test, further training is offered or their training plan is amended to incorporate a different NVQ unit.

28. Instruction in fork-truck driving is good. A designated area of the West Bromwich engineering site is mainly used for fork-truck driving instruction and there are also facilities at the Cradley Heath engineering premises. Trainees are trained on either a counter-balance or an extended boom or reach truck. The loads used are of different types and weights and are in stacked piles or contained within racks. In addition to the flat-floor area, a ramp on the outside of the building is used to simulate different conditions found in warehouses. Trainees are instructed in groups of three and are encouraged to comment on the driving techniques of their peers. This method of observation ensures that all trainees remain active and that learning is a continuous process. The resources at the Cradley Heath site are satisfactory. However, although the actual training is of a good standard, the overall design of the three-week programme for fork-truck trainees is poor. The first week is disjointed. The first two days concentrate on induction to the programme and a short period of job-search activity, when trainees are helped to prepare a curriculum vitae. The remainder of the week is not planned and trainees are able to continue with job search or are allowed free time away from the company's premises. Nearly 25 per cent of trainees drop out of the course during this early stage. Trainees who remain for the third week of training do not have planned activities to help them to secure employment. They are, however, referred to an external agency for help in undertaking job search. This referral is often not taken up.

29. Trainees who have achieved an NVQ at level 2 in customer service often progress to level 3. However, the roles that some of them then undertake do not involve sufficient supervisory experience to allow them to provide suitable evidence to achieve the level 3 NVQ. Trainees cannot meet the range and depth of evidence required without using simulated evidence.

30. Retail trainees who do not have a placement when they start their training programmes are given work packs to help them to develop their knowledge of the workplace. However, the packs are based on competencies from the distribution and warehousing NVQs. These are confusing for trainees and their supervisors, who are unable to apply the content to their chosen area of work.

31. Retention rates on adult and youth-training programmes are poor. In retailing and warehousing the number of early leavers for the 1999-2000 contract year was over 50 per cent for adults and over 75 per cent for youth trainees. This compares with 25 per cent for both youth and adult programmes for the previous year. The proportion of adult trainees achieving qualifications in retailing and warehousing was 59 per cent in 1998-99. The following year 20 per cent achieved their intended qualification but 40 per cent of trainees are still on programme. The proportion of adults on the fork-truck course who progress into employment is around 7 per cent, a decline from the 10 per cent the previous year.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

32. STA has an equal opportunities policy which was last updated in July 1999. Its policy and procedures are reviewed and updated annually. STA has had an equal opportunities monitoring group since 1993. In 1998 STA revised its policy and introduced new systems to report and monitor statistical data. The number of members of the monitoring group was increased to take into account the new structure and to allow for representatives drawn from external agencies and employers. A senior manager of STA acts as the equal opportunities co-ordinator and leads the monitoring group. STA is also a member of a local employers' network, which aims to increase employers' awareness of the requirements of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1995*. The organisation has procedures for the recruitment and selection of staff and trainees. Employers are provided with a copy of STA's equal opportunities policy and sign an agreement to use this policy, or their own if it is better. The 1991 census showed that the proportion of minority ethnic groups in Sandwell had risen from 11 to 15 per cent since 1981. The equal opportunities group has produced a detailed annual action plan. This was not linked to the self-assessment report and its associated action plan. The self-assessment report did not include any strengths or weaknesses. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that given by the company.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ detailed monitoring and analysis of equal opportunities data
- ◆ effective action-planning in equal opportunities
- ◆ positive action taken to address identified issues

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no use of marketing material to promote equal opportunities
- ◆ no monitoring or reinforcing of trainees' awareness of equal opportunities

33. The equal opportunities monitoring group meets every three months. The equal opportunities co-ordinator for STA reports on all relevant statistical data for the different programmes. A detailed analysis is provided of those gaining NVQs and employment according to ethnicity, gender, and disability. Details on those referred to STA are also analysed to identify where to target recruitment activity. The data are extracted both from internal management information systems and from external information. Information is monitored against the contract, and the Employment Service and TEC's requirements and also against local labour market and community needs. It is linked to the company's business-planning through its marketing plan. The data are discussed and action to address issues is clearly recorded with set timescales. The group keeps up to date with all relevant issues and sends its members for training. Recently two members attended training on

awareness of harassment and bullying in the workplace. This has prompted the group to update its equal opportunities policy to include this subject.

34. Over the last three years the equal opportunities co-ordinator has developed an annual action plan, which was based originally on the *Disability Discrimination Act 1995* but which has now been extended to include all aspects of equal opportunities within the organisation. The action plan identifies specific issues to target, which reflect issues raised by the monitoring group. The actions are broken down into activities and target dates are set. Clear responsibility is given to individuals to undertake specific tasks, such as conducting advertising campaigns or producing mail shots aimed at particular groups. Each action is reviewed by the monitoring group and results of actions taken recorded on the plan. Where targets have not been met, further action is discussed and recorded in the plan to ensure that equal opportunities arrangements are subject to continuous improvement. There is access to all sites for those with mobility difficulties.

35. The minutes of the monitoring group's meetings are circulated to all training managers. The equal opportunities co-ordinator meets with each manager to discuss the actions which each department is to be responsible for. These actions are then shared with members of each department by their managers, either during team meetings or at internal verifiers/assessors' meetings. Each team member knows his or her role in relation to STA's objectives. Work-placement officers record all interviews undertaken with trainees and analyse the information to identify trends, for example in the proportion of male trainees or those from minority ethnic groups being interviewed. Assessors are currently talking to employers to raise their awareness about the benefits of employing people with disabilities and those from minority ethnic groups. The equal opportunities co-ordinator monitors the success of these actions. STA checks employers' equal opportunities practices in the workplace when it initially vets the work placements and at an annual review.

36. Trainees receive a copy of STA's equal opportunities statement during their induction. It refers to the company's policy and its position on related issues. Equal opportunities is referred to in the trainees' NVQ appeals procedure and the induction includes a short discussion on trainees' rights, expectations and responsibilities within the workplace and the scope of current legislation. A clearly written complaints procedure is issued to all trainees. All complaints received are addressed promptly by the equal opportunities co-ordinator and are either resolved or, in some cases, withdrawn by the trainee after further investigation has clarified the situation to the trainee's satisfaction. Most trainees remember the main points of equal opportunities. However, there is no attempt to reinforce the trainees' knowledge or understanding of equal opportunities during their training programme. There are references to health and safety on a number of checklists and questionnaires, but there are no references to equal opportunities. Trainees' understanding of this area is not monitored.

37. STA uses promotional leaflets for every occupational area it offers. It does not, however, promote its commitment to equal opportunities other than the fact that it

is an equal opportunities employer. STA is a member of a local training providers' network, which has good links with the Asian community and local women's groups and it offers training to suit their specific needs. However, it does not attempt to use its advertisements or marketing materials to target minority ethnic groups or to avoid images which reflect traditional stereotypes of people in jobs. The organisation works closely with a number of local businesses which are extremely active in their approach to equal opportunities. These contacts are not, however, used by STA to enhance its own activities or to promote different approaches to equal opportunities issues. Currently, the company is working with nine local schools providing help with their GNVQ programmes in engineering in an attempt to promote engineering more widely. Three female engineering trainees at STA have won prestigious awards but the company has not used these successes to promote the recruitment of women into engineering

Trainee support

Grade 3

38. Trainees are recruited through the local careers service by employers and by STA's placement officers. STA holds an open recruitment session each Friday afternoon for young people and each Wednesday afternoon for adults. During these sessions, trainees are given information about STA and the programmes available to them. They also undertake an initial assessment at this stage. Until recently this was an internally devised assessment but now nationally recognised basic skills tests are used. There are a series of induction sessions for young people which last between five and six days, taking place between July and September. The induction follows a set programme and involves the majority of assessors and placement staff. For young people starting at other times throughout the year, a separate induction is arranged or they are accommodated within the induction for adult trainees. Induction for adult trainees is arranged throughout the year as required. They follow a less formal structure than that for young people but still require a period of five days. As part of the induction, some trainees undertake an assessment in key skills. Trainees already in employment do not take the assessment in key skills but complete a 'skills scan' covering each of the key skills units. A high proportion of staff hold qualifications in advising on the use of prior learning and achievement. The self-assessment report included no strengths and one weakness, which inspectors agreed with. Inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses and awarded the same grade as that given by STA.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good additional support for individual trainees
- ◆ effective system for referring trainees to external agencies

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no systematic initial assessment

- ◆ no accreditation of trainees' prior experience and achievements
- ◆ uninteresting induction

39. Trainees benefit from a high level of individual support. For example, STA has supplied a number of specialist chairs for those with back problems and the services of a signer for a trainee with a hearing impairment. Special safety boots were purchased for a trainee suffering from a leg and foot injury when conventional safety boots did not provide the required level of support. STA responds rapidly to concerns raised by trainees, which have involved changes in placement and amendments to their programme, including changing the day of training sessions. Staff take swift action to ensure that trainees receive appropriate support and training when necessary. This has included employing a subcontractor to provide numeracy training when a trainee was identified by STA as having difficulties with her theoretical training. Following the training, the trainee was able to deal with the difficulties she was facing and successfully complete her training.

40. A member of STA's staff has responsibility for trainee support and maintains a register of external agencies. These agencies are able to provide specialist information and advice that may be required by trainees. A small library of information is maintained, with additional information being obtained as required. The member of staff acts as a contact point for this service, which has been developed over the past five years. All trainees are aware of the service and a log is kept of those who access it. The service is discreet and effectively managed and provides trainees with good counselling and relevant guidance and advice. The staff development plan for 2000-01 has identified the need to develop better counselling skills in some members of staff as part of a TEC contractual requirement. Trainees reviews are carried out regularly to contractual requirements and are of a satisfactory standard.

41. There is no systematic initial assessment of trainees across all training programmes. Those trainees who attend the initial recruitment sessions sit a basic skills test. This is followed by a key skills assessment as part of the induction process. However, some trainees are not given a key skills assessment. Those trainees who are employed at the time they begin their training do not receive any initial assessment of their basic or key skills. Trainees complete a 'skills scan' document which sets out their own perception of their level of skills. Although the trainee's supervisor should confirm the results, this does not always happen. STA works with a local college in sharing key skills resources and is currently setting up a basic skills unit, which will be used to identify and address any trainees' deficiencies in basic skills.

42. In spite of a number of staff having achieved the appropriate qualification to act as an advisor, there is little accreditation of trainees' prior learning and achievements. Where skills and experience are accredited they are not always matched to the NVQ standards to ensure that trainees have the relevant

competence and theoretical understanding. Some evidence is cross-referenced from a qualification at one level to the next. However, trainees with relevant qualifications or appropriate occupational experience are not given any credit for having them.

43. Trainees' induction sessions are not sufficiently stimulating. Some sessions, for instance, those which allow trainees to use a telephone system, manage to capture their interest and keep them involved. However, other sessions are dominated by trainers and do not sufficiently involve or interest the trainees. Trainees find induction dull and reminiscent of the school classroom sessions which they thought they had left behind.

44. Individual training plans are produced in a standard format in order to meet the administrative needs of the TEC. The plans are not adapted as trainees progress through their NVQs. Some amendments are recorded on the documents used in trainees' reviews. Individual training plans do not always clearly identify the framework which the trainees are working towards and sometimes do not make clear the primary qualification being undertaken.

45. STA uses an action-plan booklet which contains all of the initial and review forms used by and with trainees. In the young person's booklet there are copies of the review forms available for distribution to the trainee and the employer. The adults' booklet, however, contains only one copy for distribution. Both versions allow for a carbonised copy to be made only of the front page. The back page, which contains comments from the trainee and the employer, along with their signatures, is not copied and copies are not provided for them.

46. Job-search workshops are held at the company's main West Bromwich site, every Friday morning. All trainees are able to take part, but only adult trainees usually attend them. Trainees mainly work through materials on their own, although staff are available to respond to requests for help and guidance. There are some set activities, such as the use of current local job vacancies and research visits to the local job centre.

Management of training

Grade 3

47. STA is an employer-led organisation governed by a council of management consisting of 10 employers' representatives from member companies. The association was first formed in 1963 as a joint venture between a number of local engineering companies. STA has undergone significant changes over the past two years, including taking over another training provider and its staff and closing one of its own sites. The management structure consists of a chief executive who reports to the council of management, an operations manager, one training manager and the technical services manager, all of whom report directly to the chief executive. The training manager is responsible for business administration and retailing and customer services, and operates from the head-office site. The operations manager is responsible for two engineering sites, which have their own

training managers. There are 37 staff based across the four STA sites. Work-based training takes place on three sites, one in Cradley Heath and two in West Bromwich. All of the occupational areas have teams of tutors and assessors but there are only two placement officers; one for business administration, retailing and customer service; and another for engineering. STA's fourth site is mainly used for commercial training for group members and other companies. Targets for STA are negotiated with the local TEC. Each training department prepares information based on past performance and future expectations. This information is brought together and submitted to the TEC. Where the expected performance and the contract vary, the two profiles are prepared and are monitored. The company's council meets every six weeks and managers meet every month to consider the performance of the programmes against the targets in the contract with the TEC. Full staff meetings are held monthly. All staff have a job description which links to the company's business and operations plans. Staff appraisals are carried out annually. STA was awarded the Investors in People Standard in 1997 and was successfully re-assessed in June 2000. Two local colleges provide off-the-job training for level 3 engineers. A private training company and a number of driving schools are used for a small proportion of training. The self-assessment report referred to staff's involvement in business and operational plans as a strength, and inspectors agreed that this was a strength. A further strength identified in the report was considered to be no more than normal practice. No significant weaknesses were identified in the self-assessment report. Inspectors identified weaknesses and other strengths. A lower grade was awarded than that given by the company.

GOOD PRACTICE

In the administration department, staff receive bonus points for undertaking their key tasks to a high standard. There is a monthly and annual competition to see who has received the most points during the period. Small, but interesting prizes are awarded to those who have most points. This system promotes a lively sense of open competition and recognition of the contribution of individual members of staff to the work of the team.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ influential strategic links with external organisations
- ◆ good staff-development programme
- ◆ good response to local community and individual's training needs

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no sharing of good practice
- ◆ inadequate key skills training and assessment

48. STA's staff have excellent, well-established external contacts which it uses to keep up to date with information on training and employment and to secure work placement for trainees. Some are members of local chambers of commerce, the Confederation of British Industry, a local supplier group and a sub-regional training providers' network. A senior member of staff chairs a regional providers' forum. These extensive links create excellent networking activities with appropriate agencies and local government and enable STA to make full use of local and regional labour market knowledge. It can then form an appropriate strategic plan for the company.

49. The company has a staff appraisal system which is linked to a staff development programme. It is aimed mainly at ensuring the appropriateness of the occupational qualifications of staff. The appraisal system provides a clear link between the personal development plans of staff and the annual business and operational plans of the company. Most staff are undertaking further information technology training over the next year and this is clearly linked to the objective of improved performance. All staff are involved in negotiating realistic and measurable targets against which their performance will be monitored. For example, the number of new trainees to be recruited is agreed with appropriate staff. Trainers agree the number of qualifications that will be achieved during the annual contract and the monthly monitoring periods.

50. The training needs of the local community and individuals are taken into account during the annual round of business planning. The adult programme responds directly to labour market needs and the aspirations of individuals. Considerable care and attention is paid to ensuring that adult trainees are provided with training in areas in which they are interested and which may lead to jobs. This includes a number of specialised courses including security dog handling, transporting hazardous goods, approved codes of practice for gas fitters, approved driving instructor, power press, and fork-truck driving licences.

51. Departmental, management and staff meetings are held regularly. They are focused on reviewing and meeting the requirements of the TEC contract. Training managers have a high level of autonomy and tend to work in isolation from each other rather than ensuring that good practice and approaches are shared between occupational areas and departments. For example, fork-truck training is provided on two different sites which operate independently of each other. The two fork-truck trainers do not know how the other site functions and they have no information about each other's operations, systems and methods. Staff do not know how their programmes compare with those offered at the other site. Within engineering, for example, there are good and poor examples of assessments. However, there is no system for sharing ideas, methods and approaches between trainers or between teams within departments. Different approaches have been adopted towards internal verification and reviews, both between and within departments. This leads to variations in approach and little sharing of good practice.

52. Trainees have been required to gain key skills qualifications as part of the modern apprentice framework for the past five years. However, STA has only recently made progress in providing key skills training and assessment for its modern apprentices and national trainees. In some areas, learning materials in key skills have been issued recently to trainees, but no training or assessment has taken place. Some trainees who have been on courses for longer than six months have not had their key skills assessed. Many who started their programme less than six months ago have a poor understanding of what key skills are, or the way in which they contribute to trainees' qualifications.

53. The main focus of STA's quality assurance and management activities has

been to meet the requirements of its TEC contract. A major aspect of this is to ensure that the company meets the levels of achievement of qualifications specified in the profile negotiated with the TEC. However, this profile does not set out the level of performance for each individual programme. Although the company's managers have been aware of the low achievement and retention rates for some time and have identified some of the reasons for it, such as company closures or redundancy in the immediate area, no systematic action has been taken to address these issues. The company has access to data through a computerised management information system but it does not sufficiently analyse its data to set targets.

Quality assurance

Grade 4

54. STA meets the quality assurance requirements of the TEC and the awarding bodies with which it works. The technical services manager has the major responsibility for the organisation's quality assurance arrangements. He is responsible for maintaining and updating STA's policies and procedures, analysing the responses of trainees and employers to questionnaires and managing the self-assessment process and use of data. The operations manager and the training managers on the three sites where work-based training is provided also have a responsibility for the quality assurance of training programmes. Two surveys of the views of each intake of trainees are undertaken. One is carried out three months after trainees have started their programme and the other when they have completed it. Inspectors regarded two of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report as being no more than normal practice but agreed with the one weakness identified. An additional strength and further weaknesses were identified. The grade awarded was lower than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-written and -evaluated policies and procedures

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no overall quality assurance plan
- ◆ poor internal verification practice
- ◆ no extension of quality assurance arrangements to all subcontractors
- ◆ no use of statistical data to make continuous improvements

55. STA's policies and procedures cover the key aspects of its operations. They are well written and staff find them easy to apply. They are flexible enough to allow different departments to use them in the most appropriate way. The procedures are regularly evaluated to ensure that they are continuing to meet the

requirements of the organisation and can be applied appropriately by the staff. The procedures used to be audited once every two months by externally trained internal auditors but this period has now been extended to every three months. Any non-compliance is recorded and discussed at the monthly management meetings. It is then left to the relevant manager to address the issues with their staff but there is no system to ensure that remedial action is taken except when further internal audits identify continuing problems in the same area.

56. The organisation has a number of quality assurance arrangements and different managers have produced a number of initiatives. The initiatives have included one training manager observing her staff providing training. She then provided them with feedback on their performance. However, other departments do not use this system and the results are not recorded in a way which could identify trends and developments within the company. STA has no single strategy to link quality assurance objectives, nor any plan to ensure that when problems are identified they are addressed in a systematic way. The self-assessment process has not been defined or incorporated in any quality assurance arrangements and it remains an isolated operation. Although staff are encouraged to participate in quality assurance activities, they are not always directly involved in the process. Two annual self-assessment reports had been produced with six-monthly updates and amendments to the resulting action plans. However, the reports are not linked to the company's business plan or to other action plans and quality assurance arrangements, such as those produced by the equal opportunities monitoring group. The equal opportunities policy and procedures do include the use of the annual action plan but the quality assurance manual does not refer to self-assessment. Although the results of the two questionnaires which trainees complete after three months and when they leave their programme are analysed and presented to the management team, no action is taken to follow up or address points identified as requiring attention. Similarly, employers' responses to questionnaires are analysed but there is no system for addressing the issues identified, such as the extent of employers' understanding of NVQs and a lack of information being provided to them by the company. Different departments have adopted different internal verification systems and there is no overall policy or consistent approach.

57. In two occupational areas, internal verification practices are poor. For example, in engineering, internal verification is conducted only when trainees have completed their qualification. This cannot then be used to support assessors in their work and to advise them about good or poor practice as trainees progress. There are a number of examples of poor assessment practice in business administration, which the internal verification system has not addressed. The system itself is well designed but it is not used in an effective way in all areas.

58. STA does not have appropriate agreements with all of its subcontractors. In the area of training in security methods it has a comprehensive contract, which specifies the responsibility of the subcontractor and the training programme that will be followed. STA gives a work-placement agreement to some of its subcontractors. However, in the case of companies providing driver training, including heavy goods and passenger carrying vehicle licences and approved

driving instructor training, there are no arrangements for the level of training to be specified or monitored. The manager responsible for this area takes a keen interest in the progress of trainees and displays a good understanding of how different companies provide effective training. However, this is based on his initiative rather than a clearly defined process. Similarly, in the case of trainees who receive their theory training in further education colleges, STA has no agreements to determine the level of service expected. The trainees' employers pay for their off-the-job training in this instance but STA does not advise or guide them as to the levels of support and monitoring they should expect trainees to receive from the colleges. This has resulted in marked differences in the support provided by the same college to trainees from different employers. One employer receives a telephone call on the same day if a trainee misses a class while another receives promised monthly progress reports only every quarter. One employer, having received insufficient information on a regular basis about his trainees at one college, moved them to another college. However, other employers have experienced the same problems with this college.