



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT DECEMBER 2000

Busy Bees Childcare Limited

SUMMARY

Busy Bees Childcare Limited provide good training in early-years care and education. Off-the-job training is good and key skills are well integrated into the NVQ. The training in customer service is satisfactory at this early stage of its development. Equal opportunities, management of training and quality assurance are good. There are excellent systems and procedures to protect trainees' rights and training is rigorously monitored and quality assured. Not all sites are yet using the company's new systems. Trainee support is satisfactory. Retention rates are high. However, trainees do not receive a formal initial assessment and trainees' progress reviews are incomplete.

GRADES

| OCCUPATIONAL AREAS | GRADE |
|--------------------------------|-------|
| Retailing & customer service | 3 |
| Health, care & public services | 2 |

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

KEY STRENGTHS

- ♦ good off-the-job training
- ♦ good integration of key skills with NVQ
- ♦ thorough and systematic equal opportunities systems and procedures
- ♦ high retention rates
- ♦ thorough and detailed procedures for staff and trainees' selection and recruitment
- ♦ excellent staff appraisal and development opportunities
- ♦ rigorous monitoring of training and assessment
- ♦ thorough and detailed quality assurance procedures

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ♦ slow progress for some trainees
- ♦ no formal initial assessment
- ♦ incomplete reviews of trainees' progress
- ♦ not all sites using new systems

INTRODUCTION

1. Busy Bees Childcare Limited (Busy Bees) is a nationwide provider of childcare, operating in a variety of settings ranging from work-based nurseries in partnership with large retail outlets, universities, government agencies and car manufacturers to community-based provision accessible to local families. The company was established in 1984, initially in response to the childcare needs of the company's directors. The company has expanded and now owns and manages a total of 43 childcare facilities. The company employs 59 staff at its head offices in Lichfield and 840 staff in its nurseries.

2. The company holds a contract with Wiltshire and Swindon Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), which is the co-ordinating TEC for a wide range of TECs funding Busy Bees' trainees. There are contracts with North London, Birmingham and Solihull, Merseyside and Southeast Wales TECs. The contracts are to provide advanced modern apprenticeships involving NVQs in early-years care and education at levels 2, 3 and 4, in customer service at levels 2 and 3 and playwork at levels 2 and 3, and key skills at levels 1, 2, 3, and 4. The company also has one New Deal client on the employment option and contracts directly with the Employment Service in Birmingham and Solihull. Busy Bees currently has a large number of privately funded trainees and 78 trainees on government-funded programmes. Busy Bees is an approved assessment centre for two awarding bodies. The company obtained centre approval in July 2000 for early-years care and education and in August 2000 for customer service. Before this, all training and assessment were contracted through a local further education college and all contracts for TEC-funded trainees were locally negotiated. All government-funded trainees are advanced modern apprentices. Fifty-eight are taking NVQs in early-years care and education. Nine are at level 2, 44 at level 3 and five about to start at level 4. Three are taking NVQs in playwork, two at level 2 and one at level 3. Seventeen are taking NVQs in customer service, one at level 2 and 16 at level 3. Owing to the low numbers of trainees, playwork has not been reported on in this inspection.

3. Of all trainees, 8 per cent are from minority ethnic communities, 1.33 per cent are men, 1.33 per cent are registered disabled and 6 per cent have special learning needs. In 2000, the proportion of young people in the Busy Bees operational areas with five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C or above, is as follows: Finchley, London 57.5 per cent; Hampshire 54.9 per cent; Wiltshire 55.5 per cent; Liverpool 35.3 per cent; Tower Hamlets, London 32.7 per cent; Enfield, London 46.1 per cent. In Blackburn it is 40 per cent; Birmingham 40.8 per cent; Solihull 55.1 per cent; Staffordshire 48.1 per cent; Wolverhampton 38.7 per cent; Nottingham 28.7 per cent; Oxford 50.3 per cent; Ealing, London 46.1 per cent; and Essex 50.8 per cent. The national average is 49.2 per cent.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

4. Busy Bees produced its first self-assessment report and accompanying action plan in June 2000. They were revised in August 2000 when Busy Bees became aware of its forthcoming inspection. The quality assurance co-ordinator attended two training days organised by the TEC and organised internal assessment according to the quality statements in *Raising the Standard*. Four members of staff contributed to the report and early consultation took place with assessors, internal verifiers and nursery managers. Views were also sought from a small group of trainees. The report included useful information about the various facilities which Busy Bees owns and manages and how training is arranged. It identified strengths and weaknesses in each occupational area and each of the generic areas. However, the report lacked detail about training arrangements and did not include local labour market information. Most grades given by Busy Bees had improved owing to the effective implementation of its action plan.

5. A team of five inspectors spent a combined total of 22 days at Busy Bees in December 2000. They interviewed a total of 32 trainees. They visited 16 work placements and conducted 13 interviews with workplace supervisors and nine work-based assessors and internal verifiers. They conducted 12 interviews with Busy Bees' head office staff and examined trainees' files and portfolios of NVQ evidence. They looked at trainees' records, policies and procedures, minutes of meetings, assessment and verification records, records of feedback from trainees and management information. They observed and graded two training sessions, observed one progress review and observed three assessment sessions.

Grades awarded to instruction sessions

| | GRADE 1 | GRADE 2 | GRADE 3 | GRADE 4 | GRADE 5 | TOTAL |
|--------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Retailing & customer service | | | | | | |
| Health, care & public services | 1 | | 1 | | | 2 |
| Total | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 |

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Retailing & customer service

Grade 3

6. The company has 17 trainees in the occupational area working towards customer service NVQs at levels 2 and 3. All the trainees are employed by Busy Bees and work in the childcare facilities used by the company. All are advanced modern apprentices. All the training for the customer service NVQs takes place in the workplace, with off-the-job training for key skills. Assessors visit trainees every two weeks, on average, when assessment plans are produced, observations

take place and tasks to be completed before the next visit are identified. Tasks identified at the previous visit are also checked for relevance and accuracy. In addition, a monitoring officer also visits the work placement every 12 weeks to carry out the review required by the TEC and to ensure that each trainee sees another member of staff for additional support. An additional review takes place halfway between the 12-weekly review visits, in the form of a postal questionnaire. Trainees are required to complete a review sheet and send it back to the administration centre. Assessors and the monitoring officer are all trained and occupationally competent to carry out assessments and reviews. Busy Bees began training in this occupational area in August 2000 and therefore there are no achievement rates and there have been no early leavers. The self-assessment report identified one strength, in relation to staff on the scheme meeting regularly to share ideas and design new resources, which is considered normal practice. The weakness stating that trainees have only recently started was not considered to be a weakness by inspectors. Inspectors agreed with the other weakness. Inspectors identified an additional strength and the grade awarded is the same as that given by Busy Bees in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ frequent and effective NVQ action-planning

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of preparation for new qualification

7. When trainees are signed up, they are immediately given tasks to complete in order to begin building a portfolio of evidence. These tasks are routinely carried out and easy to achieve but have the effect of motivating the trainees by demonstrating that evidence collection is well within their grasp. On the next visit, this evidence is examined and agreed on, if appropriate, and more tasks are set. Trainees who have been on the programme for only three weeks already have a considerable amount of paper evidence towards their portfolio. Assessors also begin to make observations early on in the assessment process, using naturally occurring opportunities. Although the trainees have been working towards their qualifications for a relatively short time they have all made significantly more progress than is normal for that length of time.

8. Busy Bees has only recently started to offer customer service qualifications and did not prepare the infrastructure of assessors, internal verifiers and quality assurance arrangements in advance. Occupationally competent assessors and internal verifiers are now providing an excellent service but they were taken on after the trainees were identified and signed up. Internal verification procedures are now established but at the time of the inspection no verification had taken place.

9. When Busy Bees started customer service training it had no training resources in the form of printed material or documents. One assessor has produced some good training materials and although these have been discussed with individual assessors they are not, as a matter of course, made available to other assessors. These training materials are not subject to any quality assurance arrangements and at present there are no procedures for rectifying this.

10. Assessment decisions are satisfactory but a number of differences in practice between assessors were observed. Assessors disagree about the completion of evidence matrices, the use of simulations and the content of the modern apprenticeship programme. Assessors are located in different regions and are a long way apart geographically. This has adversely influenced the sharing of good practice. Procedures now exist for assessors and verifiers to meet every three months.

Health, care & public services

Grade 2

11. The company has 58 trainees undertaking NVQs in early-years care and education, all of whom are advanced modern apprentices, and one New Deal client on the employment option. All trainees are employed. Trainees work towards NVQs at levels 2, 3 and 4 in early-years care and education and key skills at level 2. Busy Bees manages and owns 43 childcare establishments across the country. These include work-based nurseries in partnership with large retail outlets, car manufacturers, colleges and government agencies. A programme of off-the-job training sessions is offered to trainees and other employees of Busy Bees. All Busy Bees' assessors, verifiers and training staff are qualified and occupationally experienced. All assessment takes place in the workplace. The company was approved as an assessment centre by the appropriate awarding bodies in July 2000. Before that, the responsibility for the NVQ programmes, training and assessment lay with a local further education college. The self-assessment report identified a strength relating to assessors, mentors and trainees working as a team, which was considered normal practice. Two strengths identified in the self-assessment report, the rigour of assessment practice and the high quality of trainees' portfolios of evidence, were not agreed with by inspectors. The support given to trainees by workplace mentors was considered more appropriate to the generic area of trainee support. The company has taken action on the weakness relating to the support and feedback to assessors by internal verifiers and inspectors did not agree that those issues were now weaknesses. Nor did they agree with the weakness relating to the poor achievement rate and lack of integration of key skills with the NVQ, since the company has taken steps to rectify it. Inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses. The grade given by inspectors was higher than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good integration of key skills with NVQ work
- ◆ good off-the-job training
- ◆ well co-ordinated on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ good, clear and well-used information guides for trainees and assessors

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ slow progress for some trainees
- ◆ few resources available for learning theory

12. Assessment relates clearly to key skills units. Trainees are very aware of key skills and understand them as part of the modern apprenticeship framework. They recognise the link to the NVQ and are able to fit them into an activity. For example the project on communication is able to cover information technology, application of number, working with others and improving own learning and performance. Assessors are confident about assessing key skills and cross-referencing them to the NVQ. Staff have benefited from recent training.

13. The training is planned, recorded and taught effectively. The company provides in-house training for all employees, including trainees. The in-house training has recently been linked to the NVQ standards to support the training in theory. Assessment is planned with frequent observations of trainees' practice. Assessors give feedback to trainees both orally and in writing. Assessment practice is rigorous and well recorded. The observed training session on key skills was extremely good. The premises and resources available for off-the-job training are good. Participants are very positive about their off-the-job training experiences. Good practical activities are used to encourage trainees' engagement in training. The electronic presentations are effective and professional. The opportunities for in-house training are extremely good. The company is committed to training. This is evident through the staff appraisal system and the development of personal learning portfolios for each member of staff. All staff who attended the training are very positive about what they have learned.

14. The co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training is good. As the company is both the training provider and employer there is a real benefit to the organisation in having competent and well-trained staff. The company invests in its staff. The focus on good childcare recognises the need for well-trained staff to ensure that they have the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to work effectively with children and their families. Trainees benefit from their experiences in nurseries. Trainees are able to work with children of all ages to meet the requirements of the NVQ. Those trainees undertaking NVQs at level 3 have work-based mentors who are able to direct the work of team members and demonstrate leadership skills. Mentors, assessors and trainees work well together and all parties are aware of progress and achievement. Trainees have a good understanding of their NVQ and

the assessment process. They speak confidently about the standards required and the types of work they are involved in, and are able to give feedback to assessors about the assessment process on a six-weekly basis.

15. Information guides for assessors and trainees are good, clear and well used. The information is simply written, free from jargon and practically based. These guides are well controlled, with issue dates and filing references. The guides state clearly how they should be used. In addition, there are practice guides for activities in the nurseries and extensive policies and procedures available at each nursery. These are well used by trainees and help them understand Busy Bees' childcare practices.

16. The slow progress of trainees was identified in the self-assessment report. Some trainees who started their training in 1998 are only now completing their qualification. The slow progress is partially a result of the transfer of responsibility for training and assessment from a further education college to the company itself. New trainees are progressing more rapidly. Trainees who experienced delays are given more attention and frequent access to assessment to help them catch up. Trainees are satisfied with the new arrangements and the focus on better collection of evidence and assessment practice.

17. There are few books, videos and other learning materials to support trainees in developing an understanding of the theory behind their practice. The nurseries themselves have a full collection of Busy Bees' policies and procedures and the well-qualified and experienced staff are a good resource for trainees. However, the resources to support trainees in understanding theory do not offer a broad background to help trainees understand differing practices, especially for those about to start their NVQ at level 4.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 2

18. Busy Bees has an equal opportunities policy and procedures which are shared with all trainees during induction. These are also part of the nurseries' collection of policies and procedures, which are regularly reviewed and updated. The company's nurseries serve differing catchment areas across the country. Some nurseries are in city centres and others are in towns and suburban districts. Children from a range of cultural and religious groups are cared for by the company's staff. The company's mission statement commits it to promoting equal opportunities throughout the organisation. The self-assessment report stated that equal opportunities is consistently monitored. Inspectors agreed that this is a strength of the company, and found further strengths. The self-assessment report identified the uneven balance between men and women as a weakness. However, this is common in the occupational area, and the company has taken steps to try to recruit more men. Inspectors did not agree with this weakness. A different

weakness was identified. Inspectors awarded a higher grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ thorough and systematic equal opportunities systems and procedures
- ◆ good promotion of equal opportunities
- ◆ excellent response to complaints

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ poor recall by some trainees of equal opportunities procedures

19. There are well-written procedures for the selection and recruitment of staff. The company's staffing manual gives guidance about the clearly structured selection procedure, which is designed to ensure equal opportunities. Applications are monitored to record the success of different ethnic groups. The training manual states that once appointed every member of staff has equal rights to training. Staff report that they have easy access to training, and are given incentives to join training sessions. The equal opportunities policy is reviewed regularly by all staff. This is part of a rolling programme of meetings to discuss company policies and procedures. Staff sign to show that they have taken part in the discussions. An annual questionnaire assesses staff's understanding of the equal opportunities and harassment policies. It invites them to outline any issues which have arisen at work. The personnel department analyses the answers, acts as necessary on any information given, and produces a report to summarise the findings.

20. Photographs of staff and children from a range of ethnic and cultural groups are used to promote the company in local and national newspapers, and at employment and training fairs. Similar photographs are displayed in the nurseries and at the head office. Application forms and parents' handbooks are available in Punjabi, and signs in the nurseries are translated into local community languages. The appointment of staff reflects the cultural mix of the children in the nurseries. The job specifications for nursery nurses and nursery assistants include the desirability of speaking languages spoken by the client group. Staff from specific cultural groups are able to speak to the children in their first languages. A specially produced multicultural activities handbook suggests good ideas to support the celebration of a wide range of cultures and festivals. The company is working to remedy the gender imbalance among staff by publishing reports of the workplace experiences of men. It is positive about employing people with disabilities, and provides materials to support them in their work. During a training session, the whole group was supplied with large-print materials to prevent a trainee with impaired vision being disadvantaged.

21. Complaints against a member of staff, which included issues of harassment, were thoroughly investigated by the personnel department. Staff were interviewed,

and disciplinary action was taken. The company led team-building workshops to help repair the damage done to morale, and then encouraged staff to continue the process by themselves. Early-years care and education trainees have a good understanding of the complaints procedure, and are sufficiently confident to use the six-weekly written evaluations to identify weaknesses in their training. The company takes notice of matters brought to its attention, and responds effectively to remedy any causes for complaint.

22. Some customer service trainees have a poor recall of equal opportunities procedures. They have not yet been given their NVQ handbooks, which contain easily understandable versions of the company's policies. Equal opportunities systems, the complaints procedure, and the harassment policy were explained orally at induction. However, these trainees are unclear about the steps they would take if an issue arose in their own workplace.

Trainee support

Grade 3

23. All trainees at Busy Bees are employees of the company. The company uses a thorough interviewing procedure when recruiting new staff. In literature sent out with application forms for employment, a brief summary of why working for Busy Bees is good includes a statement that training opportunities are available. All employees attend an induction training day, which supports the formal induction to the workplace. Trainees receive training on the NVQ process before they start their training programmes. This is supported by a handbook explaining the terms of the training and the NVQ process, which is given to each trainee. Staff from the training department carry out 12-weekly reviews to assess trainees' progress. There are also six-weekly postal questionnaires to monitor the candidates' training experience. Advanced modern apprentices who successfully complete their qualification remain with the company. Many trainees undertake further training.

24. The self-assessment report identified two strengths and two weaknesses. Inspectors found more significant strengths. The self-assessment report did not identify any of the weaknesses found by the inspectors. The grade given by the inspectors is the same as that given by Busy Bees in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ high retention rates
- ◆ good access to additional training
- ◆ comprehensive package of staff benefits
- ◆ good incentives to complete training

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no formal initial assessment
- ◆ no updating of individual training plans
- ◆ incomplete reviews of trainees' progress
- ◆ insufficient accreditation of prior learning

GOOD PRACTICE

Each member of staff is provided with a personal learning portfolio and given instruction on its use. It encourages systematic recording of individuals' training achievements. One section encourages reflection on work practice.

25. Of the 103 trainees who started training in 1999 and 2000, 20 were early leavers. This represents a retention rate of 80.5 per cent. Data on the early leavers indicate that nine trainees left the company without giving a reason.

26. Busy Bees provides access for all staff to a wide range of training. The training policy states that the company is committed to providing relevant training for all of its staff. Trainees have access to this training, which covers topics such as timetable planning, children's rights and behaviour management. Some of the courses are designed specifically to fit the requirements of the NVQ. Most of these courses are run on Saturdays, to enable trainees to attend the courses. Expenses are paid to staff who attend the courses, free transport is arranged if necessary, and time off in lieu is given if staff attend more than two training sessions in a year. Monthly staff meetings in the nurseries provide an opportunity for updating knowledge and teaching on relevant topics.

27. The company provides its staff with a package of benefits, which includes private health care. Corporate childcare vouchers are available to staff. Busy Bees has been able to help trainees by providing childcare places for their children. It has also provided support to staff experiencing housing problems, by making company accommodation available for a short time.

28. By celebrating and publicising trainees' success Busy Bees actively encourages trainees to complete their training. The company recognises the achievements of trainees at award ceremonies. Articles to publicise trainees' success appear in the publications produced by the company and in the local press. One publication provides information on various aspects of available training as well as on achievements, and the fortnightly publication *Beeline* frequently includes articles which highlight the benefits of training.

29. Some financial incentives have been introduced, based on either completion of units or completion of the whole qualification. These incentives are not available in all workplaces because of the contractual arrangements for managed units.

30. Busy Bees conducts no formal initial assessment of occupational skills, knowledge and suitability of the training for the new trainee. There is no exploration of the trainee's preferred learning style, resulting in assessors spending extra time and in inappropriate individual support being given. However, the effect on training is minimal because informal gathering of information takes place within individual nurseries and in the company as a whole. The effect is also reduced by the use of soundly structured recruitment and interviewing procedures

for all employees. Effective communication between staff involved in training in the nurseries and the training department at head office helps to allow appropriate support for the trainees. Relevant materials are produced to allow a trainee with a disability access to information and Dictaphones have been used to record evidence of knowledge. Busy Bees allows its assessors flexibility in the time spent with each trainee. The introduction of full-time assessors enables more regular support and assessment of the trainees. The company is piloting a scheme to determine if it is practical and beneficial for the trainee to have regular time away from the workplace so that portfolio work can be completed. The company has cover staff, whom it uses in these circumstances.

31. Staff involved in the training of modern apprentices are not making use of the individual training plans. The plans often contain little information. They do not adequately record the individual trainees' specific training requirements and how these needs will be met. Trainees are not provided with a copy of their individual training plan, are not able to refer to it and are not always aware of their completion date. The plans are not individualised or updated to reflect problems experienced and trainees' progress through their training.

32. Trainees' progress reviews are often incomplete: the information recorded is limited and does not reflect the total training experience of the trainee. This is particularly true of the 12-weekly progress reviews. Six-weekly postal questionnaires have been introduced, and, although the number returned varies, trainees find this a more acceptable means of expressing difficulties which they may be experiencing. The appropriate staff quickly deal with all identified problems which are monitored by the training department.

33. Insufficient accreditation of trainees' prior learning and experience has led to inappropriate use of resources. Trainees who have sufficient, current knowledge acquired from other sources are still being asked to complete project work. Busy Bees has recently trained two members of staff who, with the one member of staff already qualified, will be able to provide a systematic approach to accreditation.

Management of training

Grade 2

34. The company's training department has developed over the past year to take full responsibility for the management of training within the group. The department has been an approved assessment centre with the awarding body since July 2000. The training department operates independently of the nurseries but with a link through weekly management meetings which have an emphasis on training once a fortnight. The company has a training manager who reports to senior management about issues related to training. The department co-ordinates training and assessment across all the nurseries in the group, which covers a very wide geographical area throughout the country. Until recently, this has been through work-based assessors and supervisors, who have assessed and mentored trainees in addition to their other roles. The company is now moving towards using

full-time assessors employed directly by the training centre, but there will continue to be a nominated mentor in the workplace. The centre has written procedures for staff recruitment, appraisal and development, to which all trainees also have access. Data are collected through a management information system which carries details of all employees. The company has been accredited as an Investor in People.

35. The self-assessment report identified two strengths with which inspectors agreed: the comprehensive management-information system and staff opportunities for training. The weakness had already been rectified. Inspectors identified an additional strength and two additional weaknesses. Inspectors awarded a higher grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ thorough, detailed procedures for staff recruitment, selection and induction
- ◆ excellent appraisal and staff-development opportunities
- ◆ well-understood, cohesive management systems

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient recording of some decision-making
- ◆ no training agreement with contractors

36. Procedures for staff recruitment and induction are very detailed and thorough. Nursery managers notify head office when they have vacancies, and these are advertised in childcare publications and local newspapers. The head office has a 24-hour answering service linked to a computer so that all calls can be taken. About 50 per cent of application forms are returned. Completed application forms are sent to the nursery manager, who draws up a shortlist and interviews applicants. The recruitment procedure sets out in detail how the selection and interviewing are to be conducted. This is supported by detailed guidelines, which cover suggested questioning techniques, seating arrangements, use of body language and other important details. There is a suggested list of questions to ask for each level of job applied for, from senior manager to cook. The induction takes place over a whole day, and covers all nursery or training department procedures. For training staff, there is a staff handbook, which contains a copy of the training and assessment procedures and paperwork. All staff receive copies of the health and safety and equal opportunities policies.

37. There are excellent opportunities for staff development. Appraisals take place annually. Each member of staff carries out a self-appraisal, which is followed by a discussion with his or her line manager. The two then agree on areas of strength and areas which need developing, and agree on a development plan which takes account of the company's needs and the individual's aspirations. All employees have access to a wide range of training, including in-house sessions and training

days on various aspects of childcare and education for staff working in the nurseries. Certificates are issued for every training event. All employees are required to do at least two days' training each year, and are given time off in lieu if they attend more than two sessions. Many of the sessions are linked to NVQ standards, and so trainees benefit significantly from these. All training attended is recorded in the trainees' personal files. Managers and deputy managers attend an annual two-day conference, which staff from head office attend for an evening, as a social occasion. The company provides a personal learning portfolio for every employee in which he or she is encouraged to put a curriculum vitae, certificates of training and staff development attended and significant practical experience. Recent training since the company became an assessment centre in its own right has included a two-day training event for assessors. Assessors have also taken part in key skills training, and some are doing the key skills practitioners' award. They have the opportunity to acquire internal verifiers' and accreditation of prior learning awards. Many staff who have trained and worked as nursery nurses in the company's nurseries have moved into senior positions and into the training department. There is a very low turnover of staff in the company.

38. Managers see staff as a resource and believe that it is the company's responsibility to provide training to ensure best practice in childcare.

39. There is a cohesive structure of management systems. Staff understand their roles and are effectively deployed. There is an open management style, which encourages open debate, and staff feel confident about making suggestions and know they will be listened to. They have co-operative relationships and informal communication takes place daily. Formal communication is through e-mail, memoranda and newsletters, and through meetings at all levels. Assessors and internal verifiers' meetings take place every three months. Training department meetings take place weekly. The quality assurance co-ordinator passes on any issues identified to management through the head of training and personnel. The management team meets weekly, and, on alternate weeks, the emphasis is on training. Training data are entered into the comprehensive management information system and are used effectively to influence decisions. There is a separate strategic and operational plan to identify the objectives of the training department.

40. Minutes of senior management meetings are detailed, with clear action-planning which is monitored at subsequent meetings. However, minutes of other meetings are not sufficiently detailed to inform absent staff fully about issues raised and decisions made. They do not clearly identify action to be taken, and do not monitor whether previous action has been carried out.

41. Some training is carried out by external agencies. There is no written training agreement to ensure that this training meets the requirements of the company. This has resulted, in one case, in training not meeting the expectations of the company.

Quality assurance

Grade 2

42. The centre has well-recorded quality assurance procedures for all aspects of training and assessment and for nursery practice for all employees. The quality of NVQ training and assessment is monitored through the internal verification process, trainees' progress reviews, analysis of data and questionnaires completed by trainees and staff at the training centre. The management-information system is used to collect data from the questionnaires. The quality assurance co-ordinator has overall responsibility for ensuring that procedures are adhered to, for monitoring data and for taking action on any problems identified. Significant issues are reported to senior management meetings. The quality assurance co-ordinator prepared the self-assessment report, in consultation with other members of the training team. Some nursery managers and a group of trainees were asked to comment on the report. The company accurately identified two strengths in the self-assessment report. It had already taken action to address its identified weakness. The inspectors found two additional strengths and two additional weaknesses. The grade given by inspectors was higher than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective changes implemented to improve training
- ◆ rigorous monitoring of training and assessment
- ◆ thorough, detailed quality assurance procedures

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ not all sites using new systems
- ◆ inaccuracies in self-assessment report

43. There is a commitment to continuous improvement throughout the company. The quality assurance co-ordinator is effective in helping staff to identify what needs to be improved. The open management style of the company encourages staff, both in the nurseries and in the training team, to make suggestions about how to improve the way in which things are done, which they do effectively. The quality assurance co-ordinator quickly acts on any issues raised at trainees' progress reviews, which are then discussed at training team meetings. Discussion at those meetings has often resulted in changes being made to training procedures. More serious issues or suggestions for significant changes are discussed by senior management.

44. When the company has agreed on significant changes to practice, these are usually piloted and evaluated in a small number of nurseries before being put into general use. The personal learning portfolio, which all employees now receive, was first tested with a small number of employees. The company has identified an

issue which the trainees have raised about lack of time to work towards their NVQ. There is currently a pilot scheme in two nurseries which allows time off each week for trainees to work on their portfolios. The centre is monitoring the effect it has on trainees' progress. The manager in one nursery taken over by the company in 2000 reported that it had improved significantly, both in terms of equipment and facilities in the nursery and in opportunities for staff training.

45. The company monitors all aspects of training and assessment rigorously. All trainees have a checklist of elements and units achieved, which is updated with their assessors each month. The assessor sends a copy to the head office, together with a record of visits she has made during the month to each trainee. This information is entered into the database, so that information about what the trainee has achieved is always available. As trainees achieve units, they receive unit certification. Trainees regularly evaluate assessment carried out by their assessors by completing a checklist and making a comment. Where there has been a difficulty in the relationship between an assessor and a trainee, another assessor is appointed. Participants evaluate all training events through the completion of a questionnaire. The grades awarded are entered into the database, so that the quality of training in specific subjects or areas of the country can be monitored. Staff at the head office carry out frequent observations of training sessions and write a written report. The quality assurance co-ordinator monitors the results and takes appropriate action. One session, provided recently by an external agency, was judged to be unsatisfactory, and the company no longer uses that agency.

46. There are thorough and detailed procedures for all aspects of training and assessment and also for all aspects of childcare practice. These are practical and easily readable, and are available to employees in every nursery, in well-organised files for each aspect. Trainees benefit greatly from these. The procedures are supported by clear guidelines about how to use them effectively, and include the relevant documents to be used. Procedures are reviewed monthly on a rolling programme. A programme listing the procedures to be reviewed each month is sent out to all nurseries. These are discussed at staff meetings, and all staff sign to confirm that they have read and understood the procedures. All documents are dated so that their currency can be easily checked.

47. The company has been an approved assessment centre only since August 2000, and so the procedures for the NVQ assessment process are not fully established. It is too early to evaluate their effectiveness. Some assessors are not yet using the new assessment methods which the company has adopted although they have had training in how to use them.

48. There were some inaccuracies in the self-assessment report. Some weaknesses were identified and have already been acted upon, but other strengths and weaknesses were missed. There was insufficient detail about demographic and environmental factors in each area the company operates in.