

# INSPECTION REPORT

## Acorn Initiative

03 September 2001



ADULT LEARNING  
INSPECTORATE

## Grading

Inspectors use a seven-point scale to summarise their judgements about the quality of learning sessions. The descriptors for the seven grades are:

- *grade 1 - excellent*
- *grade 2 - very good*
- *grade 3 - good*
- *grade 4 - satisfactory*
- *grade 5 - unsatisfactory*
- *grade 6 - poor*
- *grade 7 - very poor.*

Inspectors use a five-point scale to summarise their judgements about the quality of provision in occupational/curriculum areas and in New Deal options. The same scale is used to describe the quality of leadership and management, which includes quality assurance and equality of opportunity. The descriptors for the five grades are:

- *grade 1 - outstanding*
- *grade 2 - good*
- *grade 3 - satisfactory*
- *grade 4 - unsatisfactory*
- *grade 5 - very weak.*

The two grading scales relate to each other as follows:

| SEVEN-POINT SCALE | FIVE-POINT SCALE |
|-------------------|------------------|
| grade 1           | grade 1          |
| grade 2           |                  |
| grade 3           | grade 2          |
| grade 4           | grade 3          |
| grade 5           | grade 4          |
| grade 6           | grade 5          |
| grade 7           |                  |

## Adult Learning Inspectorate

The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) was established under the provisions of the *Learning and Skills Act 2000* to bring the inspection of all aspects of adult learning and work-based training within the remit of a single inspectorate. The ALI is responsible for inspecting a wide range of government-funded learning, including:

- work-based training for all people over 16
- provision in further education colleges for people aged 19 and over
- the University for Industry's *learnirect* provision
- adult and community learning
- training given by the Employment Service under the New Deals.

Inspections are carried out in accordance with the *Common Inspection Framework* by teams of full-time inspectors and part-time associate inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work which they inspect. All providers are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

## Inadequate provision

A provider's provision will normally be deemed to be less than adequate where

- one third or more of published grades for occupational/curriculum areas and New Deal options are judged less than satisfactory, or
- leadership and management are judged to be less than satisfactory

The final decision as to whether the provision is inadequate rests with the Chief Inspector of Adult Learning. The overall judgement as to whether the provision is adequate or inadequate is included in the summary section of the inspection report.

## SUMMARY

### The provider

Acorn Initiative is part of Nottinghamshire County Council. It offers training for disaffected young people in Nottinghamshire. All 59 learners are taking the Learning Gateway Life Skills training and they are based in nine training centres across the county.

### Overall judgement

Life Skills training and leadership and management at Acorn Initiative are satisfactory. The quality of the provision is adequate to meet the reasonable needs of those receiving it.

### Life Skills

Acorn Initiative works with disaffected young people. There is a good range of learning opportunities, both in and outside the training centres. Learners receive comprehensive and effective support, which encourages them to attend the training and progress to employment and further training. There are effective progress reviews which include the learner, the key worker and the personal adviser from the careers office. Basic skills training takes place in separate sessions and is not an integral part of the other training. There is insufficient use of work placements. Staff are very experienced at working with young people but do not have a wide enough range of training techniques. There is not enough availability of computer equipment in the training centres and some of the premises are not suitable for training.

### Leadership and management

Leadership and management at Acorn Initiative are satisfactory. There are very effective partnerships with outside organisations which offer a wide range of support, expertise and funding. Staff are well supported and are part of an effective supervision process. Training centres are located across the county to make the training easily accessible to young people. Acorn Initiative has not identified all the skills needed by the staff in its training centres. Agreements with subcontractors are inadequate and contain little reference to equal opportunities. There are comprehensive equal opportunities guidelines for staff. Acorn Initiative closely monitors its Life Skills teaching. A large amount of information is collected but not all of it is effectively analysed or used to bring about continuous improvement.

**GRADES**

| Foundation programmes | 3 |
|-----------------------|---|
| Contributory grades:  |   |
| Life Skills           | 3 |

| Leadership and management | 3 |
|---------------------------|---|
| Contributory grades:      |   |
| Equality of opportunity   | 3 |
| Quality assurance         | 3 |

**KEY STRENGTHS**

- effective involvement of disaffected learners
- wide range of training available
- effective partnerships with external agencies
- well-located training centres

**KEY WEAKNESSES**

- little integration of basic skills support with other activities
- inadequate use of work experience
- ineffective process for identifying staff training needs
- ineffective analysis and use of some data

**OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED**

- more effective use of individual learning plans
- ongoing development of quality assurance arrangements

## THE PROVIDER AND ITS CONTEXT

1. Acorn Initiative is part of the community services department of Nottinghamshire County Council's youth, community and play service. Acorn Initiative was set up by Nottinghamshire County Council in 1995 to deal with the rapidly rising unemployment levels in North Nottinghamshire. Acorn Initiative works with disaffected young people, many of whom find it difficult to take part in learning. It concentrates on social education and preparation for adulthood. By Autumn 1999, Acorn Initiative had contracts with two training and enterprise councils (TECs) in North Nottinghamshire and Greater Nottinghamshire, to offer Life Skills training in six geographical areas, and other training for learners who need additional support. Since April 2001, Acorn Initiative has had a contract with Nottinghamshire Learning and Skills Council (LSC) for Life Skills training. Acorn Initiative is also a partner in the development of the Connexions programme in Nottinghamshire.

2. Acorn Initiative has nine sites across Nottinghamshire, with a further two programmes due to open in September 2001 and January 2002. There are 59 learners on the Life Skills programme. It has 40 staff, including those working in administration. Many are part time and there are also eight linked workers who are employed by the county council's youth, community and play service.

3. There have been significant changes in employment patterns in Nottinghamshire since 1991. For example, mining has lost 11,000 jobs and now employs about 2,500 people. The focus is now on business and professional occupations. Much of the county is rural, which affects the ability of young people to reach the places with the best employment opportunities. In June 2001, unemployment in the county was 3.9 per cent compared with 3 per cent nationally. There are large differences in unemployment rates across the county, from 5.4 per cent in Mansfield to 1.9 per cent in Rushcliffe. Some parts of the county have high youth unemployment. In Mansfield, 30.1 per cent of unemployed people are aged between 18 and 24, well above the national average of 24.4 per cent. In 2000, 44.3 per cent of school leavers in Nottinghamshire achieved five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C or above, compared with 49.2 per cent nationally. Again, there is wide variation within Nottinghamshire, with an achievement rate of 63 per cent in Rushcliffe and only 34 per cent in Mansfield. The 1991 census showed that 1.5 per cent of the population in Nottinghamshire were from minority ethnic groups, compared with 6.2 per cent nationally.

## THE INSPECTION

4. The inspection was carried out by a team of four inspectors, who spent a total of 16 days with Acorn Initiative in September 2001. Inspectors interviewed 36 learners, 34 staff, six careers officers and one work-placement provider. They observed and graded 13 learning sessions and observed six progress reviews. The inspectors examined learners' individual learning plans, progress review records, files and portfolios of evidence. A wide range of other paperwork was examined, including contracts, external reports, internal reports, minutes of meetings, staff personnel records, and policies and procedures.

Grades awarded to learning sessions

|                       | Grade 1  | Grade 2  | Grade 3  | Grade 4  | Grade 5  | Grade 6  | Grade 7  | Total     |
|-----------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Foundation programmes | 0        | 0        | 5        | 6        | 1        | 1        | 0        | 13        |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>0</b> | <b>0</b> | <b>5</b> | <b>6</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>0</b> | <b>13</b> |

## OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

### Foundation programmes

Grade 3

| Programmes inspected | Number of learners | Contributory grade |
|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Life Skills          | 59                 | 3                  |

5. Acorn Initiative has a contract for the Life Skills part of the Learning Gateway. The Life Skills course lasts for 26 weeks but can be extended when necessary. All learners attend for a minimum of 16 hours each week, usually over a three-day period. Learners are referred by the careers service. They receive an induction on their first day and they carry out an initial assessment and prepare an individual learning plan during the first week. Each training centre has a training programme, which includes development of personal skills, basic skills, computer literacy, adventurous activities and a residential course. Some learners work towards externally-accredited qualifications including information technology at introductory level, emergency first aid, health and safety, food hygiene and sports awards. Acorn Initiative uses subcontractors for basic skills and computer training, and the youth, community and play service for motor vehicle projects, residential, arts and adventurous activities. They have a progress review each month, which includes the learners' key worker and the personal adviser from the careers service. Most of the staff have a youth work background and some have experience of training in outdoor activities. All staff were involved in the self-assessment process.

The following table shows the achievement and retention rates available up to the time of inspection.

| Foundation Programmes   |         |   |         |   |           |    |         |    |         |    |
|---|---------|---|---------|---|-----------|----|---------|----|---------|----|
| Foundation Programmes   |         |   |         |   |           |    |         |    |         |    |
|   | 1997-98 |   | 1998-99 |   | 1999-2000 |    | 2000-01 |    | 2001-02 |    |
|   | No.     | % | No.     | % | No.       | %  | No.     | %  | No.     | %  |
| Number that started   |         |   |         |   | 72        |    | 190     |    | 67      |    |
| Still in training   |         |   |         |   | 0         | 0  | 16      | 8  | 43      | 64 |
| Gained job with training/progressed to further training and/or planned learning completed |         |   |         |   | 50        | 69 | 107     | 56 | 3       | 4  |
| Left without either   |         |   |         |   | 22        | 31 | 67      | 35 | 21      | 31 |
| Gained job with training  |         |   |         |   | 4         | 6  | 20      | 11 | 2       | 3  |
| Progressed to further training  |         |   |         |   | 19        | 26 | 24      | 13 | 1       | 1  |
| Planned learning completed  |         |   |         |   | 22        | 31 | 63      | 33 | 0       | 0  |

## STRENGTHS

- effective involvement of disaffected learners
- good support for learners
- effective progress reviews
- wide range of training available

## WEAKNESSES

- little integration of basic skills support with other activities
- inadequate use of work experience
- narrow range of training techniques
- poor resources at some training centres

## OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- clearer identification of milestones for achievement
- more effective use of individual learning plans
- better information for learners about progression routes

6. The Life Skills programme recruits disadvantaged young people who lack the skills and attitudes needed to move into mainstream training. Problems many of these young people have, include exclusion from secondary education, homelessness and repeat offending. Some of the staff also work as youth workers and meet the young people in local youth clubs and other locations. This early contact with the youth worker is extremely useful and offers the young people consistency in their contact with support staff. Learners enjoy their time on the Life Skills programme. Most of them either complete their planned learning or move on to further training and/or employment.

7. Learners receive good support. All staff are trained to be able to work with a wide range of young people and have extensive experience. They are highly sensitive to the needs of the learners and regularly give additional time to help them overcome problems. For example, one learner has a serious medical condition, which he did not understand well before joining the training programme. Life Skills tutors have liaised with external agencies and gathered information for the learner, as well as obtaining a medical alert tag for him to wear. Staffing ratios are high, generally one member of staff to two or three learners. This allows tutors to give individual coaching to help overcome learners' problems with learning. There is also good use of external agencies to provide extra training.

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8. Learners have a formal progress review each month with their key worker and their personal adviser from the careers service. They are set realistic targets for the next month. The reviews cover learners' training as well as other areas that may be affecting their progress such as timekeeping and attendance. Learners are actively involved in the progress reviews and see them as being supportive and challenging. Good records are kept of progress reviews. Life Skills staff also complete a daily diary of events which describe problems which could affect the learner, such as domestic and personal problems and any incidents which occur during training. These are discussed with the learner and reviewed regularly.

9. Learners are able to take part in a wide range of training opportunities. Acorn Initiative organises activities which maintain the learners' interest and help to increase their confidence and self-esteem. Training sessions take place within, and outside, the training centres. Staff also involve many external agencies in specific parts of the training programme, such as drug awareness, sexual health and finance. Other sessions include team building exercises, anger management, interview preparation, health and safety awareness, and basic skills support. Many activities take place outside the training centres and include a range of residential experiences, such as caving, white water rafting and orienteering. There are also opportunities to take part in a variety of work experience placements. Some learners attend a project to gain skills in motor vehicle repair. All activities are planned to meet individual learning objectives and learners measure their progress against these.

10. Basic skills training and support is mostly limited to specific sessions and is not an integral part of the other activities. Basic skills initial assessment takes place during the first week of training and all learners develop numeracy and literacy skills as part of their personal targets. Learners attend basic skills training sessions each week which mainly involve written exercises in reading, punctuation, form filling, spelling and working with numbers. The lack of integration means that learners do not have the opportunity to practise and fully recognise their progress. The organisation has recognised the importance of effective basic skills development and has recently decided to appoint a basic skills co-ordinator and a facilitator for learners with dyslexia, both full-time posts. These posts are currently being advertised.

11. Acorn Initiatives does not make good enough use of its work placements. It has established a significant number of work placements with a range of industrial, commercial, public and voluntary sector employers. All the placements have been approved as meeting health and safety requirements and the employers have been briefed on their responsibilities. The number of learners who go on work placements is small and at the time of inspection only four out of the 59 learners were in work placements. The potential for individuals to experience different working environments is therefore limited. When learners have been on work experience, it has been very successful with many gaining permanent employment and some employers being persuaded to create training opportunities such as modern apprenticeships. Acorn Initiative has recognised its poor use of work placements and has recently created a post for an additional full-time work-placement officer.

12. Staff have little awareness of training techniques. The predominant use of set, written exercises for basic skills tuition, fails to recognise the particular learning needs of this client group, many of whom have problems with reading and writing. There is little use of interactive computer-based learning materials and only limited use of training games to develop and reinforce learning. Staff recognise the need to develop their own skills as trainers and a training programme is being planned.

13. The accommodation and equipment at some of the training centres is very poor. Training is given in large, multi-purpose rooms which are poorly laid out and noisy. There are few quiet areas for counselling or for learners to work on their own. One training centre is in poor repair and is not a positive learning environment. Access to computers is extremely limited. Some training centres have no computers and learners use resources at the local college. One of the new training centres has a suite of new computers and printers which have been purchased with funds from a partner organisation. Two learners at different training centres have visual impairments and one also has a back problem. Neither had been supplied with a large screen and one was using a laptop computer. Seating at both training centres did not meet health and safety requirements.

14. Individual learning plans are prepared for all learners and include personal milestones which they aim to achieve during their training programme. However, the milestones do not always set specific, measurable targets. Information about the learners is recorded on many different documents but is not always brought together on the individual learning plan. It is therefore difficult to have an overall picture of the planned outcomes and progress of the learner. Tutors work well with the learners to help them progress to further training and development but tutors are not always aware of the range of opportunities available to the learners.

#### Poor Practice

*Inspectors observed basic skills assessment. The tutor administered the test to a group of learners who exchanged answers and comments with their peers. The more boisterous individuals dominated the rest of the group, creating a noisy and disruptive environment. The more reserved learners struggled or finally gave up attempting the test.*

## LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 3

15. Acorn Initiative is part of the community services department of Nottinghamshire County Council's youth, community and play service. It is overseen by the assistant director in the community services department. Its head office is in Ollerton, where the senior worker, the two team leaders, the full-time work-placement officer and the main administrative staff are based. The senior worker has overall responsibility for Acorn Initiative and the rest of the staff are based in the training centres. Each training centre has a leader-in-charge, an assistant and some have additional staff. The senior worker and team leaders make up the central team and are each responsible for certain training centres and for the supervision of the leaders-in-charge. The leaders-in-charge are responsible for the supervision of their staff. The central team carry out observation visits to all the training centres and also have meetings each week where identified problems are discussed with the leaders-in-charge. There are training centre team meetings every six weeks and the whole staff team meets every six months for a day of sharing good practice. Forms and paperwork are kept in manuals at each training centre and a new quality assurance manual has been developed over the past year. Acorn Initiative uses Nottinghamshire County Council's equal opportunities policy and has an equal opportunities statement for its learners. Nottinghamshire County Council is accredited with the Investors in People standard, a national quality assurance standard.

### STRENGTHS

- effective partnerships with external agencies
- comprehensive supervision and support for staff
- well-located training centres

### WEAKNESSES

- ineffective process for identifying staff training needs
- inadequate agreements with subcontractors
- some ineffective analysis and use of data

### OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better links with careers service
- better quality assurance arrangements

16. Acorn Initiative's Life Skills programme works effectively in partnerships with external agencies. Its key partner is the youth service. Workers from the youth service ensure that contact and support is available for the young people before and after their time on the Life Skills programme. All the facilities of the youth service are available to Acorn Initiative, including access to agencies which are linked to the youth service, the crime and disorder team, and staff training. One of Acorn Initiative's new training centres is supported by a number of partners and has been able to gain funding through

a single regeneration budget (SRB) project and other local agencies. Acorn Initiative's links with the colleges bring in useful additional expertise, including college projects receiving European Union funding, staff for the training centres, a work-placement worker and a mental health project. One college is also working with Acorn Initiative to identify suitable training qualifications for the staff. The expertise, funding, contacts and publicity brought in by its development of and commitment to these partnerships enables Acorn Initiative to offer a service to learners which goes beyond the contractual requirements.

17. Acorn Initiative has a comprehensive policy for staff supervision and support. Line managers meet with their staff, individually, every six weeks. The meetings are confidential. There are also six-weekly team meetings where any problems are discussed and actions agreed. Staff have thorough annual performance reviews where their development needs are discussed and training is arranged. Staff find the supervision and performance reviews are supportive, which is important when they work in isolated, and often difficult, situations. They have ongoing, informal support from their line managers and also other workers. They can also use the youth service and the county council's professional support facilities.

18. The location of the nine existing and two new training centres, is carefully planned. There are key locations in Nottinghamshire where either pit closures, rural factors or other reasons mean that young people are disadvantaged. Research has shown that in these areas there are either few, or no, training opportunities for young people. Acorn Initiative has planned the location of its training centres to ensure that they are in the most suitable places to meet the needs of young people. This has led to a complex structure of small training centres with a high ratio of staff to ensure that each training centre can function properly. Transport is arranged when needed and staff travel long distances to ensure that all learners have equal access to training.

19. Staff are very experienced in working with young people and in enabling them to develop their personal skills. However, few of the staff have experience or qualifications in education or training. Acorn Initiative has identified that it needs experienced basic skills staff and plans to appoint two new staff members. There has been no analysis of the skill requirements for each training centre. Staff identify their own training needs during their annual performance reviews but these are not always linked to the specific requirements of their training centre, or Acorn Initiative as a whole.

20. There are service level agreements with most of the subcontractors, but not for some of those who offer the adventure activities and the residential courses. The agreement with one of the colleges is being rewritten to include all the requirements of both the college and Acorn Initiative. The layout of the standard agreement is brief with no description of the services being offered and no specific requirement for the staff to have certain qualifications. The agreement's reference to equal opportunities refers only to racial and sex discrimination. Acorn Initiative does not check any subcontractors' insurances. Some agreements have additional paperwork attached but it is very brief. The agreement with work-placement providers covers health and safety very fully but

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mentions equal opportunities only briefly. It has the Nottinghamshire County Council's statement attached. The careers service and Acorn Initiative have established a service level agreement between themselves, which includes individual targets for each training centre.

21. Acorn Initiative has good links with the careers service at senior management level and Acorn Initiative's staff meet careers service staff regularly. However, Acorn Initiative's staff are not fully aware of everything that happens on Learning Gateway before the learners are referred to the Life Skills option and they do not always receive comprehensive information about individual learners.

### **Equality of opportunity**

**Contributory grade 3**

22. The county council is currently revising its equal opportunities policy. This policy is used by Acorn Initiative and is accompanied by comprehensive guidelines for staff. The guidelines are issued regularly by the county council's personnel department and are well laid out, practical and easy to use. There are set procedures for complaints and harassment which are used by learners when necessary. Staff are fully aware of the importance of equality of opportunity and support their learners individually to achieve this. Acorn Initiative has an open recruitment policy and helps as many individuals as possible to train. This is reflected in the geographical spread of the training centres. Statistics are collected on the different groups of young people and there is some analysis of data to identify performance trends. A new post of Life Skills support worker has recently been created with the task of recruiting young people from minority ethnic groups and supporting them on the training programme. This will help each training centre to match its recruitment activities to the local community.

23. Staff are given a large amount of equal opportunities training. However, there is little formal training about legislation and how it affects Acorn Initiative and the learners. There is little awareness of the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act although staff can get support from the county council's disability support team. There is also inadequate reference to equal opportunities in its service level agreements with subcontractors and no evidence of ongoing monitoring. There is satisfactory access to the premises for people with mobility problems.

**Quality assurance****Contributory grade 3**

24. There is a comprehensive file bringing together all the everyday documents needed. Each training centre uses this. There is also a quality assurance manual, which consists of procedures and practical guidelines for staff. Parts of the manual have been given to staff, but the whole manual is still being finalised and some procedures are still being developed. The quality assurance paperwork is not well referenced and does not record the dates documents were completed. There is a system to monitor and evaluate the teaching of Life Skills, which includes learners' feedback, staff supervision and a schedule of meetings. Acorn Initiative also has an advisory group consisting of learners' representatives from each training centre. The central team carries out observation visits at the training centres and then produces detailed reports and actions for improvement. The observation visits are modelled on the schools inspectors' matrix of observing and evaluating youth work. A specific document for the evaluation of basic skills and information technology training is also used, but there is no planned schedule for these observations. The information gathered is always discussed at team meetings but the central team does not always review the information and use it to improve the training across the whole of the organisation.

25. Staff were fully involved in the self-assessment process and in the implementation of the action plan. The initial self-assessment report was written in December 2000 and a detailed action plan was drawn up. There were regular reviews and updates of the action plan and a progress report was produced in July 2001 which identified the current position of Acorn Initiative against the 'Common Inspection Framework'. Inspectors agreed with many of the judgements made in the self-assessment report but there was no specific focus on the quality of the training process. This lack of focus underlies many of the weaknesses inspectors found. Inspectors gave the same grades as those identified in the self-assessment report.

**Good Practice**

*An advisory group has been set up with two staff members acting as co-ordinators and learners representing each training centre. It meets every six weeks to discuss the training. Key influential people are invited to attend, for example, the contracts manager from the LSC. Minutes are taken and actions are agreed. Learners are encouraged to take responsibility for the proposed actions and to keep the learners at their training centre informed.*

**Poor Practice**

*Two female members of staff took five male and two female learners on a three day residential course. There is a male warden at the residential centre during the day but no male adult staying overnight. This is particularly unsuitable for activities involving vulnerable young people.*