

INSPECTION REPORT

First Rung Limited

07 January 2002



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 **learn**direct 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

First Rung Limited is a registered charity working on a not-for-profit basis in Colindale and Edmonton, London. It was established in 1983 to provide training and employment for young people, particularly those with learning difficulties and disabilities. Learners are recruited from the London boroughs of Enfield, Barnet, Brent, Haringey and Harrow. Modern apprenticeships and other work-based learning programmes are offered in administration, information technology (IT), retail operations and customer service. National vocational qualifications (NVQs) at level 2 are offered in childcare. The company also provides the Life Skills element of the Learning Gateway. First Rung Limited currently has 157 learners. Twenty-seven staff teach and manage the training programmes.

Overall judgement

The quality of the provision is adequate to meet the reasonable needs of those receiving it. More specifically, the quality of work-based learning is satisfactory in business administration, early years care and education, retailing, IT and Life Skills. The leadership and management of First Rung Limited are satisfactory, although its approach to quality assurance is unsatisfactory. The company's handling of equality of opportunity issues is good.

GRADES

Leadership and management	3
Contributory grades:	
Equality of opportunity	2
Quality assurance	4

Business administration, management & professional	3
Contributory grades:	
Work-based learning for young people	3

Information & communications technology	3
Contributory grades:	
Work-based learning for young people	3

Retailing, customer service & transportation	3
Contributory grades:	
Work-based learning for young people	3

FIRST RUNG LIMITED

Health, social care & public services	3
Contributory grades:	
Work-based learning for young people	3

Foundation programmes	3
Contributory grades:	
Life Skills	3

KEY STRENGTHS

- good management of individual learning
- good internal and external communications
- effective recruitment of learners from disadvantaged groups and minority ethnic communities

KEY WEAKNESSES

- lack of established strategies to improve retention rates
- no overall quality assurance framework
- insufficient involvement of workplace supervisors in training

THE INSPECTION

1. A team of seven inspectors spent a total of 28 days at First Rung Limited (First Rung) in January 2002. Inspectors met 49 learners, and conducted 35 interviews with First Rung 's staff. Inspectors visited 22 workplaces, where they interviewed a total of 24 employers and supervisors. Assessments, learners' progress reviews and 11 training sessions were observed. Inspectors examined a range of documents, including learners' portfolios and files, learners' personal records, First Rung's plans, policies and procedures, management information and reports from awarding bodies. Inspectors studied First Rung's self-assessment report and the accompanying action plan, which was updated in November 2001.

Grades awarded to learning sessions

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Total
Information & communications technology	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
Health, social care & public services	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Foundation programmes	0	2	3	2	0	0	0	7
Total	0	2	4	4	0	0	0	10

THE PROVIDER AS A WHOLE

Context

2. First Rung is a registered charity working on a not-for-profit basis in Edmonton and Colindale, London. Established in 1983, First Rung provides work-based learning for young people, particularly for those with learning difficulties and disabilities. These include NVQs in administration, information and communication technology (ICT), retail operations and Life Skills. A level 2 NVQ is offered in childcare. First Rung is not recruiting currently for modern apprenticeships. First Rung currently has 157 learners, of whom 34 are employed and 122 are in work placements. There are 27 staff who teach and manage the training programmes. These include the four members of the senior management team, six work-based assessors, six workshop trainers/assessors, and two training co-ordinators. First Rung has two training centres. The larger of the two, the head office, is in Edmonton in the London borough of Enfield. The second centre is in Colindale in the London borough of Barnet. Learners are recruited from a geographical area that includes the London boroughs of Enfield, Barnet, Brent, Harrow, Haringey and Waltham Forest.

3. First Rung recruits learners from diverse social and economic areas. Barnet has lower employment rates, a lower proportion of residents in the lowest income bands and well above average educational attainment levels compared with the rest of North London. Haringey contains some of the most deprived electoral wards in the country and has educational attainment levels well below the average for the region. Brent has seven of the 10 most deprived wards in the area. Unemployment rates varied from 2.9 per cent in Harrow to 8.8 per cent in Haringey, against a national average of 2.9 per cent in September 2001. The service sector accounts for most employment in the area. Approximately 25 per cent of all employment is in the public and voluntary sector. In 2001, the proportion of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C or above was 55.8 per cent in Barnet, 45.6 per cent in Brent, 47 per cent in Enfield, 30.9 per cent in Haringey and in Harrow it was 57.5 per cent. In all areas, these results were below the national average of 50 per cent. The 1991 census shows that 14.1 per cent of the population of Enfield are from minority ethnic communities.

Work-based learning for young people

4. The quality of work-based learning is satisfactory in all areas. Staff are particularly responsive to the needs of individual learners and offer them good support. Learners receive a good induction to their training. Progress reviews are monitored effectively. Some comments on action plans and review records are not sufficiently focused. Employers often lack knowledge of NVQs and are not sufficiently involved in learners' progress reviews. There are poor retention rates in a number of areas of learning, and some poor achievement rates. Slow progress is made by some learners.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 3

5. First Rung has a board of 10 trustees who work closely with the company. The senior management team consists of the chief executive and three senior managers who are responsible for operations, finance and quality assurance. Twenty-four of the 27 staff report to the head of operations. Two training co-ordinators, based at Edmonton and Colindale, have responsibility for the staff and for the welfare of learners at each centre. Following the recent re-organisation of the company, there are staff who now manage internal verification, learner support and IT across the two centres. The annual business plan sets out the direction in which the company intends to develop. The system for staff appraisals and reviews is linked to the business plan. First Rung holds the Investors in People award. This is a national standard for improving an organisation's performance through its people. The quality assurance system consists of a quality assurance policy and a series of procedures. The equal opportunities and quality assurance policy are reviewed and updated regularly. First Rung produced its first self-assessment report in 1998. The most recent self-assessment report was produced in November 2001.

STRENGTHS

- strong financial management
- good internal and external communications
- good target-setting for staff
- good understanding of equality of opportunity issues by learners
- effective recruitment of learners from disadvantaged groups and minority ethnic communities
- good management of individual learning
- effective internal verification in most occupational areas

WEAKNESSES

- lack of established strategies to improve retention rates
- inadequate planning for modern apprenticeships
- insufficient monitoring of employers' equal opportunities policies
- slow introduction of quality assurance
- slow introduction of some action plans

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better monitoring and evaluation of staff development
- less complex equal opportunities policy
- more staff training on equality of opportunity
- more appropriate language in induction materials

6. Strong financial management has reduced overheads and made First Rung solvent. Annual business planning, with short-term and medium-term targets, is translated into clear operational plans. There is no long-term strategic plan which focuses on learning. Staff are aware of the business plan and the part they play in it. Following the recent reorganisation, staff now work at both centres which enables the sharing of good practice. Funds have been released to buy extra resources such as software for computers to enhance learning. Additional administrators have been employed to enable staff to concentrate on teaching, learning and assessment. First Rung has taken measures to ensure that fluctuating income will not affect learners' resources.

7. Good internal and external communication enables the exchange of information and brings in new ideas, a strength which was identified in the self-assessment report. All staff have a clear vision of the contribution First Rung makes by involving disadvantaged and disaffected young people in learning. All staff feel able to contribute ideas for improvement. Staff are able to discuss issues and concerns with managers when the need arises. Staff give their views about the company in an annual survey. Regular, minuted meetings are held at all levels, giving clear communication lines for the dissemination of information. First Rung has established productive relationships with many local agencies which offer services such as counselling, housing advice and advice on pregnancies. Another agency specifically supports young black and Asian people to maintain their education and training. Local networks are used to share ideas and promote good practice. The careers service uses First Rung to teach their new staff about work-based learning.

8. First Rung sets challenging and appropriate targets for its staff. As identified in the self-assessment report, appraisals effectively link personal development and training needs to the business plan. Short-term targets are set and monitored. Staff are fully supported to achieve appropriate additional qualifications. Individual staff development is not always recorded and First Rung does not monitor how staff training is improving its services to learners.

9. Management information is collected and recorded on a recently upgraded computer database. As a result, inspectors were not able to analyse separate achievements for level 1 and 2 learners before this year. Insufficient use is made of this information for the overall management and monitoring of the training provision. Targets for recruitment are set in line with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) contract.

10. Inadequate planning for modern apprenticeships has resulted in very poor achievement rates across the areas of learning. Learners were recruited before First Rung was able to offer the full modern apprenticeship framework for learners. Staff did not have the expertise to teach key skills. As a result, learners have been unable to meet all the requirements of the framework. Staff are currently training to teach key skills and there are presently a limited number of modern apprenticeships in the organisation.

Equality of opportunity**Contributory grade 2**

11. First Rung has an equal opportunities policy that is reviewed and updated regularly. It refers to all relevant legislation and is circulated in the staff handbook. The policy is clear, but references to numerous other policies and procedures contained in the quality assurance manual makes the presentation too complex. There are clear anti-harassment and complaints procedures. Staff are able to discuss working time arrangements with managers freely, and the organisation has a flexible approach to staff hours to take account of individuals' needs and family commitments. Staff have annual training in equality of opportunity issues, but some staff had poor recollection of the training session.

12. All learners are involved in a well-planned three-hour session on equality of opportunity issues at their induction. Learners watch a video, take part in a discussion and answer written questions to test their understanding. An information sheet about discrimination uses difficult language and is not easy to understand. Learners who are not employed directly have a further training session during the four weeks workshop. Most learners interviewed during the inspection had a good understanding of a range of equality of opportunity issues. All were aware of anti-harassment and grievance policies.

13. Employers and work-placement providers complete a declaration stating their commitment to equality of opportunity and attach a copy of their equal opportunities policy or agree to use First Rung's policy. First Rung also checks on accessibility for wheelchair users. No further checks on how employers are applying these policies take place, other than in response to issues raised by learners at progress reviews.

14. Learners have a formal progress review at least once a quarter. Reviewers question learners systematically about their training and their personal development. Comments are written on a standard monitoring form. Learners are asked carefully about their understanding of equality of opportunity and how this might relate to them in the workplace. Any problems raised are dealt with quickly.

15. Training co-ordinators keep in regular contact with careers advisers and also attend careers events at local schools. Marketing leaflets are well designed to appeal to different cultural groups. Staff from minority ethnic backgrounds provide positive role models. There has been successful recruitment of young people from minority ethnic backgrounds. Fifty-seven per cent of First Rung's learners are from minority ethnic communities compared with a 14.1 per cent minority ethnic population for Enfield as a whole and 18.4 per cent for Barnet as a whole.

16. Premises at the Colindale site are accessible for learners with restricted mobility, but the Edmonton premises are not. There are plans to relocate this training centre to provide more suitable facilities and better access.

Quality assurance**Contributory grade 4**

17. First Rung has clear policies and procedures to identify and deal with learners' needs. The main vehicle for this is progress reviews and workshop evaluations. A critical examination of the outcomes of these is the main focus of the quality assurance procedure. The result is a skilful analysis of individual learning. Senior managers agree the priorities for improvement. Training co-ordinators pass on information to ensure improvements are made. During further reviews, staff monitor improvements. The company manages this process well. Effective arrangements for internal verification include a systematic plan for carrying out and monitoring assessments. Assessors are observed regularly and given clear feedback.

18. First Rung has procedures for complaints and grievances, for internal verification and for health and safety. The quality assurance policy is updated regularly and a set of statements define quality in many aspects of the training process. There is, however, no overall framework for assuring quality. The quality statements do not describe how the particular activity should be carried out, or provide guidance on the standard to which something should be done. Learners' files are checked regularly to ensure they contain all the necessary documents, but the standard of information is not monitored. There is no systematic analysis of an occupational area using a range of data. The focus of quality assurance remains in the performance of the individual learner. Strategic analysis is rarely used to develop improvement plans.

19. First Rung has been slow to carry out work on some action plans prepared in August 2001, following self-assessment. Some of the areas it has failed to deal with, such as the lack of involvement of employers in training, were identified as key weaknesses at the inspection.

20. Retention rates are low in three of the five occupational areas, and there are some poor achievement rates. Data have not been analysed to identify a pattern to early leavers. First Rung has introduced a number of strategies to improve retention recently. For example, a work-placement development plan aims to place learners in their first eight weeks of joining. Additional guidance is provided at interview and a tracking system monitors the frequency of assessor visits. Retention rates have not yet improved.

Good Practice
<p><i>The trustees of First Rung use their professional expertise for the benefit of the company. For example, one trustee observes learning sessions and gives useful feedback to staff, another conducts mock interviews with the learners. At the request of the chief executive a trustee has conducted individual interviews for the annual staff survey of the provision.</i></p>

AREAS OF LEARNING

Business administration, management & professional

Grade 3

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	46	3

21. First Rung has 46 learners in business administration. Three learners are foundation modern apprentices working towards NVQs at level 2 and two are advanced modern apprentices working towards an NVQ at level 3. These learners are all employed. There are 41 learners on other work-based learning programmes, of whom 18 are working towards an NVQ at level 1, and 22 are working towards an NVQ at level 2. Fifty per cent of these learners are employed and the rest have work placements with a range of local organisations. Most learners are recruited through the careers service, but a number are recruited directly from employers. Many learners have progressed to NVQ training from the Life Skills training programme. More than 60 per cent of learners have additional social or learning needs. Fifty per cent come from minority ethnic groups. Learners can join the training programme at any point in the year. Most training is carried out on the job by workplace supervisors. Learners only attend the centre to practise skills that they cannot gain in the workplace. Four administration assessors visit workplaces at least fortnightly to plan and carry out assessments. There are three-monthly progress reviews. A significant number of learners gain permanent jobs while in their work placements.

The following tables show the achievement and retention rates available up to the time of the inspection.

Work-based learning for young people										
Foundation modern apprenticeships (FMA)										
	1997-98		1998-99		1999-2000		2000-01		2001-02	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number that started					22		8		1	
Still in training					0	0	2	25	1	100
FMA framework completed					1	5	0	0	0	0
NVQ level 2 completed					11	50	3	38	0	0
Left without completing the framework					10	45	3	38	0	0

Work-based learning for young people										
Advanced modern apprenticeships (AMA)										
	1997-98		1998-99		1999-2000		2000-01		2001-02	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number that started			7		4		1		1	
Still in training			0	0	0	0	1	100	1	100
AMA framework completed			1	14	1	25	0	0	0	0
NVQ level 2 completed			0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
NVQ level 3 completed			1	14	1	25	0	0	0	0
Left without completing the framework			6	86	2	50	0	0	0	0

NVQ Training										
NVQ Training										
	1997-98		1998-99		1999-2000		2000-01		2001-02	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number that started	54		82		53		72		47	
Still in training	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	12	32	68
Individual learning plan completed	35	65	49	60	32	60	47	65	0	0
Left without completing individual learning plan	19	35	33	40	21	40	16	22	15	32
NVQ level 1 completed	24	44	36	44	23	43	35	49	0	0
NVQ level 2 completed	11	20	13	16	9	17	5	7	0	0

STRENGTHS

- thorough initial assessment and induction
- effective use of work-based learning
- good action-planning and target-setting

WEAKNESSES

- slow achievement rates of NVQs at Edmonton site
- poor retention and achievement rates of learners
- poor development of background knowledge

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- more careers advice and guidance
- better contingency planning for staff absence
- clarify employers' roles and responsibilities in the learning process

22. There is a thorough and effective process of initial assessment and induction. Recruitment is followed by a comprehensive induction to the workplace and a separate induction to the training programme. All learners attend a five-day induction, during which trainers carefully explain learners' rights and responsibilities, health and safety, equal opportunities and appeals procedures. The materials used in induction are good. Tutors ensure that learners understand the information required for their work placement. During induction, learners take diagnostic tests to determine their occupational aptitude and any basic skills needs. Learners' key skills are assessed. Staff discuss the results of assessments with learners and use the results to determine the level of training. Many learners spend up to two months developing their basic skills at the training centre before progressing to an NVQ training programme. Learners find this initial training invaluable as it gives them confidence to cope in work placements and to achieve their NVQ.

23. Effective use is made of work-based learning. The company uses a careful screening process and its wide network of employers to find suitable work placements for those learners not already employed. Assessors liaise frequently with employers to link training in the workplace effectively to the requirements of the NVQ standards. Supervisors are involved fully in the process, but the roles and responsibilities of all those involved in the NVQ training are not always clear. Many learners have challenging jobs. Learners are enthusiastic about their training, and appreciate the commitment, care and enthusiasm shown by assessors and employers. As identified in the self-assessment report, well-organised portfolios contain an extensive range of diverse evidence. Learners are proud of their portfolios. Learners who join the administration training programme with few qualifications and low self-esteem make significant progress. Many are offered long-term employment after a few months in a work placement. Although employers offer good training, much of it is specific to their organisation or the job role. There is insufficient development of background knowledge or exploration of alternative methods of carrying out administrative tasks. This weakness was not identified through self-assessment. Occasionally, if a learner cannot gain the necessary experience in the workplace, First Rung provides individual training to develop skills such as telephone techniques, computer skills or customer service. Learners are given some advice on careers during training, but it is not always sufficiently specific.

24. Well-structured individual action-planning and target-setting motivate learners and are beginning to improve their rate of progress. Short-term action plans are related

clearly to the NVQ standards and give learners an achievable but demanding set of targets. Employers value the information they receive in the action plans as it enables them to identify ways in which the learner can gather evidence of their NVQ competences. The action plan is reviewed every two weeks during the assessor's visit and if actions are not completed, the learner and the assessor discuss the reasons why. Learners welcome the frequent contact they have with their assessors.

25. Achievement of NVQs in administration has been slow at one centre, with one group of learners taking between a year and 18 months to complete an NVQ at level 1 or 2. There have been frequent changes of assessors because of ill health. Some learners received no visits for several weeks when an assessor left earlier this year. As acknowledged in the self-assessment report, retention rates and achievement rates of modern apprenticeship frameworks have been particularly poor, with only one advanced modern apprentice out of four achieving the requirements of the full framework in the past three years. Only one of 32 foundation modern apprentices achieved the full framework in the same period. Staff lack qualifications to train or assess in key skills, and are currently receiving training.

Good Practice

First Rung's staff are exceptionally supportive to disadvantaged young people. One learner joined the Life Skills programme after leaving school early with no qualifications because of bullying. With support, she achieved number power, wordpower and computer qualifications, then progressed to an NVQ at level 1 in administration, followed by a national traineeship. Aged only 20, she is embarking on an accountancy course.

Information & communications technology

Grade 3

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	34	3

26. First Rung provides work-based learning leading to NVQs in using IT at levels 1 and 2. There are 21 learners at level 1, and 13 at level 2. First Rung no longer offers modern apprenticeships in this area. Most learners are recruited to the training programmes from the careers service and have additional learning and/or social needs. Training includes sessions to develop social, literacy and numeracy skills. Off-the job training is provided in computer workshops at both of First Rung's training centres. There are two separate four-week training programmes. The first is designed to bring learners' skills to a level where they are ready for employment. The second programme has been introduced recently to further develop learners' computer skills and their personal and social skills. Learners can achieve a national basic computer skills qualification when they have completed the second training programme. After the basic training, learners continue to develop their computer and personal skills, and to collect evidence for their NVQs with local employers.

The following tables show the achievement and retention rates available up to the time of the inspection.

Work-based learning for young people										
Foundation modern apprenticeships (FMA)										
	1997-98		1998-99		1999-2000		2000-01		2001-02	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number that started			1		4		2			
Still in training			0	0	0	0	0	0		
FMA framework completed			0	0	0	0	0	0		
NVQ level 2 completed			1	100	2	50	0	0		
Left without completing the framework			0	0	2	50	2	100		

NVQ Training										
NVQ Training										
	1997-98		1998-99		1999-2000		2000-01		2001-02	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number that started	96		121		161		34		42	
Still in training	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	21	27	64
Individual learning plan completed	73	76	88	73	125	78	9	26	0	0
Left without completing individual learning plan	23	24	33	27	36	22	18	53	15	36
NVQ level 1 completed	58	60	70	58	101	63	5	15	0	0
NVQ level 2 completed	15	16	18	15	24	15	3	9	0	0

STRENGTHS

- good workshop resources
- good off-the-job training
- good assessment practice

WEAKNESSES

- poor recent retention and achievement rates on level 1 training
- slow progress for some learners
- insufficient involvement of workplace supervisors in learners' training

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better understanding by workplace supervisors of NVQs

27. First Rung provides good workshop resources for learners. This strength was not recognised in the self-assessment report. There are adequate, well laid-out workstations and up-to-date computers and software which meet industrial requirements. The workshop has good facilities for practical demonstrations and background information training. Access to the Internet, and a well-stocked library of relevant publications and guides, provide learners with excellent resources.

28. Good off-the-job training is planned following assessment. Learners are given basic skills tests and vocationally specific tests. Induction is planned well and learners find it enjoyable and informative. Following induction, the learners attend well-structured training programmes which take into account individual additional learning or social

needs. Lesson plans are good. They show clear objectives and specify appropriate learning resources. There are good handouts for learners which contain clear instructions and useful illustrations. Following completion of the initial training programme, First Rung tries to match learners to work placements. The recently introduced second training programme has been planned carefully to enable learners to use their initiative and imagination while continuing to develop life and social skills. Learners are motivated by the introduction of a new award, which can be gained on completion of the training programme. Learners who gain a work placement before the end of their training programme are encouraged to achieve the award. During the training programmes, information about individual progress and feedback from learners on their training experience is collated and analysed weekly. This information is used to plan improvements to the training programme.

29. Assessment practice is good. Assessors visit the workplaces frequently to discuss progress, agree action plans, and carry out assessment. Learners value the support they receive. Assessors are sensitive to the fact that most learners have additional learning and social needs, and give good pastoral support, advice and coaching. Portfolios are well structured. As identified in the self-assessment report a range of diverse evidence is used. Learners are proud of their portfolios. Assessors observe learners' performance on many occasions. Records of these observations and discussions with learners are detailed, and linked to the relevant NVQ standards. Internal verification practice is good. Portfolios are sampled at an appropriate frequency. Assessment practice is observed periodically, and feedback given to assessors on their performance. Internal verifiers and assessors discuss assessment practice and ensure standardisation. Good assessment practice is common to both centres.

30. Recent retention and achievement rates of level 1 learners have been poor. In the three years to March 2000, achievement and retention rates on the NVQ training programme were satisfactory. Since then, there has been decreasing recruitment, declining achievement rates and a rise in the number of early leavers. Of those learners starting at level 1 and 2 in 2000-01, 33 per cent have completed their NVQ. Fifty-five per cent left the training programme early with no qualifications. Seven learners are still in training. Of the level 1 learners starting in 2001-02, 50 per cent have left early, with no qualifications. The fall in recruitment to the training programme and the fall in achievement and retention rates coincide with a radical change in assessment strategy imposed by the awarding body. First Rung has made fundamental and appropriate changes to its training programmes to enhance the employability of learners in response to the change in strategy. It is too soon to measure the effectiveness of these.

31. Some learners are making slow progress. Although First Rung's policy is for learners to move into work placements at the end of the initial four-week training programme, this is not achieved in most cases. Many learners are still without a work placement three or more months into their training programme. It is too early to determine whether the extended training programme will improve this situation. Additional training is provided for those learners who are not placed, but they are unable to progress with their NVQs until they have a work placement. Once in work placements,

some learners do not make sufficient progress as they are not set demanding enough targets, or shown how to gather workplace evidence effectively to build up their portfolios. Some learners are in roles that give them few opportunities to practise and develop their computer skills and collect valid evidence from their work.

32. Some workplace supervisors are not sufficiently involved in their learners' training. Many supervisors have a poor awareness of the specific requirements of NVQs. Not all employers provide written comments for learners' progress reviews. Where supervisors take the initiative, the process works well and the assessor and supervisor regularly work together in the interests of the learner. Some supervisors are prepared for learners to work on portfolios in work time, but learners are not aware of this. Some learners, whose job role has changed when they gain employment, find it difficult to demonstrate the necessary skills for their NVQ.

Good Practice

Computer skills training sessions have been designed skilfully to encourage learners to be imaginative. One training session, required learners to invent a brand name for a product, determine the market needs, and identify the key features to make it attractive to customers. They then created an electronic presentation to advertise and market their product effectively.

Retailing, customer service & transportation**Grade 3**

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	23	3

33. First Rung currently provides training towards NVQs in retailing at level 2 and distributive operations at level 1. Two training sites are used. Most learners are referred to First Rung from the local careers service. There are 23 learners, of whom 15 have additional learning or social needs. Individual support is offered by the assessor as required. Learners can join the training programme at any point during the year. Learners' levels of basic skills and occupational skills are identified through initial assessment and any prior qualifications or achievements are noted. A five-day induction is carried out. Work placements are arranged in local and national organisations and charity shops. Agreements are signed and health and safety appraisals are carried out before learners are placed. Two of the 23 learners are employed.

The following tables show the achievement and retention rates available up to the time of the inspection.

Work-based learning for young people										
Foundation modern apprenticeships (FMA)										
	1997-98		1998-99		1999-2000		2000-01		2001-02	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number that started			2		19		5			
Still in training			0	0	0	0	0	0		
FMA framework completed			0	0	0	0	2	40		
NVQ level 2 completed			1	50	7	37	4	80		
Left without completing the framework			2	100	12	63	3	60		

Work-based learning for young people										
Advanced modern apprenticeships (AMA)										
	1997-98		1998-99		1999-2000		2000-01		2001-02	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number that started					17					
Still in training					0	0				
AMA framework completed					0	0				
NVQ level 2 completed					0	0				
NVQ level 3 completed					0	0				
Left without completing the framework					17	100				

NVQ Training										
NVQ Training										
	1997-98		1998-99		1999-2000		2000-01		2001-02	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number that started	68		44		54		26		40	
Still in training	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	23	57
Individual learning plan completed	36	53	19	43	26	48	20	77	1	3
Left without completing individual learning plan	32	47	25	57	28	52	6	23	16	40
NVQ level 1 completed	23	34	13	30	19	35	15	58	0	0
NVQ level 2 completed	13	19	6	14	7	13	5	19	2	5

STRENGTHS

- effective pre-assessment planning
- good action-planning
- good understanding of NVQs by learners

WEAKNESSES

- insufficient involvement in training by work-placement providers
- no accreditation of NVQ units
- poor achievement rate of foundation modern apprentices

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- more learning materials to cover background knowledge

34. Thorough and effective pre-assessment sessions introduce learners to their training. Each element of the NVQ is explained carefully in a way that learners can understand. Staff explain which methods of providing evidence are acceptable. Realistic dates for achieving targets are agreed. Action-planning is carried out effectively during assessors' visits. Clear short-term targets are agreed. Staff ensure learners understand how to achieve their targets. Progress towards achievement is checked at the next visit. This clear and effective action-planning is helping learners on NVQ training to progress at an appropriate rate.

35. Learners have a good understanding about what they need to do to achieve their NVQ and how the process works. Learners are given good written guidelines, which

they find easy to use. Resource materials, such as videos, computers and handouts are adequate, but there is not enough information on all the background knowledge required in the retail industry. Assessors are skilled at showing learners how to cross-reference their evidence. Clear explanations and regular reminders are given throughout the training to help the learner. The self-assessment report does not identify these strengths.

36. Work-placement providers are insufficiently involved in the planning and reviewing of training, a weakness identified in the self-assessment report. They do not take part in the pre-assessment planning or the planning of training. Some discussions take place to ensure the appropriateness of the NVQ units selected by the learner. Insufficient use is made of witness statements at some work placements. Provider's comments recorded on learner's progress reviews during assessor's visits are brief and their views are not included in the learner's formal review.

37. There has been no unit accreditation for learners who leave without achieving a full NVQ. Learners are not gaining certificates for work that could help them to gain employment or be accredited towards another qualification. First Rung has recognised the omission and now checks whether any recent leavers have completed units that can be accredited. In the past, there have been poor achievement and retention rates on foundation and modern apprenticeships. First Rung is no longer offering modern apprenticeships in this area of learning.

38. Learners who started in 2001-02 are making appropriate progress towards completing their NVQ. There has been recent improvements in planning and support. The proportion of learners who achieved their NVQs rose from 52 per cent in 1997-98 to 74 per cent in 2000-01.

Health, social care & public services

Grade 3

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	18	3

39. First Rung offers NVQs at level 2 in early years care and education. There are 18 learners in training. All the learners are women and eight are from minority ethnic groups. Seven of the 18 have additional learning or social needs. Three learners have progressed from the Life Skills training programme. Most of the others are referred by the careers service. Learners can join the training programme at any time during the year. They have a one-week induction. Trainers assess key skills and basic skills and set a written test of the learners' understanding of child development. Learners watch a video about equal opportunities and discuss the content. Learners write a pre-assessment plan with a trainer which sets out how they will be assessed and whether they have additional learning needs. One learner is employed and the others receive a training allowance and help with the costs of travel. All learners spend four days each week working in playgroups, nurseries, nursery classes or schools. They attend First Rung's training on the fifth day to gain background knowledge on childcare and development. The assessor offers support to individuals on this day. All skills assessments take place in the workplace. There is one assessor who is experienced in early years care and one part-time trainer. An internal verifier from a local assessment centre is monitoring the quality of assessment practice. The Edmonton training co-ordinator reviews learners' progress every three months.

The following tables show the achievement and retention rates available up to the time of the inspection.

Work-based learning for young people										
Advanced modern apprenticeships (AMA)										
	1997-98		1998-99		1999-2000		2000-01		2001-02	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number that started			5		2		3			
Still in training			0	0	0	0	0	0		
AMA framework completed			0	0	0	0	0	0		
NVQ level 2 completed			0	0	0	0	0	0		
NVQ level 3 completed			0	0	0	0	0	0		
Left without completing the framework			5	100	2	100	3	100		

NVQ Training										
NVQ Training										
	1997-98		1998-99		1999-2000		2000-01		2001-02	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number that started			10		23		16		18	
Still in training			0	0	0	0	4	25	14	78
Individual learning plan completed			8	80	20	87	7	44	0	0
Left without completing individual learning plan			2	20	3	13	5	31	3	17
NVQ level 1 completed			0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
NVQ level 2 completed			0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

STRENGTHS

- good retention and achievement rates for level 2 NVQs
- effective support for individual learners
- good development of learners' understanding of diverse cultures

WEAKNESSES

- insufficiently thorough monitoring of assessments
- inadequate understanding of NVQ process by learners
- insufficient information for workplace supervisors about learning

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- less reliance on written evidence
- more detailed action-planning
- more resources relating to children aged five to eight

40. There were good retention and achievement rates between 1998 and 2000, when 80 per cent or more of learners, who started NVQs at level 2, achieved their awards. Nearly half of learners have achieved the NVQ level 2 for the year 2000 to 2001, and a further quarter are still in training. First Rung has retained a high number of learners in the current year, with 14 of the 17 starters still on the training programme.

41. First Rung provides particularly good support for learners. This strength was recognised in the self-assessment report. The staff ensure that learners are adequately supported by careers advisers. All learners have a thorough induction to the company

and to NVQ training whenever they join. They are placed in appropriate work placements within a week of starting. Learners who make significant progress on the Life Skills training programme are transferred promptly to the early years NVQ. First Rung's staff are friendly to learners and build good working relationships with staff in the workplaces. There is effective communication between the training centre and workplaces. Arrangements that have been agreed are confirmed in writing. Workplaces are notified promptly of any changes to plans. The assessor effectively monitors the learners' progress during fortnightly visits to each work placement. Workplace supervisors and the assessor give constructive written feedback to learners. First Rung's staff carry out comprehensive reviews of learners' progress and satisfaction with their training at planned intervals. Staff direct learners to external agencies when learners need additional specialist support and guidance.

42. Trainers are effective in developing learners' understanding of cultural diversity. A planned series of activities introduces equal opportunities issues, such as discrimination, during the first week at the training centre. Learners' understanding is checked through discussion. Photographs of families, case studies and other learning materials used by First Rung reflect various cultures. Work placements offer good opportunities for learners to work alongside adults and children from diverse ethnic communities. Learners are set appropriate projects that provide evidence for their NVQs while encouraging a wider knowledge of differing lifestyles. Learners are asked to research equipment to meet the needs of children from different cultures in their settings.

43. First Rung has not been thoroughly verifying assessments of learners' skills and knowledge. The assessor qualified recently. While training, her assessment decisions were not monitored by an occupationally competent assessor. The training centre does not have a complete set of copies of external verifiers' reports. The previous assessment centre held standardisation meetings, but the assessor has not attended them regularly. Assessment practices are satisfactory. The assessor discusses assessments with learners and agrees the timing with workplace supervisors. However, learners are not sufficiently active in deciding which elements will be assessed or in recording their assessment plans. The assessor makes detailed notes of learners' skills while observing them, and provides written feedback.

44. Learners have an inadequate understanding of the NVQ process. Learners do not decide when different types of evidence are appropriate. They do not identify the elements for assessment. Not enough use is made of questioning to help learners to identify where one piece of evidence can be matched to different parts of the standards. Learners are not clear about the purpose of some written evidence and how it links to knowledge and understanding. They cannot identify clearly what they have achieved and what evidence they still need to collect. They are unsure which units they must complete and what optional units they can choose.

45. First Rung's staff do not tell workplace supervisors what off-the-job training is planned. Supervisors cannot ensure that learners have practical experience that relates to background knowledge training sessions. Learners do not collect sufficient evidence

of their competence through their everyday work.

46. Learners' portfolios contain more written evidence than is needed to show knowledge and understanding. Learners are required to write reflective accounts for elements that will be assessed by observation in the workplace. There is insufficient use of questions and witness testimonies. Action plans do not set out in sufficient detail what learners need to do to achieve the next stage in their learning. Learning is planned to develop understanding of children up to the age of five, rather than the full early years age range. There are few resources to help learners understand children's development and the curriculum for five to eight year olds.

Good Practice

Learners negotiate and write a set of guidelines about how to behave in learning sessions at the centre. This establishes the rights of individuals to a confidential and sympathetic hearing during group discussions. Learners feel secure and have the confidence to play an active part. The guidelines are revised from time to time.

Foundation programmes

Grade 3

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Life Skills	36	3

47. Life Skills training at First Rung is designed to help learners develop their self-confidence and motivation, identify a career aim and progress into employment with training, work-based learning or further education. Currently, there are 36 learners on the training programme. Training lasts for up to 19 weeks, but is extended for some learners. Most learners stay for less than the allowed time and the average length of stay is eight weeks. Learners attend for a maximum of 24 hours a week, and must attend for 16 hours. Learners are encouraged to attend for the full 24 hours. Training timetables include a mixture of activities, such as working with computers, literacy and numeracy training, and group activities designed to build confidence and develop life and social skills. Learners may attend work placements and may join occupational training to gain experience of the world of work. Three full-time, and three part-time, staff are involved in Life Skills training.

48. Before April 2000, First Rung provided initial training. During 2000-01, initial training and Life Skills were offered. Since April 2001, First Rung has provided only Life Skills training.

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

Foundation Programmes										
Foundation Programmes										
	1997-98		1998-99		1999-2000		2000-01		2001-02	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number that started	122		129		261		130		121	
Still in training	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	36	30
Gained job with training/progressed to further training and/or planned learning completed	2	2	16	12	8	3	8	6	28	23
Left without either	72	59	69	53	76	29	69	53	43	36
Gained job with training	2	2	8	6	2	1	1	1	2	2
Progressed to further training	0	0	8	6	6	2	7	5	26	21
Planned learning completed	50	41	60	47	185	71	81	62	42	35

STRENGTHS

- good coaching and training
- good use of work placements and occupational tasters
- effective progress reviews

WEAKNESSES

- weak individual target-setting and action-planning
- poor retention and progression rates

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better progression to employment, further education and training
- more imaginative teaching of basic skills
- further development of enrichment activities

49. Staff use good training and coaching techniques. Training groups are small, and staff use good techniques to build confidence and help to overcome learners' fears. Some imaginative activities are used to good effect. For example, a single activity, the main objective of which was to extract information from newspapers, was used to practise teamworking, interpersonal skills, numeracy and verbal communication skills, as well as reading and comprehension skills. Learners are challenged to attempt new tasks and to reflect on what they accomplish. They respond enthusiastically to their trainers. Those learners interviewed could describe what they had learned. Basic skills training is available for those who need it, but there is little variety in teaching methods. The training timetable provides a variety of activities, but there are few practical activities to enrich the experience of learners. The self-assessment report identifies the need for more enrichment activities and better basic skills training, but does not recognise the good standards of training.

50. Good use is made of work experience and occupational tasters. Many learners are currently gaining valuable experience with employers. These include work placements with retail outlets, childcare providers, and in offices. Placements are matched carefully to learners' interests and career aims, and First Rung takes into account any learning and support needs. Effective use of work placements helps learners to develop many personal skills to enhance their job prospects and to gain practical experience of work. Learners may also join training sessions in their vocational area and some have started assessment towards an NVQ. Learners are positive about their work experience and see it as an important part of their training. The self-assessment report recognises the good use of work placements.

51. Progress reviews are conducted sensitively, in an atmosphere of trust. There are close and co-operative working relationships between those involved. Staff conducting reviews are well prepared and knowledgeable. They are aware of any work placements, progress reviews in training and any pastoral support needs, and incorporate these well into the progress review. Staff use excellent questioning and listening techniques, allowing learners to formulate ideas and express their own views. The learners interviewed felt that they are listened to and treated as adults. Many of them described positive changes that have taken place as a result of their progress reviews. The self-assessment report identifies the good pastoral support for learners, but does not recognise the good quality of progress reviews.

52. Staff work with learners to identify learning and support needs. A screening test is used to identify basic skills training needs, but diagnostic assessment is informal and not well recorded. Individual action-planning and target-setting are weak. Development plans are bland and lack clear, simple, individual targets. Records of reviews lack detail and do not reflect progress towards targets. This makes it difficult to pass information between the many people involved in training and supporting each young person and means that the learners do not have a clear, simple way to measure their own progress.

53. Retention rates are poor. Of 121 learners who started during 2001-02, 51 per cent left without achieving the targets on their individual learning plan or moving to employment or training. Twenty-eight leavers for this period moved into employment, further education or work-based learning. This represents a progression rate of 32 per cent, which is acceptable for this group of learners, but means that 68 per cent of leavers have not achieved the objectives of training. The self-assessment report recognises the need for improved progression rates, but does not identify poor retention as a weakness.

Good Practice

A member of staff with experience of theatre uses drama as a training tool to enable learners to explore topics that affect their lives. Learners act out different scripts in their group, and the activity prompts debate and discussion. This challenges learners to express themselves, draws out undiscovered talents and allows them to learn in a fun and unfamiliar way.

Poor Practice

A learner with reading and writing difficulties took up a work placement in childcare. She carried out tasks that could have provided evidence towards an early years care and education NVQ. Her workplace supervisors were positive about her potential to work in childcare. The assessment methods for the NVQ require reflective accounts and questionnaires. There is little use of diverse assessment methods that can be used to judge competence. Although she was not discouraged from attempting the award, the learner was advised that she would find it difficult because of the amount of written work. This placed unnecessary obstacles in the way of her achieving her objectives.