

INSPECTION REPORT

Starting Off

12 November 2001



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

STARTING OFF

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 **learndirect** 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

Starting Off is a limited company which functions as a specialised employment agency, and as a training provider offering work-based learning in administration and retailing and customer service for young people. It is based in the towns of Northampton, Kettering and Peterborough and its headquarters are in Northampton.

Overall judgement

The quality of the provision is adequate to meet the needs of those receiving it. The quality of work-based learning is satisfactory. Leadership and management are satisfactory in most respects with the exception of equality of opportunity.

GRADES

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

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

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

STARTING OFF

KEY STRENGTHS

- good off-the-job training
- good learning materials
- good achievement of additional, vocationally relevant qualifications
- effective measures to secure employment for learners
- good development of staff
- comprehensive internal verification
- flexible working arrangements for staff

KEY WEAKNESSES

- opportunities for assessment not fully exploited
- poor understanding of NVQs and the modern apprenticeship framework by employers
- slow progress in developing and assessing learners' key skills
- no medium- to long-term business strategy
- unclear criteria for the selection of learners
- little action to promote equality of opportunity
- poor standard of premises

THE INSPECTION

1. A team of five inspectors spent a total of 25 days at Starting Off in November 2001. They interviewed 62 learners, observed 12 learning sessions, examined 26 portfolios and 21 learning plans. They visited 19 work placements, spoke to 18 employers and conducted 68 interviews with staff. In addition, they examined the company's policies and procedures, its promotional material, its staff handbook and learners' induction material and awarding body reports. Inspectors studied the company's first self-assessment report which was produced in August 2001.

Grades awarded to learning sessions

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Total
Business administration, management & professional	0	1	4	2	0	0	0	7
Retailing, customer service & transportation	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	5
Total	0	1	6	5	0	0	0	12

THE PROVIDER AS A WHOLE

Context

2. Starting Off is a limited company with headquarters in Northampton and additional bases in Kettering and Peterborough. It was established in 1989 as an employment agency for young people aged 16 to 21 years. The training function was established in 1990 to give an alternative to the youth training scheme. In 1999, the business was refocused to meet the demands of work-based learning, and there was a decline in learner numbers during this transition. Since then, the training side of the business has grown and now accounts for approximately 60 per cent of the company's annual income. In 2001, a specialist recruitment service for young graduates was introduced. The training relates to office-based occupations, and consists of business administration, accountancy, estate agency, customer service and information technology (IT). There are 298 learners and all are modern apprentices. An intensive six-week work preparation course assists young people who are not ready for employment. There are 16 modern apprentices currently on this programme. IT training has been established very recently and, as yet, there are few learners. Most of the off-the-job training takes place at the training provider's sites, but some is subcontracted to six other training providers. Five of these are further education colleges and one is a private training provider. Starting Off has 41 staff. Twenty-two are full time and the rest are part time.

3. Training is funded by Northamptonshire and Peterborough Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs). Starting Off aims to work with learners who have achieved four general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C or above. The LSCs recognise the training provision as complementary to that of other training providers in the area who work with more disadvantaged young people. They expect retention and achievement rates to be high.

4. In Northampton, service industries account for 69.5 per cent of jobs, in Kettering for 68 per cent and in Peterborough unitary authority for 78.4 per cent. In September 2001, unemployment rates were 2.3 per cent in Northampton, 1.8 per cent in Kettering and 2.3 per cent in Peterborough, compared with 2.9 per cent nationally. In 2000, the proportion of school leavers achieving five or more GCSEs at grade C or above was 38 per cent in Northampton, 42 per cent in Peterborough and 42 per cent in Kettering, compared with the national average of 49.2 per cent. The 1991 census shows that the proportion of people from minority ethnic groups is 6 per cent in Northampton, 3.5 per cent in Kettering and 7.3 per cent in Peterborough, compared with 6.2 per cent nationally.

5. A significant proportion of learners achieve the targets on their individual learning plans and achieve their qualifications. However, there is scope for improving the achievement rates, given the entry level of most young people. Many learners achieve additional, vocationally relevant qualifications which enhance their employability. Off-the-job training is good, and is flexible enough to accommodate the learners' needs. The

learning materials are good. The training provider shows considerable initiative in finding jobs for young people. Work placements offer good potential for learning, and there are positive relationships with employers. However, opportunities for assessment are not always taken. Employers have not been made sufficiently aware of the design of NVQs, the structure of the modern apprenticeship framework, and their own responsibilities for creating learning and assessment opportunities. Staff do not approach key skills development and assessment with the same effectiveness as other aspects of the modern apprenticeship framework.

6. Staff are fully aware of business targets and their own responsibility for achieving them. Investment in staff development is recognised as an important method of building the company and improving the quality of the learner's experience. Staff are actively involved in initiatives to improve the company's operations. Internal verification is strong and there is good use of data to evaluate company performance. However, quality assurance systems are not comprehensive. The company has done little to actively promote equality of opportunity. Premises are poor.

Work-based learning for young people

7. Learners gain additional qualifications which enhance their employability, and there are good arrangements for off-the-job training. Learners on business administration programmes benefit from effective planning, although it is not fully developed in customer service. Good learning materials have been produced for business administration learners. Opportunities for assessment are not always taken. Retention and achievement rates on all programmes are satisfactory.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 3

8. Starting Off has two directors, one of whom is the managing director, who oversees work at all three sites. Each training centre has a recruitment manager, a senior training co-ordinator and a senior trainer. In two instances, these functions are carried out by the same people working across two sites. The recruitment manager identifies new learners and places them either in employment or in training. The senior training co-ordinator oversees the learner's experience in the workplace and the senior trainer oversees the off-the-job training. Each of these postholders is assisted by a small team of staff. A quality assurance manager monitors the organisation's performance against their contract across all three sites, while a training quality assurance manager manages the internal verification process and the managing director has overall responsibility for equal opportunities.

STRENGTHS

- effective measures to secure employment for learners
- good internal communication
- good development of staff
- innovative approaches to developing the organisation's effectiveness
- comprehensive internal verification
- good use of data related to LSC contracts
- flexible working arrangements for staff

WEAKNESSES

- no medium- to long-term business strategy
- unclear criteria for recruiting learners
- poor standard of premises
- incomplete quality assurance arrangements
- lapsed subcontracting arrangements
- no use of data to assess performance against equal opportunities criteria
- little action to promote equality of opportunity
- insufficient monitoring of equal opportunities in the workplace
- poor access to premises

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- a more formally structured staff appraisal system
- stronger contractual arrangements with employers
- regular evaluation and updating of policies
- more consistency in quality assurance processes
- better use of staff expertise to promote equality of opportunity

9. The recruitment and training functions of Starting Off complement each other well. Whenever possible, new recruits are placed directly into employment, and employers are encouraged to support them on one of the modern apprenticeship programmes. Starting Off is highly effective in this role. Over 90 per cent of learners on the intensive job preparation programme find employment, and most employers who accept an untrained applicant agree to them undertaking a modern apprenticeship. The company has a high level of credibility with the business community and many employers offer repeat business. The methods used to place young people into work are imaginative. Regular mailshots are sent to employers which give pen portraits of individual learners and what they have to offer. If a young person has difficulty travelling, mailshots are targeted to his or her locality. There are also targeted mailshots to areas where there are new business start-ups. When a young person is finding it really difficult to get a job, the staff undertake an intensive door-to-door search until a job has been found.

10. There is good communication between the staff responsible for the three aspects of the organisation's activities. The management structure has been changed recently to facilitate this and job roles and responsibilities are clearly thought out and are understood. There is close collaboration between members of the various teams to ensure that young people receive the appropriate support. The managing director meets the senior staff at each branch every week to review performance against contract. This is preceded by a meeting of the senior training manager and the senior training co-ordinator to discuss how each learner might best be supported so that they achieve on schedule. It is followed by meetings, usually every week, with individual trainers and training co-ordinators to discuss how to progress the learner's work. Senior trainers meet each month to share good practice and to discuss new initiatives. Clear information about each branch's performance against LSC targets is presented to staff each month by either the managing directors or the quality assurance manager. New initiatives or changes by the LSC or awarding bodies are also highlighted at these meetings. Informal communication is good and the working environment is busy but friendly and supportive.

11. The company is committed to staff development. New staff undergo a period of induction which may include work-shadowing, and they find it easy to ask for help. Staff are encouraged to take on new responsibilities or a different role when they have been with the company for some time and have demonstrated their competence, and there are a number of good examples of this. In addition to their core responsibilities, staff are encouraged to undertake assignments which will advance the business. The company's

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new website, the revised design of the intensive work-preparation programme, handbooks for learners and new learning materials are all products of this approach. Staff development needs and interests are identified through a process of staff performance review. Although the company has no staff development plan for the current year, last year's plan demonstrates significant investment in staff development. The company is accredited with the Investors in People standard. Each employee's job description includes a clause which states that the postholder must have a serious interest in self-development.

12. The staff's performance reviews take place quarterly and all staff are included. The review meeting is conducted by line managers and focuses on whether staff have completed their assignments and on agreeing an action plan for the next few months. However, the scheme does not have a clear framework. For example, the criteria against which the employee's performance is being reviewed are not clear, and it is not properly recorded.

13. There have been a number of innovative measures to improve the effectiveness of the company. For example, the managing director carried out a survey of the organisation's culture. The feedback he received was one of the factors which led to a change in the management structure and the re-allocation of tasks. This has improved communication within the company. An incentive scheme has been introduced to reward teams of staff if they manage to meet the targets related to the contract. Working groups are put together for assignments. For example, the marketing group and, initially, the self-assessment group. Periodically, there are off-site development workshops where managers can review and develop their management skills.

14. There is no medium- to long-term business strategy in areas such as quality assurance, equality of opportunity and premises. Although efforts are made to improve these aspects, it is not planned to show priorities, timescales and responsibilities. The company has recently revised its written agreement with employers, but it does not clearly set out the employer's responsibilities.

15. Applicants to Starting Off are expected to have a minimum of four GCSEs at grade C and above. As part of its efforts to improve retention rates, the company has carried out an analysis of early leavers and completers and has concluded that some of the learners have additional social needs. The company considered excluding these learners in the future, but a decision was made not to do this. However, in the absence of clear, written selection criteria, some staff still think that this is a factor for rejecting candidates and this has serious implications for equality of opportunity.

16. Premises are poor. In Northampton and Peterborough, rooms are too small for the purposes intended and in Northampton, it is difficult to ensure confidentiality of meetings. There are a number of potential health and safety hazards, including holes in floors and uneven floor boards. The Northampton and Peterborough sites, in particular, are poorly maintained, with poor furnishings. At Northampton, a discarded window clutters one of the exits, while at Peterborough, a roof-top is littered with discarded

cigarettes. This is a poor working environment for staff and learners.

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade 4

17. Overall responsibility for equal opportunities lies with the company's managing director, although responsibility throughout the organisation has recently been delegated to a member of the management team. The company has an equal opportunities policy, which was reviewed in September 2001. There are also procedures for complaints and grievances. New staff and learners are given a copy of the company's policies and procedures as part of their induction.

18. The company offers a supportive working environment for its staff. Flexible working is common practice, and a number of employees have working hours which have been individually negotiated to suit their particular circumstances. There are also instances where job roles have been changed to allow staff to fulfil their commitments at home.

19. The learners are mostly women. In 1998-99, only 20 per cent of learners were men, and in 1999-2000 the proportion increased to 25 per cent, but dropped to 20 per cent again in 2000-01. The proportion of young people with disabilities in 2000-01 was 17 per cent and 4 per cent of learners were from minority ethnic groups. The company collects data on equal opportunities, but does not analyse it to use it as a basis for planning or recruitment policies. The numbers of learners with disabilities or of minority ethnic origin are in line with the demography of the area.

20. The company has done little to promote equality of opportunity, but there are plans to run an event for young men aimed at raising their awareness about training. The company's promotional literature is attractive, but does not give any reference to equality of opportunity. The local LSC carried out a review of the company's equal opportunities practice in June 2001, and made a number of recommendations for improvement. Some of these have been carried out, but it is too early to judge their impact.

21. Since August 2001, learners have been expected to attend a training session on equal opportunities. Most have now attended, and feel that it has improved their understanding of equality. Many of the staff have, or are working towards, a professional qualification which includes an element of equal opportunities. It is not clear how this has influenced practice. The company has not reviewed the effectiveness of its equal opportunities policy. However, any complaints made by learners are investigated and action is taken.

22. Monitoring of equal opportunities in the workplace is not sufficiently proactive. During the first visit to a workplace, training co-ordinators check whether the employer has an equal opportunities policy. After this, they only respond to difficulties, rather than monitoring whether the policy is implemented.

23. All three of the company's training centres are in premises which would present considerable problems to people with mobility difficulties. Two of the sites have no rooms on the ground floor. One has a lift and an internal ramp and the main site has a temporary ramp which cannot be permanently installed. The company had significantly

underestimated its weaknesses in this area.

Quality assurance**Contributory grade 3**

24. There is a range of quality assurance policies and procedures, which meet the requirements of the LSCs. Overall responsibility for quality assurance rests with the company director. There is a quality assurance manager who has responsibility for contract compliance, and quality assurance systems and procedures. The training quality assurance manager has responsibility for the quality assurance arrangements directly related to training, assessment and verification. A group of the organisation's staff are currently preparing for the re-accreditation of the Investors in People standard.

25. Internal verification is the responsibility of the training quality assurance manager and it is carried out regularly and thoroughly. It includes observation of the assessors' performance and verification of portfolios and written feedback to assessors is detailed and helpful. There is a comprehensive plan with sampling by candidates, elements, evidence type, assessors and training centres. Recording is clear, easy to understand and up to date. There are precise written procedures identifying the requirements of verification which are regularly updated, although the latest versions are not coded or dated. Assessors' meetings are infrequent, but there are detailed memos to update assessors on awarding body requirements and external verifiers' findings and subsequent actions needed. An internal verifier's newsletter is produced every quarter. Recently, assessors' competency interviews have been carried out, and staff training has been given to deal with the shortfalls.

26. The organisation has a procedure for the recruitment of learners which was produced in 2000 and has been reviewed and updated since. However, the revised version is incomplete and does not include written criteria for the selection of applicants. In November 2000, procedures for assuring the quality of training were produced and are kept by the manager at each of the training centres. A recent survey identified that the procedures are not implemented consistently, as staff at each of the three training centres have made amendments. All of these procedures have now been withdrawn from circulation and are in the process of being reviewed and amended. Currently, staff are kept up to date with changes through regular meetings with managers.

27. Some aspects of quality assurance are incomplete and this is identified in the self-assessment report. For example, employers are asked for feedback on the quality of the recruitment service, but not on the quality of the training they give. Learners are only asked to evaluate their training programme when they have finished. There is no observation of training for the staff review process. Internal audits take place to check the effectiveness of quality assurance systems, but they are infrequent and do not form part of an overall quality assurance strategy or schedule. The company regularly measures its performance against LSC financial targets and the information is shared with staff to encourage them to meet the company's targets.

28. There are six subcontractors and the remit for each varies slightly, but overall includes training, assessment and verification. The company has identified that contractual arrangements need improving and has allowed them to lapse with all but one

of the subcontractors. At present there is no written performance criteria to measure the quality of service offered by others, but the company has plans to resolve this.

29. A working party consisting of staff from across the company started work on the self-assessment report in May 2001. However, this stopped when the company received an earlier date than expected for inspection. The self-assessment report was prepared by a small group of managers and all staff received a copy. They were invited to evaluate its accuracy and to identify developments in which they would like to be involved. Their replies are awaiting analysis. It is intended that suggestions for improvement will be used to formulate a business plan. The self-assessment report is clear, and critical. Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths identified, but many others were no more than normal practice. They also agreed with a number of the weaknesses, but found others in addition.

AREAS OF LEARNING

Business administration, management & professional

Grade 3

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	235	3

30. There are 235 learners in office-based occupations. This overall figure is accurate up to the time of inspection. Accurate achievement and retention rates are not available for the period 2001-02. One hundred and forty are working towards modern apprenticeships in business administration at foundation and advanced levels. Eighty-one learners are working towards qualifications in accountancy at foundation or intermediate levels and 14 learners are modern apprentices in estate agency at foundation and advanced levels. Off-the-job training is offered at all three of the company's sites, and most learners attend for one half day each week. In addition to their main qualification, learners can undertake a range of externally accredited courses. Their progress with the off-the-job training is reviewed by trainers every week or every fortnight and their progress at work is reviewed by a training co-ordinator approximately every eight weeks. Progress reports from off-the-job training are used as a basis for the review process in the workplace. Learners are employed in the financial, service and manufacturing sectors of local companies. All learners undergo an initial assessment which includes an assessment of their basic skills. During their initial period in placement, they are helped to match the work carried out in their work placement against the requirements of their qualification.

31. Most learners are employed, but others carry out an intensive work preparation programme. This develops their basic skills and understanding to a level where they can work in administrative posts in local organisations. There are 16 young people on this training programme.

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			60		209		236			
Still in training			0	0	0	0	88	37		
FMA framework completed			38	63	135	65	94	40		
NVQ level 2 completed			44	73	154	74	99	42		
Left without completing the framework			22	37	70	33	51	22		

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			53		76		87			
Still in training			0	0	7	9	35	40		
AMA framework completed			35	66	47	62	30	34		
NVQ level 2 completed			2	4	9	12	13	15		
NVQ level 3 completed			3	6	48	63	32	37		
Left without completing the framework			18	34	28	37	22	25		

NVQ Training										
NVQ Training										
	1997-98		1998-99		1999-2000		2000-01		2001-02	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number that started			238		28		9			
Still in training			0	0	1	4	7	78		
Individual learning plan completed			154	65	14	50	2	22		
Left without completing individual learning plan			84	35	14	50	0	0		
NVQ level 1 completed			0	0	0	0	0	0		
NVQ level 2 completed			147	62	12	43	0	0		
NVQ level 3 completed			13	5	1	4	0	0		
NVQ level 4 completed			0	0	1	4	2	22		

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STRENGTHS

- flexible off-the-job training
- additional qualifications offered
- effective action-planning
- well-prepared and effective learning materials

WEAKNESSES

- poor understanding of the NVQ framework by employers
- slow progress in the development and assessment of key skills
- insufficient assessment in the workplace

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better understanding and use of national standards by learners

32. The provider has a flexible approach to the off-the job training. Good efforts are made to meet the needs of individual learners and to accommodate the requirements of the employer. For example, learners can attend the training workshops for half a day each week, one evening each week or one day each fortnight. They can change their usual day of attendance on occasions when they have other commitments, and light refreshments and a taxi service are provided free of charge, to help learners attend evening sessions.

33. Training sessions are used to help learners with their portfolio-building and to review their progress. A good level of individual advice and guidance is available throughout the sessions. Learners work at their own pace on work-related tasks which have been developed to meet the national standards. Staff have designed a comprehensive range of quality learning materials for each unit of the business administration, accountancy and estate agency qualifications, as well as for key skills. There is a good range of practice papers for those who are preparing for externally accredited examinations.

34. Good use is made of action plans and progress reports. Learners and trainers set measurable targets for the completion of the units and associated tasks which form part of the learning contract. Trainers also prepare written reports on the progress of their off-the-job training. The action plans and the progress reports then feed into the progress review process which is carried out by the training co-ordinators. The action plans are amended to take account of changes in the work pattern of the learner, and to reflect any new learning opportunities this creates. Learners contribute to the review process and can record their comments on the review form. The employer reads the

progress report from Starting Off and then makes their own written observations. All three parties sign the completed progress review form.

35. Employers' awareness of NVQs and the modern apprenticeship framework is poor, despite their involvement in the progress review process, and despite what is often a strong commitment to training and staff development within their own companies. For example, there are no links between the NVQ training given by Starting Off and the company's own, in-house training programmes. Employers are unaware that they can play an active role in creating opportunities for learners to gather evidence across a range of units.

36. Learners work towards assessment at the training provider's own sites, although observation of learning takes place in the workplace. They work on one element or unit at a time and do not collect evidence from their everyday work tasks if it does not relate to their current unit. Staff have undergone training in key skills, but progress in developing and assessing learners' competence is slow.

37. The retention and achievement rates of learners are satisfactory. In addition to their main programmes of study, learners can undertake a wide range of additional, vocationally relevant qualifications. They include word processing, text processing, audio typing, book-keeping, first aid and certificates in health and safety. Many learners gain additional qualifications. For example, in the year ending April 2001, the average pass rate in word processing across the three sites was 89 per cent.

38. Young people on the intensive work preparation programme should complete after six to eight weeks and then move into employment. Those who find it difficult to gain work after this period are given additional support and training. Starting Off's recruitment agency places some learners with employers for a trial period of up to six months.

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

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	56	3

39. There are 51 foundation modern apprentices and five advanced modern apprentices undertaking customer service NVQs at levels 2 and 3. This overall figure is accurate up to the time of inspection. Accurate achievement and retention rates are not available for the period 2001-02. Most apprentices are young people who have applied to the company's employment agency to find a job. All applicants undertake a basic skills test. When the apprentice gains a job, the results of the test and other relevant information are passed to a training co-ordinator who visits the employer and the employee to discuss the possibility of the young person undertaking an NVQ. Once a training agreement is signed, a health and safety appraisal is carried out, and the apprentice attends an induction at one of the training provider's training centres. When this is not possible, the induction is carried out in the workplace, and the employer is invited to attend. A series of workshops on background knowledge are carried out at each of the company's training centres. Most of the workshops are taught by a subcontractor who is also responsible for the NVQ registration, assessment and internal verification. Workplace assessment is carried out using a variety of methods. Training co-ordinators visit learners approximately every eight weeks to monitor their progress but visits can be more often if necessary. The subcontractor gives details of the learners' progress in the training workshops before the visits and employers attend the monitoring meetings. Action plans with short-term targets are drawn up at each visit. In its self-assessment report, the company identified the lack of unit accreditation for apprentices who leave early as a weakness, but it has since introduced new arrangements for this. One learner has benefited from this to date. A number of apprentices have previous qualifications and they are taken into account when identifying the need to undertake all key skills activities. Resources include televisions, videos, computers, booklets and flipcharts.

40. Achievement rates for foundation modern apprentices have increased slightly from 41 per cent in 1999-2001 to 42 per cent in 2000-01. In 1999-2000, 59 per cent left early without achieving the targets on their individual learning plan. In 2000-01 the rate has improved to 24 per cent. For the advanced modern apprentices achievement in 1999-2000 was 73 per cent with 27 per cent leaving without achieving the targets on their individual learning plan. For 2000-01, 52 per cent of starters have achieved. Sixteen per cent left without achieving their targets. Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report, but others were no more than normal practice.

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			10		22		62			
Still in training			0	0	0	0	21	34		
FMA framework completed			7	70	9	41	26	42		
NVQ level 2 completed			9	90	15	68	27	44		
Left without completing the framework			3	30	13	59	15	24		

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			19		11		25			
Still in training			0	0	0	0	8	32		
AMA framework completed			7	37	8	73	13	52		
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			6	32	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			10							
Still in training			0	0						
Individual learning plan completed			1	10						
Left without completing individual learning plan			9	90						
NVQ level 1 completed			0	0						
NVQ level 2 completed			0	0						

STARTING OFF

STRENGTHS

- good off-the-job training
- good work placements
- good achievement of additional, vocationally relevant qualifications

WEAKNESSES

- insufficient assessment in the workplace
- poor use of individual learning plans

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- further development for progression to level 3
- better induction programmes

41. The standard of the off-the-job training is good. Employers and learners are given advance notice of which part of the training programme will be covered. Individual sessions are well planned, and use of a variety of teaching methods and activities. Staff have developed a range of interesting learning materials, including booklets, packs which are designed to encourage personal and career development, case studies and projects which give valuable information about the occupational area. Learners find the sessions interesting and contribute freely. They can use the training centre's resources to help them complete their portfolios.

42. Work placements are good. They offer learners the opportunity to gain valuable experience and competence in a range of tasks, including some which are not included in their qualification. Employers are supportive and are involved in the training programmes. They are aware of the qualifications and the need for apprentices to gather evidence and witness testimonies. They are involved in the progress review process and the setting of targets. Resources within the organisations are good.

43. Learners have the opportunity to gain a number of additional certificates, which help them to retain employment or improve their prospects of career advancement. For example, a substantial number of learners have gained certificates in text processing, IT and first aid. Retention and achievement rates are satisfactory.

44. Many opportunities for assessing competence for NVQs and key skills are not taken. Company policy is that no assessments are carried out until the learners have attended the series of off-the-job workshops and in some cases this takes up to six months. During this time, learners are gathering evidence for their portfolios but it is not cross-referenced to the NVQ criteria. Some workplace observations have been carried out but the details are not always referenced to the NVQ. If learners leave early, it is

not possible to accredit them with any units despite the fact that they have collected relevant evidence. Much of this evidence could also be used for the assessment of key skills.

45. Many of the learners' individual learning plans do not contain target dates for the completion of NVQ units or key skills, taking into account previous experience, prior knowledge or current levels of performance. The plans are not always referred to during the monitoring visits, and some learners are unaware of them altogether. Results from the initial basic skills test are not recorded on all plans. Internal verification is carried out at regular intervals and is thorough. Additional materials and sessions are being designed for level 3 NVQs in order to help learners' progress.

46. There is an induction programme and learners can recall this taking place, but their recollection of the content is vague. The information is given in a short period, often only two hours, and they do not absorb all the details. A number of booklets have recently been introduced or updated for reference and they were still being issued at the time of the inspection.