

INSPECTION REPORT

St Thomas Network

07 May 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 Jobcentre Plus programmes. The same scale is used to describe the quality of leadership and management, which includes quality assurance and equality of opportunity. The descriptors for the five grades are:

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

The two grading scales relate to each other as follows:

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

Adult Learning Inspectorate

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

- work-based training for all people over 16
- provision in further education colleges for people aged 19 and over
- the University for Industry's **learnirect** provision
- adult and community learning
- training funded by Jobcentre Plus
- education and training in prisons, at the invitation of her majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons.

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 Jobcentre Plus programmes 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

St Thomas Network is a charitable company limited by guarantee based in Dudley, West Midlands. It is a community learning centre which provides a range of education, training and community activities. There are currently 11 learners on Life Skills training programmes. Approximately 1,700 learners use the facilities of the training centre each year.

Overall judgement

The overall quality of the provision is adequate to meet the reasonable needs of those receiving it. More specifically, learning in Life Skills is good. Leadership and management are also good. The quality assurance and equality of opportunity aspects of the organisation are satisfactory.

GRADES

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

Foundation programmes	2
Contributory grades:	
Life Skills	2

KEY STRENGTHS

- good overall management
- very good use of external partnerships
- effective promotion of equal opportunities
- good action planning
- good progress by learners
- good pastoral support
- good basic skills support
- good resources and facilities

KEY WEAKNESSES

- inadequate use of data
- insufficient staff training on learning styles
- incomplete quality assurance systems
- insufficient learner progression into employment

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- greater involvement of board members
- more equal opportunities training for staff

THE INSPECTION

1. A team of two inspectors spent a total of six days in May 2002 at the St Thomas Network (the Network) in Dudley. They interviewed eight learners, nine staff, four staff from external agencies and three employers. They visited three work placements and employer sites. The inspectors examined five individual development and learning plans and eight portfolios of evidence. They observed two progress reviews and five learning sessions. Inspectors examined a range of documents, including the business and development action plan and a range of policies and procedures, learners' achievement data and certification. They also studied the self-assessment report which was produced in February 2002 and attended a team-meeting and evaluated the learning resources available to the learners.

Grades awarded to learning sessions

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Total
Foundation programmes	0	0	2	1	1	1	0	5
Total	0	0	2	1	1	1	0	5

THE PROVIDER AS A WHOLE

Context

2. The Network is a registered charity, and a company limited by guarantee, based in the St Thomas ward of the metropolitan borough of Dudley, West Midlands. It aims to develop the existing and new skills and capabilities of the local community. The Network operates from four training centres in the ward. Its main base is in an old school owned by the local authority and leased to the Network. The Network is based very close to the town centre of Dudley. There are 11 full-time staff and 28 part-time staff, which includes tutors, nursery nurses, caretakers, finance and administration staff, and millennium volunteers. In addition, there are 30 volunteers who work with the Network. The training centres are used for education, training, and leisure activities by the local community. Approximately 1,700 local people of all ages use the training centre throughout the year. Groups include 87 New Deal learners, 188 learners on leisure-based courses, 433 learners on LSC-funded training programmes, and 312 learners on learndirect courses. Some groups, such as the Asian women's group, also use the facilities for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), mother-tongue classes for children and some leisure classes.

3. Government-funded provision at the training centres includes direct provision by the local colleges and learning provided under franchise by the Network. It includes the New Deal options of full-time education and training and the voluntary sector. NVO training in retail and customer service is also provided, alongside classes in ESOL and basic skills. LSC-funded training programmes are provided under contract from local colleges, in computers, business administration including book-keeping, catering, hairdressing, music-industry, counselling, teacher-training and short courses in food hygiene and first-aid. Informal adult education is provided under contract to the local authority. As part of UK Online and learndirect, computer classes are provided as well as a drop-in facility. The Life Skills programme is funded by the Black Country Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

4. The provider works in a ward of the borough with one of the highest deprivation indicators. There are a high number of lone parents in the ward. Twenty-six per cent of the households have an income of less than £5,000 per year. The main areas of employment growth are banking, finance and insurance, distribution, hotels and restaurants, other service sector industries, administration and retailing. The proportion of people from minority ethnic groups in Dudley is 4.5 per cent, compared with the national average of 6.2 per cent. However, the ward has the highest proportion of minority ethnic groups in the borough, at 20 per cent. The unemployment rate in Dudley in October 2001 was 4.3 per cent, compared with the national average of 2.9 per cent. The proportion of young people achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C or above in 2001 in Dudley was 49.6 per cent, compared with the national average of 47.9 per cent.

Life Skills

5. The Life Skills training provision by the Network is good. Learners make good progress in achieving their personal development goals. Their self-confidence and motivation is significantly enhanced. They are effectively re-introduced to learning. Regular weekly staff-meetings review learners' pastoral and learning progress. Learners benefit from particularly good personal, pastoral and study support. Staff very carefully match learners to work placements on the basis of their aspirations and aptitude. The effective use of work placements leads to increased motivation and reinforcement of employability skills for the learners. Some learners get jobs as a result of their ongoing hard work and determination. Basic skills tuition and support is particularly good. Learners are able to use their new basic skills in their work placements and at work. Learners also benefit from a wide range of resources and facilities on site. Teaching in Life Skills is slowly paced and not sufficiently challenging. Learners get jobs during their stay on the programme. There are not enough externally accredited short courses that can help learners to get jobs.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 2

6. The Network, which has been in existence since the 1980's, achieved charitable status in 1990. In January 2002, the Network became a company limited by guarantee and is in the process of re-registering itself as a charity. The director is responsible for the operational management of the Network and reports to the board of trustees, which comprises people from the local community, as well as representatives from local organisations, including the town's education department and the church. There is an education and training manager and a senior administrator. Each area, including the Life Skills programme, has a manager who is also the co-ordinator, and a team of staff. The Life Skills training programme is based at the Beechwood Road training centre. In addition there are three more training centres used by the Network. Fifteen different funding sources are used for the broad range of activities provided by the Network. In addition to the board of trustees, there is an advisory group with representatives from, for example, local schools, primary care trust, the youth service, the police and the local authority. The Network has an equal opportunities policy and a quality assurance statement. The director is responsible for equality of opportunity and quality assurance. There is a range of policies and procedures for the range of activities provided. The first self-assessment report was produced by the Network in February 2002. There is also an action plan containing recent developments.

STRENGTHS

- good management of Network
- good communication
- very good use of external partnerships
- effective promotion of equal opportunities
- good action-planning

WEAKNESSES

- inadequate use of data
- insufficient staff training on learning styles
- incomplete quality assurance systems

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- greater involvement by board members
- more equal opportunities training for staff

7. The Network is well managed. Many new developments and changes have been successfully introduced, following the appointment of a new director in January 2001. Funding is well sourced. There are good working relationships with working partners. The organisational objectives are shared by all staff, who work effectively as a team and

often carry out work over and above that which is required of them. New members of staff are recruited through well-recorded objective procedures. All staff are able to quickly develop good working relationships with the learners. Staff training needs are effectively identified and staff are able to attend regional and local training events. Lesson observations, using standardised forms, have been recently introduced. There is an outline plan to ensure that all staff are observed regularly and systematically. The director carries out these observations and provides very good feedback to staff. The feedback and subsequent action-planning is well recorded. Staff performance is evaluated through an annual appraisal system. Approximately six staff have had appraisals this calendar year. Staff are reviewed when they change job roles. Training and development needs are clearly defined and target dates are set.

8. Communication in the Network is good, a strength acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Staff work well as a team and with the learners. As well as good informal communication, there is a wide range of meetings at all levels. Meetings are well-recorded, with clear responsibilities and target dates for actions. Learners' progress is reviewed at these meetings and effective learner support is well planned. The new policies group has been introduced to help the director in making decisions with the greater involvement of the staff. This group comprises six staff representatives from different areas of the Network. Staff are well-motivated, enthusiastic and well informed about developments at the Network.

9. There is very good use of external partnerships, a strength acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Two of the staff, including the director, are employed by Dudley metropolitan borough council and seconded to the Network. The borough council also provides the infrastructure, knowledge and support of their finance system to the Network. Premises are leased to the Network by the borough at no charge. There is effective use of a range of funding sources. There are effective partnerships with government-led initiatives to improve the life, health and economic prospects of the community. Learners are able to use the very good range of basic skills resources and expertise, learndirect computers and the music technology workshop. Hairdressing tutors help learners with personal grooming, image and presentation at job interviews. There is good contact with a range of support agencies for learners. Staff refer learners to other agencies for additional help with issues such as alcohol and drug abuse, pregnancy, and homelessness. Learners also benefit from the teaching input from a range of presentations from external organisations. Effective partnerships ensure good communication and effective responses to problems faced by the learners. Some of the supporting agencies are represented on the Network's advisory group.

10. Data are not used adequately to inform management about trends in retention and achievement and other performance indicators. Data are not compared effectively to help management review and evaluate current issues and implement improvements. For example, although a lot of information is collected in detail about learners, including reasons for leaving the training programme early, it is not collated and used to improve planning.

11. There is insufficient training for staff in different learning styles. There is insufficient sharing of good practice between staff. For example, Life Skills teaching staff do not share ideas on the good planning of teaching in basic skills. There has been no training to help staff develop materials or their teaching methods to provide better learner support for, for example, learners with dyslexia. There is insufficient variation in teaching styles to meet the needs of all the learners.

12. The previous board of trustees has not been sufficiently involved in providing the strategic direction and objectives for the Network. A new board of trustees, comprising representatives from the local community, is being recruited to improve further the working relationships with the local community and the effective implementation of new developments.

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade 3

13. The Network has a range of equal opportunities policies and procedures, which include, an equal opportunities policy, a policy of cultural diversity, a harassment and bullying policy, the complaints and grievance process and procedures, a disciplinary policy and guidelines for staff, a disciplinary process for learners and a confidentiality policy. Employers sign an agreement to comply with the Network's equal opportunities policy and have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities

14. Equality of opportunity is promoted effectively. The Network's marketing materials use a good range of appropriate images of learners. Staff reflect the ethnic mix of the local community. Some staff have disabilities. There are effective procedures for dealing with discrimination. The learners are given an effective induction to equal opportunities, which is emphasised through relevant workshops. For example, learners participate in a week of activities to improve their awareness of disability. Staff have a good understanding of equal opportunities issues and attend relevant workshops.

15. Access to the Network is good. Security at the Network includes keypad coded access to entrance doors and a monitored car park. There are ramps around the Network and accessible ground floor teaching rooms.

16. There is a range of relevant learning resources available at the Network for equal opportunities training. Some of the resources are not adequate or easy to use. There is no guidance for staff on how facilities and resources could be improved for the learners.

17. Staff have not received training to adapt learning materials to meet individual learning needs and ensure equality of opportunity. Learners have to complete some activities before their learning support needs have been identified and communicated to teaching staff. There is an over-reliance on the use of hand-outs with a lot of text and activities that require proficient reading and writing skills. There is insufficient use of pictures, photographs and activities which allow learners to work together.

Quality assurance

Contributory grade 3

18. Action planning from the self-assessment report is good. Deadlines are realistic,

responsibilities are clearly defined and interim review dates are set. The self-assessment report did not acknowledge this strength. The initial action plan is now a development plan with completed items and new actions. The development plan is a working document with priorities clearly marked. Staff fully understand their roles and responsibilities. Lesson observations and the staff appraisal system are part of the action-planning process.

19. There are effective policies and procedures to widen participation and improve the training programme. There is good document control, with issue dates. Existing policies have been systematically reviewed. Many of the new policies and procedures have effective formalised arrangements. There are plans to review these on an annual basis. The policies and procedures are written clearly and some include easy to use flow charts. Staff value these procedures and use them effectively as reference documents.

20. Learner views on how to improve the training programme are collected each week. This feedback is used to help improve subsequent training. Personal advisers from Connexions or the local careers service and the Network staff review learners' progress in the very effective weekly staff meetings. The learning sessions provided by external agencies are also evaluated. Personal advisers are able to influence changes and improvements to the learning experience of the learners throughout the duration of the training programme. The various providers of Life Skills training in the borough meet every three months to share good practice.

21. Basic skills learning resources are regularly evaluated. New resources are acquired to meet the career aims and learning styles of the learners. Good in-house learning resources are also developed.

22. Some of the quality assurance systems are incomplete. All policies and procedures are available to staff. These are provided in the staff handbook, which is issued to new staff at their induction. Four lesson observations have taken place, but the results of these observations have not been used to improve staff training. Although business planning documents are kept in a file, there are no strategic and operational targets. There are annual questionnaires for learners to complete and a range of informal feedback systems. This feedback is not used adequately to implement improvements. Tutors do not produce regular, written evaluations of lessons.

23. The Network produced its first, full self-assessment report in February 2002. Learners and past learners, staff, personal advisers and employers were involved in the development of the report. It contained a reasonably accurate assessment of the Life Skills provision. The assessment of leadership and management was less accurate. The report was effectively self-critical in identifying the Network's strengths and weaknesses.

Good Practice

Learners develop good personal presentation skills with the Network's hairdressing tutor. This helps learners prepare for job interviews. In addition, some learners put on a fashion show to demonstrate what they had learnt about choosing the appropriate image for different occasions. This event was featured in one of the leading national educational journals. Learners' self-confidence was significantly increased because of this level of interest in their progress and achievements.

AREAS OF LEARNING

Foundation programmes

Grade 2

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Life Skills	11	2

24. There are 11 learners on Life Skills training programmes. All learners are referred by personal advisers from Connexions or the local careers service. The training programme lasts for 20 weeks. Personal advisers develop an individual learning and development plan with the learner. Assessment, including basic skills, is conducted by Network staff. The training programme is scheduled for a minimum of 16 hours each week, although most learners attend for up to 24 hours each week. A full-time co-ordinator manages the training programme and is supported by a full-time and a part-time basic skills tutor. There are two part-time Learning Gateway link workers who teach on the Life Skills programme. A full-time administrator supports the Learning Gateway programme.

25. Training comprises group work on Monday and jobsearch and progress reviews on Friday. Topics for the subsequent weeks are also discussed and negotiated. When ready, learners attend work placements which last from one to three days each week. Learners also attend workshops to improve their literacy, numeracy and computer skills. Many outside agencies contribute to the training programme. Learners attend a number of workshops, including food hygiene, first-aid, time management, employer expectations, sexual health, pregnancy, anger management, crime and offending, health and social issues. They also take part in day outings. Learner progress is reviewed every month by their personal adviser who also attends the weekly team meetings to review all learners' progress.

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

Work-based learning for young people																
Life Skills	2001-02		2000-01		1999-2000											
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	Number of starts	35		39		22										
Retained*	14		20	51	17	77										
Successfully completed	14		20	51	17	77										
Still in learning	11		0	0	0	0										

*retained learners are those who have stayed in learning for at least the planned duration of their training programmes, or have successfully completed their programme within the time allowed

STRENGTHS

- good learner progress in training
- effective work placements
- good pastoral support
- good basic skills support
- good resources and facilities

WEAKNESSES

- insufficient progression into employment
- insufficiently challenging Life Skills training programme

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- more external accreditation of short courses

26. Learners make good progress in achieving their individual development and learning goals. Many learners progress very quickly to a job or further training. All learners who stay on the training programme develop greater confidence. For example, one learner who had not been sufficiently confident to call an employer and arrange an interview, eventually called the employer after relevant training and got a job. Learners develop a good range of social and problem-solving skills, and are able to work with other learners with a range of different learning and social needs. Learners are able to develop a clearer idea of their career aims. They develop appropriate Life Skills and have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Many continue in learning after they have left the training programme. Many previous learners return to the Network to talk to existing learners about their own experiences on the training programme and what jobs they are now working in. Although many learners are not able to progress to their chosen job or career in the 20-week period, they do progress well towards their individual targets. For example, one learner is joining the Royal Navy as a chef and another learner is working towards an NVQ in care and has had an offer of a job as soon as she reaches the age of 18. Learner progress is monitored and reviewed regularly in a weekly meeting by all tutors and personal advisers. Individual learning plans and schedules are amended to ensure that the learner is given appropriate help and works towards effective targets.

27. The progression of learners to full-time education and training is increasing. In 1999-2000, 5 per cent progressed. During the past academic year this figure increased to 26 per cent. This year the figure is lower, at 11 per cent, although there is still 31 per cent of the learners in training. The number of learners being referred back to Connexions, known as the 'front end', is declining significantly.

28. Work placements are used effectively, a strength not acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Learners are well prepared for their work experience during the jobsearch module and develop good jobsearch skills. There is good use of computer-based resources for jobsearch. Learners are able to respond effectively to job-advertisements, fill in application forms and write letters of application, as well as prepare their own curriculum vitae. Learners are well matched to their work placements. There are good working relationships between the Network and employers. Employers provide good learner support and are fully involved in the progress reviews. Employers and learners sign an agreement which confirms the objectives of the work placement. Personal advisers visit the learners in the workplace. The time spent by learners on work experience is increased as they gain confidence and their skills improve. Many learners are treated as regular employees at their work placements. Learners are well motivated to succeed in their jobs.

29. There is good pastoral support, a strength not acknowledged in the self-assessment report. Many learners attend the Life Skills programme to improve their self-confidence and self-esteem. Staff are committed to helping the learners succeed, and are appropriately qualified to deal with the wide range of learning and social needs of the learners. Learners are able to contact staff in the evenings and at weekends and staff respond promptly. The Network also provides learners with appropriate clothing for job interviews and provides transport to potential work placement providers. Staff also work well to build good working relationships with learners' families. Issues such as poor attendance and financial or other personal problems are resolved effectively.

30. There is particularly good basic skills support, a strength not identified in the self-assessment report. This support helps learners to meet successfully the literacy and numeracy demands of the workplace. Learners' basic needs are assessed at induction. The results are analysed and discussed with the learners, their personal adviser and other relevant staff. Basic skills support is provided according to the needs of the individual learners and is taught in individual or group training sessions. Learners have scheduled times when they attend basic skills training. They can also attend additional basic skills training if necessary. Learners effectively use their basic skills in the workplace and can demonstrate their competence to their employers and workplace supervisors. Basic skills tutors are well-qualified and relevantly experienced and make good use of both computer-based and particularly good in-house resources. They effectively link the computer and other more traditional resources to provide the basic skills training. Staff provide good individual feedback to learners.

31. There is a good range of facilities and resources, including a music technology centre, a learndirect centre and a hairdressing salon. Learners are also able to attend

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training sessions carried out by a range of working partners, including the 'What Centre', which deals with a range of young people's issues, the Brook Advisory Service, the police, the mother and baby unit, and a drama group. Learners are also able to attend anger-management workshops. Many learners are also provided with effective individual help and counselling if necessary.

32. Insufficient numbers of learners progress into jobs, a weakness acknowledged in the self-assessment report. The proportion of learners getting jobs is low, but improving slowly. In 1999-2000 and 2000-01, 18 per cent and 23 per cent, respectively, of learners gained jobs. In the current year, 17 per cent have so far gained jobs. Most of the jobs, however, do not involve additional training and are not sustainable in the long term. Although some learners achieve external accreditation for short courses, such as food hygiene and first-aid, there is insufficient external accreditation of short courses to help learners improve their chances of gaining a job.

33. The Life Skills training programme is not sufficiently challenging. Some learners' tasks are laborious and have no obvious purpose. Many learners do not find the training sufficiently interesting and find it too similar to the school learning experience. There is no plan for the Life Skills training. The programme does not have systematic targets. The lesson objectives are not sufficiently focused or reinforced or linked to learners' everyday needs. Some learners have to repeat work carried out in previous workshops. Some of the individual needs of learners identified at the initial assessment are not dealt with until late in the training programme. Core elements of the programme are not clearly identified. Some learners do not fully understand the importance of particular aspects of the training programme.

Good Practice

Learners are taught by a volunteer tutor who has a disability. This helps the learners to gain a better understanding of disability.