

INSPECTION REPORT

Strategic Training Solutions (Mansfield) Limited

09 September 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
- **learndirect** 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.

Overall judgement

In those cases where the overall judgement is that the provision is adequate, only those aspects of the provision which are less than satisfactory will be reinspected.

Provision will normally be deemed to be inadequate where:

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

This provision will be subject to a full reinspection.

The final decision as to whether the provision is inadequate rests with the Chief Inspector of Adult Learning. A statement as to whether the provision is adequate or not is included in the summary section of the inspection report.

SUMMARY

The provider

Strategic Training Solutions (Mansfield) Limited is a private training company based in Mansfield. It provides work-based learning for 105 young people in horticulture, business administration, information and communications technology, retailing and customer service and hairdressing and beauty therapy. The company also provides training for over 103 learners on training programmes jointly funded by Nottinghamshire Learning and Skills Council and the European Social Fund.

Overall judgement

The quality of provision is adequate to meet the reasonable needs of those receiving it. More specifically, the quality of work-based learning in horticulture, business administration and retailing and customer service is satisfactory. The quality of training in information and communications technology is also satisfactory. Training is unsatisfactory in hairdressing and beauty therapy. Leadership and management of the company are satisfactory, as is equality of opportunity. Quality assurance is unsatisfactory.

GRADES

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

Land-based provision	3
Contributory grades:	
Work-based learning for young people	3

Business administration, management & professional	3
Contributory grades:	
Work-based learning for young people	3
Other government-funded provision	None

Information & communications technology	3
Contributory grades:	
Other government-funded provision	3

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Retailing, customer service & transportation	3
Contributory grades:	
Work-based learning for young people	3
Other government-funded provision	None

Hairdressing & beauty therapy	4
Contributory grades:	
Work-based learning for young people	4

KEY STRENGTHS

- open and very supportive management
- good staff development
- thorough health and safety management
- good development programme to improve quality assurance process
- good training support for learners
- good rate of progression into employment

KEY WEAKNESSES

- inadequate strategic planning
- inadequate reinforcement of equality of opportunity
- no quality assurance framework
- insufficient monitoring and evaluation of training
- poor achievement rate for modern apprenticeship frameworks
- ineffective target-setting

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better use of management information
- greater clarity in equal opportunities policy and procedures

THE INSPECTION

1. A team of seven inspectors spent a total of 28 days at Strategic Training Solutions (Mansfield) Limited (STS) in September 2002. Inspectors visited 30 workplaces. They interviewed 66 learners and 16 employers and workplace supervisors. They conducted 27 interviews with members of STS's staff and observed progress reviews, assessments and learning sessions. Inspectors examined a range of documents including learners' portfolios and records, progress review documents, assessment records, external verifier's reports, minutes of meetings, plans, policies and procedures. Five learning sessions were observed and graded. Inspectors studied STS's most recent self-assessment report produced in August 2002.

Grades awarded to learning sessions

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Total
Land-based provision	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Information & communications technology	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Hairdressing & beauty therapy	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	3
Total	0	0	1	1	3	0	0	5

THE PROVIDER AS A WHOLE

Context

2. STS was formed in January 1998 and in July 2002 became incorporated. The company is owned and managed by its managing director. There are a further 23 staff, 18 of them full-time and five part-time. STS has its company offices and a training centre in central Mansfield. STS provide training for 208 learners from across north Nottinghamshire.

3. The company initially provided work-based learning for young people in business administration and retailing and customer service. In 2000, it extended its training provision to work-based learning for adults, offering training in information and communications technology (ICT), business administration and call centre training. This contract ended in April 2001. From August 2001, the company has extended its training into work-based learning for young people in amenity horticulture and hairdressing. Nottinghamshire Learning and Skills Council (LSC) fund STS. Currently, there are 105 learners on work-based learning programmes for young people. In December 2001, the company successfully bid for an European Social Fund (ESF) co-finance contract to provide training to employed adults who have had little or no formal training since leaving school. STS has 103 adult learners on training programmes in ICT through an examination-based qualification in information technology (IT) and national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at level 3 in business administration, management and training and retailing and customer service.

4. Since the 1990s, traditional industries in Nottinghamshire, such as coal mining and textiles, have been in decline. In May 2002, the unemployment rate for the East Midlands area was 3 per cent, which is also the national rate for England. Youth unemployment was 26.7 per cent in the East Midlands, compared with the national average of 25.3 per cent. In Mansfield and the surrounding area, 19.2 per cent of school leavers move into work-based learning, compared with the national average of 7 per cent. In 2000, the proportion of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C or above in the East Midlands was 45.6 per cent, compared with the national average of 47.9 per cent. The 1991 census indicated that the proportion of the population from minority ethnic groups was 4.8 per cent, compared with the national average of 6.2 per cent.

Work-based learning for young people

5. Work-based learning for young people is offered to 105 learners in five areas of learning. Horticulture has nine learners, business administration 21, occupational, retailing and customer service 36, and hairdressing 38 learners. There is also one learner in construction, which was not inspected because of the lack of numbers. The quality of training in horticulture, business administration, and retailing and customer service is satisfactory. It is unsatisfactory in hairdressing. There are good retention rates in horticulture and hairdressing. Learners have access to a wide range of appropriate work placements and are placed according to their individual needs. There is good progression into employment in business administration, retailing and customer service and hairdressing. Training support for learners is very effective. Staff are easily contacted and are available to assist learners with difficulties or problems as they arise. There is some slow progress towards completion of modern apprenticeship frameworks in business administration and retailing and customer service. There is some ineffective target-setting. Targets are very general and unfocused. Many employers are not sufficiently involved in the training process. There is weak background knowledge training, a lack of key skills achievement and inadequate assessment practices in hairdressing.

Other government-funded provision

6. STS also currently has 103 learners on the LSC and ESF co-finance programmes. The quality of this provision is satisfactory. These training programmes started in March 2002. They are targeted at employed adults who have had little or no formal training since leaving school. Recruitment to appropriate programmes has been very successful. There are 31 learners in business administration, management and professional, eight learners in retailing and customer service and transportation and 64 learners in ICT. Current learners are employed in companies in Mansfield and the Nottinghamshire area. Retention rates are good. Few learners leave their training programmes early. Currently all of the 64 learners on ICT programmes are still actively engaged in learning. Learners are very well supported by STS staff. Learners are positive about their learning experience. There is, however, some weak target-setting and many learners have yet to achieve their qualification.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 3

7. STS is owned and managed by its managing director. The managing director has overall responsibility for personnel issues, and for the training and development of staff, as well as the strategic direction of the company. Two full-time members of staff have significant management responsibilities. One oversees the work of internal verifiers and assessors in all areas of learning. The other runs the ESF co-finance contract, and acts as equality and diversity co-ordinator. STS has an equal opportunities policy and procedures for harassment, complaints, appeal and grievance. STS was accredited with the Investors in People standard in 1998. This is a national standard for improving an organisation's performance through its people. STS is due for re-accreditation of this standard in November 2002. The company has produced an annual self-assessment report since 1998. Its most recent self-assessment report was written in May 2002 and updated in August 2002.

STRENGTHS

- open and very supportive management
- good staff development
- extensive external liaison
- thorough health and safety management
- effective participation in local initiatives to promote equality of opportunity
- good development programme to improve quality assurance processes

WEAKNESSES

- inadequate strategic planning
- inadequate reinforcement of equal opportunities
- insufficient targeting of some under-represented groups
- no quality assurance framework
- insufficient monitoring and evaluation of training

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better recording of staff appraisals
- better use of management information
- greater clarity in equal opportunities policy and procedures

8. The managing director of STS has an inclusive and consultative management style, which is valued by staff. Staff feel well supported by management and share a commitment to STS's future. Communication within the company is regular and effective. There is a full staff meeting once each month, with weekly occupational team meetings. These provide a useful forum for the discussion of issues such as contracts,

inspection and self-assessment, equal opportunities and marketing. These meetings are adequately recorded, with action points followed up at subsequent meetings. Employees feel well informed about key aspects of the business. Employees' suggestions for improvement are welcomed, and are acted on where appropriate. When making any business decisions, employees' needs are considered. For example, when a sizeable contract for the provision of training to adults was lost, the managing director re-deployed the affected employees into other areas of training, rather than dismiss them. Staff are clear about their roles and lines of accountability. They feel well supported by management, and share a commitment to the company's future.

9. STS has a good staff development programme with plenty of opportunities for training. This is identified as a strength in the self-assessment report. Employees' training needs are identified through the appraisal process and through ongoing discussions with their line manager, and the managing director. STS's staff are encouraged to obtain assessors' and verifiers' awards, teaching and training qualifications, and key skills practitioner awards. They are given time off during their working week to attend training. In addition, staff participate in a wide range of short courses designed to extend their skills and improve their work performance. These include training in psychometric testing, equal opportunities training and professional updating events. Employees have a professional development journal, in which they list and update their training needs, and record and evaluate the training they have attended. New staff are given a thorough induction which includes a well-planned period of work shadowing. This develops their understanding of STS's way of working, and increases the speed with which they settle into the company. Staff are appraised three months after joining STS, and every six months after that. The appraisal comprises a self-evaluation, and a discussion with the managing director during which progress, successes and difficulties are shared, training needs identified, and targets set. The recording of the appraisal, although adequate, does not reflect the depth and detail of the discussion which precedes it.

10. STS's senior staff actively participate in a range of groups involved in education and training. They have formed effective links, which enable them to keep abreast of developments within the training industry generally and the local community in particular. Assessors maintain frequent and productive contact with employers, who are very satisfied with the support available to them and their learners.

11. The company has a thorough and effective system for monitoring health and safety. There is a detailed health and safety policy, which is distributed and explained to all staff members. All work placements are thoroughly vetted by the health and safety co-ordinator, who makes clear to employers STS's requirements with regard to health and safety, and carries out risk assessments. Work-placement providers are subject to regular health and safety checks, the frequency of which is determined by the LSC's risk-banding system. Work placements which fail to meet STS's demanding standards are sent an action plan listing the improvements they have to make. Their progress against this is carefully monitored.

12. STS's strategic planning is inadequate. The managing director produces an annual set of business priorities, supplemented by an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and potential problems. These are shared with staff. The priorities relate mainly to the achievement of contracts. They are not set in a clear local or occupational context, and do not refer to areas which might improve the quality of the learners' experience. There is insufficient identification of the actions needed to ensure that the objectives are achieved. There is no indication of how the company's previous performance has led to the current set of business priorities, or of how these link into future plans. STS has an adequate management information system. It has recently extended its use of data to monitor learners' progress towards their qualifications, and to set the assessors' targets for improvement. STS staff identify with their students who leave their training programme early their reasons for coming to the decision to leave. The data gathered are not always used to inform strategic planning.

13. Training is satisfactorily managed in all but one area of learning. The company has been slow to implement some important aspects of the training provision, such as the effective provision of key skills training and assessment. However, the managing director has dealt effectively with recent difficulties, for example the sudden resignation of key members of staff. Resources are adequate, and are satisfactorily deployed. Financial management is satisfactory. Performance against contract is closely monitored. New opportunities are carefully researched and thoughtfully initiated, for example the introduction of hairdressing training.

Equality of opportunity**Contributory grade 3**

14. The senior manager with responsibility for the ESF co-finance contract, also has responsibility for equal opportunities issues for both learners and employers. STS have an adequate equal opportunities policy and satisfactory procedures. These have recently been usefully revised and updated. There are effective procedures to deal with harassment, complaints, appeals and grievances. A range of documents relating to equality of opportunity is circulated to all staff, learners and employers as part of the induction process. There is, however, a lack of clarity in the organisation and presentation of this information.

15. STS effectively participates in local initiatives to promote equality of opportunity. It is successfully involved in one local initiative which is designed to help those young people who would benefit from an alternative way of learning during their last year at school. STS provides appropriate and useful work experience, carefully monitors work placements and regularly liaises with schools about learners' progress. This also provides a useful progression path to a range of modern apprenticeship programmes. STS is also actively involved in the 'student apprenticeship' project, a work-based learning pathway for 14-16 year olds which leads to a modern apprenticeship when the learner is 16 years old. STS provides these school pupils with effective opportunities to learn new skills in a work-based learning environment, to develop self-confidence and to progress. STS is also extensively involved in an ESF co-finance contract. This is targeted at employed adults, who have had little or no formal training since leaving school.

16. Equality of opportunity is not adequately reinforced during training. There is insufficient formal equal opportunities training for learners to add to their understanding of equal opportunities matters. This is identified in the self-assessment report. Equality of opportunity is also not sufficiently emphasised in the workplace for either learners or employers. Staff regularly discuss equal opportunities matters with learners at progress reviews. However, this is not in sufficient detail and learners remain unclear about what equality of opportunity involves. Employers are also unclear what their responsibilities are with regard to equality of opportunity. Individual staff who have identified a personal development need in the area of equality of opportunity are well supported in attending appropriate courses. Several staff have received some good equal opportunities training, but the approach to training is unsystematic.

17. STS monitors the numbers of learners from minority ethnic groups and those learners with disabilities. The company also monitors recruitment by gender. However, there are no effective strategies or targets to increase the number of learners from under-represented groups or to even out gender imbalances. Not enough attention is given to equal opportunities in promotional literature. Many leaflets do not state that STS is an equal opportunities employer and leaflets for the learning areas do not attempt to widen participation, either in the text or through the use of positive images.

18. The company's training premises are not accessible to people with restricted mobility. The company is based on the first and second floors of the building. Access is

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by steep stairs and there is no lift. STS's staff are aware of this problem and have identified other training locations in the vicinity which can be used by learners unable to access STS's main premises. The company supports individuals with additional learning needs, such as dyslexia, in a sensitive and thoughtful way.

Quality assurance**Contributory grade 4**

19. In May 2002, a new work-based learning co-ordinator was appointed by STS. This individual is also responsible for quality assurance. Since the appointment, there has been a good programme of development of quality assurance. The co-ordinator has introduced monthly target-setting meetings with assessors to improve the monitoring of learners' progress. New systems for internal verification have been introduced recently and staff are trained in their use. Plans have also been developed to provide better feedback by verifiers to assessors. STS now has improved procedures for obtaining feedback from learners. These changes are well conceived and are being effectively implemented. Staff have been informed and consulted on the changes through their regular meetings. Some of the new procedures are beginning to have an effect on the experience of learners. The company is responsive to concerns raised by learners, for instance STS changed the schedule of off-the-job training from a full day in the classroom to two half-day sessions, in response to learner requests. Other changes in quality assurance have yet to have an impact.

20. STS does not have a clear quality assurance framework or policy which brings together all quality assurance arrangements within the company. There is no clear process which gathers all the evidence from quality assurance procedures, to plan improvements. There are various procedures for most aspects of the company's operation, but their effectiveness varies. Processes for maintaining learners' records are efficiently and regularly audited. The monitoring of teaching, learning and assessment is less effective. The company is working to standardise forms and documents providing information to learners, but this process is not yet complete and a number of different forms are in use for tasks such as assessment planning. Some procedures are clear and provide unambiguous guidance for staff in how to carry out specific operations. Others are more descriptive and do not provide detailed instructions. There is no systematic audit of compliance with operating procedures.

21. There is insufficient monitoring and evaluation of training. Previously, some observation of training sessions was carried out as part of internal verification. A new process is now being introduced, but only a small number of observations have been carried out. There are no systematic procedures for the observation of training sessions. There are no measures to monitor the quality of training on employers' premises. Employers' and learners' views are not collected and reported regularly, and data are not fully analysed and used to plan improvements. New questionnaires have been introduced recently to obtain learners' views at different stages of their programmes. Weekly telephone questionnaires have also been introduced. The first results have been analysed, but the data have not been used to plan improvements.

22. Internal verification practice is not consistent within the company. In most areas, satisfactory systems for sampling learners' assessed work and providing feedback to assessors have been established. The new internal verifiers have introduced regular standardisation meetings in which assessors discuss portfolios to arrive at an agreed

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approach to assessment. However, in hairdressing, internal verification practice is very poor and this has not been recognised or acted on by managers. There is insufficient use of data for monitoring the quality of training provision. No regular reports are produced, except those comparing learner numbers with the LSC profile. Information on learners' destinations is collected but not analysed. There are plans to make better use of data, but these have had no practical effect yet.

23. A well-planned process for self-assessment was introduced early in 2002, but this was partly disrupted by key staff changes. All staff did, however, contribute to the production of the self-assessment report which was produced in May 2002 and updated in August 2002. The self-assessment report is a critical evaluation of the organisation, but it does not identify some important weaknesses, particularly in the hairdressing occupational area and quality assurance arrangements.

AREAS OF LEARNING

Land-based provision

Grade 3

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	9	3

24. STS began offering training in amenity horticulture in August 2001. There are currently nine learners, all of whom are following foundation modern apprenticeships in amenity horticulture. None of the learners are employed. STS holds contracts for the maintenance of 40 private gardens in the Mansfield area, which it uses to provide work experience for learners. There are two horticultural tutors, one of whom is responsible for the work experience, the other for teaching and assessment. Learners work four days each week on garden maintenance. The other day is spent in STS's training centre, receiving key skills training and classroom sessions to develop their background knowledge. Learners take courses in manual handling and first aid, in addition to their level 2 NVQ in amenity horticulture. Most learners are referred to STS by the Connexions service, others apply directly in response to the company's advertisements in local newspapers. Learners receive an induction to cover subjects such as equality of opportunity, health and safety, and attendance requirements. They also take a basic skills assessment to determine the level of support and training they each require. At the time of the inspection, one learner was receiving regular additional support in literacy and numeracy. Since the programme began there have been a total of 17 learners on this training programme.

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

Work-based learning for young people																	
Foundation modern apprenticeships (FMA)	2001-02		2000-01														
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
	Number of starts	12		5													
Retained*	9		4														
Successfully completed	2		2														
Still in learning	7		2														

*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 proportion of learners remaining in training
- good on-the-job training

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- very successful integration of key skills with vocational training

WEAKNESSES

- insufficient individualised learning
- some weak teaching of background knowledge
- insufficient careers guidance

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better links with industry

25. A high proportion of learners recruited to the horticulture modern apprenticeship programme are still in training. Of the 17 recruited so far, 13 have either successfully completed their modern apprenticeship framework, or are still on the training programme. STS has a number of thoughtful and effective measures to encourage retention and regular attendance, including cash incentives and the development of team spirit among learners working on garden maintenance. STS provides learners with good on-the-job training. The company has developed a small-scale garden maintenance business in order to provide its learners with experience of a real work situation. Learners work in a team to carry out maintenance of sites such as gardens, village greens, landscaped areas around industrial sites, and a school. They are supervised by two tutors, one of whom concentrates on supervising the commercial work, while the other carries out instruction and assessment. The range of work available is sufficient to cover the requirements of the NVQ, and the commercial pressures on the team are similar to those found in the garden maintenance industry. Most NVQ assessment is carried out by observation of learners carrying out tasks which arise naturally during their work. Learners keep a daily diary of their tasks, and transfer relevant information from the diary to job sheets during their classroom sessions. These jobsheets are used appropriately to provide evidence towards their NVQ when they have been signed by the assessor. The tutor is also able to draw learners' attention to learning points which arise during their work. However, these opportunities are not always fully used, for example, learners are not routinely told the names of the plants which they encounter.

26. Progress reviews are carried out on a regular basis. They provide a positive reminder to learners of the programme's requirements and the learner's individual progress. Targets set at the reviews tend to be too general, broad statements concerning overall unit completion.

27. Key skills training is an integral part of the vocational training leading to the NVQ. All aspects are taught through projects derived from horticultural work. For example, learners draw up a plan of a garden in a project which contributes to their application of number qualification. They also carry out research on garden plants, and costing exercises for maintenance operations. Evidence from their NVQ jobsheets is used to demonstrate competences in teamworking and communications. Most learners are making good progress, and four have achieved all their key skills qualifications.

28. The curriculum is not sufficiently tailored to individual learners' needs. Learners join the training programme with very different ability levels, but there is little differentiation in their training programmes. The more able learners are not sufficiently challenged by background knowledge learning sessions, which are designed for the less able members of the group. Insufficient attention is paid to learners' prior qualifications. In the past, a 'fast-track' group of learners was identified and provided with additional classroom time to enable them to complete their NVQ some weeks earlier than the others. However, this was not operating at the time of the inspection, and all learners are progressing at the same rate. Learners with basic skills needs are provided with satisfactory additional support by a specialist tutor. One horticultural learner is currently receiving additional support for basic skills.

29. There are weaknesses in the teaching of background knowledge in horticulture. Teachers involve all learners through directed questions. However, lessons are not well structured and the range of teaching methods is limited. There is little opportunity for independent study. There are not enough resources to stimulate interest and wider reading for learners. The classroom has less than a dozen volumes on horticulture, and there are no posters, videos or other resources for independent learning. Learners' NVQ workbooks show that they have only a basic understanding of the background knowledge required for the qualification. In some cases, such as plant knowledge and information about plant pests, there are inaccurate answers which have not been corrected in the learners' workbooks.

30. Learners do not receive sufficient careers guidance. A weekly session is held with the tutor on jobsearch skills, but no learner has found employment as a result of this provision. There are no regular links with Connexions' advisers, or with individuals from the industry who might provide an insight into job opportunities. STS does not subscribe to any trade journals for horticulture. Learners do not have a clear view of the structure of the horticultural industry, or the requirements for different posts within it.

Good Practice

One learner left the programme to join the armed forces a few weeks before his key skills national test. STS staff kept in touch with him and arranged to open the training centre late in the evening on the day of the test, to enable him to complete it.

Poor Practice

There is fictional material included in jobsheets which are written up for assessment. It is not always clear that these were not real events, but scenarios discussed in the classroom. For example, some jobsheets in learners' folders refer to situations such as evacuation from a burning building, or dealing with a serious injury at work.

Business administration, management & professional

Grade 3

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	21	3
Other government-funded provision	31	None

31. STS offers modern apprenticeship training for young people in business administration. Six learners are advanced modern apprentices and 15 are foundation modern apprentices. There are also 31 learners on ESF co-finance programmes, with four working towards a level 3 NVQ in administration, 15 working towards a level 3 NVQ in management and 12 working towards training and development lead body units. All the learners on the ESF co-finance programme are employed. On the modern apprenticeship training programme, most of the learners are employed. Those learners who are not employed are trained in basic office procedures and personal development, at the company's main training centre, until an appropriate work placement is found. Learners are recruited by way of Connexions or employers. There are four qualified assessors who visit the learners in the workplace every two weeks for assessment and individual coaching. Assessors also carry out regular reviews of learners' progress, the first after six weeks and after that every 12 weeks.

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)	2001-02		2000-01		1999-2000		1998-99		1997-98							
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	Number of starts	4		8		8		22		7						
Retained*	2		7		0	0	9		4	57						
Successfully completed	0		0		0	0	1		0	0						
Still in learning	2		3		0	0	1		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

Work-based learning for young people																	
Foundation modern apprenticeships (FMA)	2001-02		2000-01		1999-2000		1998-99										
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
	Number of starts	15		12		13		14									
Retained*	12		9		6	46	11	79									
Successfully completed	0		1		1	8	4	29									
Still in learning	12		3		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

- effective training support for learners
- good progression rate into employment
- good retention rates on the co-finance programmes

WEAKNESSES

- poor achievement rate for modern apprenticeship frameworks
- ineffective progress reviews

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better use of learners' statements
- greater clarity in written feedback

32. There is effective support for learners throughout their training period. Learners can start their programme at any time of the year. They all have an interview before they start training, and take a basic skills test. This enables staff to match the learners to the appropriate employer and to provide any additional support as needed. There are adequate arrangements in place for basic skills support if required, but currently none of the learners has any identified need for extra support. There is frequent contact between STS staff and learners, with learners receiving appropriate support based on their individual needs. Staff respond quickly to requests from learners to provide help and advice with any work or personal problems, or to provide additional assessment opportunities. Staff also provide learners with mobile and office telephone numbers and can be contacted out of normal office hours. Some learners have been encouraged to take a higher level of key skills than that required by the modern apprenticeship

framework, which learners consider to be enhancing their future prospects. Learners and employers report an increase in learners' confidence after starting training. Good learner support was identified as a strength in the self-assessment report.

33. Each learner receives a satisfactory induction to their programme. This covers an explanation of the target qualification, and policies and procedures for health and safety and equality of opportunity. Assessors make frequent and constructive visits to the workplace. These take place every two weeks and sometimes weekly. All assessment is carried out in the workplace using a variety of methods, including observations, witness testimonies, learners' statements and work-based evidence. Overall assessment practices are satisfactory. Assessment was identified as a strength by STS in its self-assessment report. There are satisfactory arrangements in place for internal verification. There is a sampling plan to show how and when internal verification will take place.

34. There is a good progression rate for learners into employment. Most current learners are now employed. Referrals are taken from Connexions. STS also recruits learners directly from employers. A number of learners are offered in-house training places while they are waiting for appropriate work placements with an employer. During this time, they are taught basic office skills including letter writing, telephone skills, filing and keyboard skills. STS has a diverse range of companies on its books. Learners are offered good work placements with employers. Most of these change to employed status, usually within the first three months. Learners are working for a wide variety of employers including cleaning materials wholesalers, medical equipment manufacturers, telecommunication suppliers and recruitment agencies. They provide a useful range of employment opportunities, including reception work, accounting, purchasing and IT. The extensive range of activities covered in the workplace often exceeds those required for the NVQ. Some learners have been given extra responsibilities or have been promoted. Good employment opportunities are recognised by STS in its self-assessment report, but are not listed as a strength.

35. There are particularly good retention rates on the ESF co-finance programmes, at 87 per cent. These programmes started in March 2002. There are currently 31 learners on a range of programmes. All these learners are well motivated and are still actively engaged in learning. Learners are working effectively towards completion of a level 3 NVQ in business administration and management and towards achieving NVQ units in training and development. Many of these learners have a target achievement date of December 2002 and are making good progress towards this.

36. STS has a satisfactory range of resources in the training centre. These are used to support the basic office skills training. They are available to learners once they are in employment, but are rarely used. Most learners have reasonable access to computers, either in the workplace or at home. Assessors have laptop computers and access to video equipment, which they use regularly on visits to learners' workplaces.

37. There is a poor achievement rate for modern apprenticeship frameworks on the work-based learning programmes for young people. Of the 54 learners who started on

foundation modern apprenticeships since 1998, only six have completed the full framework. Although 20 learners have achieved a level 2 NVQ, another 16 have left without achieving any qualifications. The progress of some learners is slow. There are examples of learners who have been working towards the NVQ for over 14 months, who have only just achieved the first two units of the NVQ. Key skills training is being introduced towards the end of the training programme and does not form an integral part of the training leading to the NVQ. The situation is improving for learners who have recently started on the training programmes, but this has not had any effect on achievement rates yet.

38. Progress reviews are ineffective. Regular reviews of learners' progress take place every 12 weeks. However, many of them are not sufficiently detailed. The targets are very general. They lack any specific focus and learners are not set challenging enough targets. For example, some targets require learners to continue working towards particular units of their qualification, but fail to break this requirement down into specific tasks. This is inadequate to guide the learner through their NVQ or modern apprenticeship framework. Workplace supervisors are invited to attend progress reviews. A space is included on the review form for the workplace supervisor's comments, but in practice, the workplace supervisor is not always present for all of the review. New procedures have been put in place over the past two months, to ensure better use of short-term target-setting, but these have not yet had any significant effect on achievement rates.

39. Learners produce statements covering the work that they carry out when the assessor is not present. These are checked by the assessor and then put in the learners' portfolios. In some cases, other evidence is then produced to validate the statement. When this is not the case, the learner has to have the statement validated by the workplace supervisor. There can be a gap of several months between the learner preparing the statement and the supervisor validating the statement.

40. Assessors are very supportive of the learners and try to encourage them by praising the work which they produce. This often leads to the use of extravagant praise, in verbal and written feedback, concerning work which is merely satisfactory. There is sometimes therefore a mismatch between the feedback given and actual learners' attainment.

Good Practice

When there is more than one learner at a workplace, they are encouraged to work together on a project to provide evidence for key skills. The project is in the form of a debate presented to a group of colleagues at their own workplace or to other learners and staff at STS's main training centre. Learners present the case for and against the subject. The debate is videoed and then used by the learners to identify evidence for a number of key skills.

Information & communications technology**Grade 3**

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Other government-funded provision	64	3

41. STS has been offering training in IT for adult learners since March 2000. Early in 2002, the company successfully bid for a co-financed LSC and ESF contract, for employed adults who have had little or no formal training since leaving school. There are currently 64 learners on training programmes within this learning area, with most taking an examination-based qualification in IT. All learners are employed. A checklist is used by STS to determine learners' initial competence in basic IT and the appropriateness of the training programme. Learners use a computer-based training package provided by STS to develop their skills and prepare them for the examinations. Learners decide when they are ready to take an examination, which can be arranged in the workplace or at the main STS training centre.

STRENGTHS

- particularly good training support for learners
- very good achievement in keeping learners in training

WEAKNESSES

- insufficiently challenging targets for learners

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better introduction to computer training package at induction

42. There is particularly good training support for learners throughout their programme. This strength is identified in the self-assessment report. Staff regularly contact learners by telephone, at least every two weeks, to check on progress and deal with any problems which may arise. Learners like this regular contact, and the availability of STS staff, both during and outside normal working hours. STS provides all learners with an effective computer-based training package specifically designed for the qualification. This package was selected following a pilot exercise in which learners on an earlier programme compared a number of alternatives. The package is well structured and particularly suitable for beginners, but is also flexible for more experienced learners. Most learners use IT facilities at home or in the workplace to work through the

package. All learners are offered the chance to sit trial examinations to help them to prepare for their final module assessments. Those learners who have no recent experience of taking examinations particularly welcome this approach. STS has recently introduced a system of individual progress reviews carried out every eight to 10 weeks. One learner has already identified an additional learning need during his first progress review, and the company immediately made arrangements to provide a further, more appropriate computer-based package.

43. The current training programme has been operating since March 2002, so there are no previous figures available for retention rates. However, none of the 64 learners who have joined since the start of the programme in March 2002 have dropped out. This is an excellent rate for learners staying on their training programme. Learners are enthusiastic about the programme and are still actively engaged in learning. They consider the qualification appropriate for their work and for their personal development.

44. The registration process for learners is satisfactory. It includes an induction into the training and the support provided by STS. Learners are issued with an effective computer-based training package as part of this process, but the package is not routinely demonstrated to ensure that all learners understand fully how to use it. Health and safety and equality of opportunity are fully discussed. An induction pack is given to learners during induction, to refer to as required during the training programme. Initial assessment is well designed and carried out effectively. The results are used to draw up the individual learning plan. The whole programme is well monitored by the programme co-ordinator who ensures that all procedures are complied with.

45. There are not enough challenging targets for learners. They have all been given the same December 2002 target date for achievement of the full qualification, irrespective of when they started. No learners have been set target dates for the achievement of individual modules. The progress reviews which have been carried out to date, do not refer to specific targets. There are no individualised targets in the individual learning plans. Module targets are not sufficiently individualised to allow effective planning of training programmes. Twelve of the 16 learners who have been on the programme since the start have yet to achieve a single module of the qualification. This is slow progress after more than half the planned length of programme.

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

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	36	3
Other government-funded provision	8	None

46. STS offers work-based learning for young people in retailing and customer service as well as a programme for employed adults under the ESF co-finance contract. Currently, there are 17 learners on advanced modern apprenticeships and 19 learners on foundation modern apprenticeships. At present, all learners on the modern apprenticeship training programme are employed. Most training is in the workplace, either through the employer or off the job with the learners' assessors. STS offers some training at its premises which learners occasionally attend. Assessment and review takes place in the learners' workplace, with a minimum of fortnightly assessment visits and 12-weekly reviews. Assessors and internal verifiers responsible for these programmes are appropriately qualified. There are also eight adult learners on the ESF co-finance programme, who are all employed. These learners are working towards a level 3 NVQ in customer service.

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)	2002-03		2001-02		2000-01		1999-2000		1998-99		1997-98					
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	Number of starts	1		10		15		19		20		3				
Retained*	1		8		8		7		10	50	3	100				
Successfully completed	0		0		0		1		1	5	1	33				
Still in learning	1		8		7		1		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

Work-based learning for young people																	
Foundation modern apprenticeships (FMA)	2001-02		2000-01		1999-2000		1998-99		1997-98								
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
	Number of starts	20		30		7		12		8							
Retained*	12		15		6		6	50	7	88							
Successfully completed	0		4		3		0	0	2	25							
Still in learning	11		7		1		0	0	0	0							

STRENGTHS

- good progression in vocational training
- good assessment practice

WEAKNESSES

- poor achievement rate of modern apprenticeship frameworks
- ineffective target-setting

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- greater involvement by employers in training
- better learning resources

47. There is good progress in vocational training. Progression from a foundation modern apprenticeship to an advanced modern apprenticeship is fully encouraged and supported, with a number of current learners having taken this route. One learner has progressed from a New Deal voluntary option to a foundation modern apprenticeship in retailing. She is now an assistant manager at her retailing outlet and is currently discussing progression to an advanced modern apprenticeship with STS. Where competence above the level of the mandatory framework for key skills is demonstrated, learners are encouraged to work towards the higher level key skills qualification, in application of number, communication and IT.

48. There is good assessment practice on the work-based learning programmes for young people. Learners have a good in-depth knowledge of the standards, frameworks and assessment process. This enables them to identify evidence against relevant units and elements, criteria and range. They complete matrices to indicate completion and

usefully identify gaps where they need to obtain further evidence. The learners are actively involved in the planning for assessment and drive the process forward. There are flexible assessment arrangements. This was identified in the self-assessment report. Assessors deal sensitively and effectively with learners' individual circumstances and requirements. Assessment is arranged out-of-office hours for those with a heavy workload. Assessment methods are altered to meet learners' requirements, with increased use of assessment by observation and verbal questioning where learners are finding targets difficult to meet. Extra assessment visits can be arranged, with a number of current learners being assessed once a week. There is a strong rapport between assessors and learners. Personal or work problems are discussed openly, with solutions found and appropriate action taken. Assessors also provide off-the-job training on an individual basis with learners. They support learners with basic skills needs as appropriate. Assessors are well organised and methodical and very committed to motivating learners to work towards achieving their qualifications. They also have a good knowledge and understanding of the occupational standards. Internal verification is thorough, with the gaps in evidence collection and authentication being identified and appropriately dealt with.

49. Initial assessment is satisfactory. It was identified as a weakness in the self-assessment report. All learners are interviewed. They complete a useful initial assessment questionnaire, which takes the form of a skills analysis and a key skills assessment. There is a basic skills test. The induction process is also satisfactory. It adequately covers all aspects of the qualification, as well as usefully discussing key topics concerning health and safety and equality of opportunity. Learners can usefully refer to the written details in the induction pack as required.

50. There is a poor achievement rate for modern apprenticeship frameworks. This was identified in the self-assessment report. Of the 68 learners who have started the advanced modern apprenticeship since 1997, only three have completed the full framework. Of the 77 learners who have started the foundation modern apprenticeship, only nine have completed the full framework. Key skills training is not routinely introduced at the beginning of the training programmes and some are not an integral part of the training leading to the NVQ. Since May 2002, STS have had strategies to remedy this poor achievement rate and improvements are already visible. Learners are now highly motivated and keen to complete the full modern apprenticeship framework, but it is too early to judge the full effectiveness of these strategies. Retention rates are now satisfactory.

51. The progress review process is carried out approximately every 12 weeks. These reviews give learners the opportunity to discuss their progress and receive feedback from the assessor. Learners appreciate the opportunity to discuss progress. Employers are normally only involved at the end of the discussion, being invited to read through the action-planning and to sign their part of the paperwork.

52. Target-setting for learners is ineffective. Learners do have targets in their individual learning plans and targets are discussed during progress reviews. However, these

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targets are too general in nature and not sufficiently focused on breaking down achievement into manageable tasks. This is ineffective in guiding learners through the NVQ and modern apprenticeship frameworks. STS has now identified this situation and over the past two months has introduced strategies to ensure more effective target-setting to support learner' achievement. The effect of these strategies cannot be measured yet.

53. There is a pleasant training room, but this is currently equipped with only one computer and a small supply of other learning materials. Assessors are building up an appropriate bank of materials to assist learners with the background knowledge necessary to gain competence. This is adequate, but is very much in the development stage. Few learners use the facilities, but those who do find them useful.

Hairdressing & beauty therapy

Grade 4

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	38	4

54. STS started up work-based learning for young people in hairdressing in November 2001. There are currently 38 learners. Of these, 35 are foundation modern apprentices working towards an NVQ in hairdressing and key skills. There are three advanced modern apprentices working towards an NVQ at level 3. Learners are recruited through Connexions and by direct referrals from local employers. Learners may join the programme at any time throughout the year. STS has its own training salon, which is based in the centre of Mansfield. There are 12 learners currently training at this salon, who attend on a full-time basis. The company also works with 23 other salons, where the remaining 26 learners are employed. These learners attend the training centre for one day every two weeks, for background knowledge, practical training and assessment. STS employs three members of staff at their central training centre to carry out training and assessment.

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)	2001-02													
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	Number of starts	3												
Retained*	3													
Successfully completed	0													
Still in learning	3													

*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

Work-based learning for young people														
Foundation modern apprenticeships (FMA)	2002-03		2001-02											
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	Number of starts	1		40										
Retained*	1		34											
Successfully completed	0		0											
Still in learning	1		34											

*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

- effective development of learners' technical skills
- good progression rate into employment by learners
- good support for learners
- good learners' retention rate

WEAKNESSES

- weak background knowledge training
- inadequate assessment practices
- no key skills achievement
- inadequate internal verification arrangements

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- more involvement by employers in learners' training
- better integration of basic skills into learners' vocational training

55. Learners have good technical skills, which are developed effectively by STS. The learners benefit significantly from having experienced hairdressing trainers to work with. Staff at the training centre update their skills by continuing work in the industry. STS's training staff also work as stylists at the training centre. The salon operates as a commercial enterprise with profitability targets. The learners are able to observe their trainers working on clients and fully assist them in the running of the salon. STS has made successful attempts to encourage more clients to use the salon through advertising and promotion. The salon remains a realistic working environment. External salons are also very keen for their learners to progress with their skills, to enable them to function better within the salon. Salons are very supportive of the learners' progress and offer good training in the workplace. However, employers are not always adequately informed of all the ways in which they can contribute to the training process.

56. There is a good progression rate of learners into employment. Those who join the programme without employment, initially work and train in the salon at the training centre. Staff effectively support them to find employment as soon as possible. They work continuously with learners to prepare them for employment within the industry. STS subsidises learners' allowances until they are able to take up employment. Trials in other salons are arranged. Effective use is made of local networks. Most learners quickly progress into employment with other salons on a permanent basis.

57. There is good support for learners throughout their training. Staff at STS are aware

of the learners' individual needs. Some learners have additional personal needs, such as a lack of confidence or personal problems at home. Staff fully support these learners in developing their interpersonal skills. They also refer learners for extra outside support if required. There is a supportive atmosphere in the salon at the training centre. Staff also ensure that learners are appropriately matched to salons that will be supportive of their needs. Those learners interviewed are satisfied with their work placements and value the support that they are given. There is effective basic skills support available for learners, should a need be identified. But this basic skills support is not an integral part of the vocational training. The good support given to learners has a positive effect on retention rates. There is an overall retention rate of 86 per cent for modern apprenticeships.

58. Background knowledge training is weak. There are few background knowledge training sessions and what is taught is not done well. Staff have no teaching qualifications and little experience of teaching. Background knowledge sessions at the training centre are poorly planned. Learners are not told what is expected of them during the training session. There is a lack of flexibility in the training programme, with all learners progressing at the same rate. The only teaching plans are in the form of a timetable. This is issued to the learners, but it is out of date and bears little resemblance to what is happening in the training sessions. Subjects are not explained well and the learning is not adequately assessed. Learners cannot recall information that they have received during the training sessions. They also often spend long periods of time in the classroom without supervision. Learners studying for a level 3 NVQ are not given sufficient background knowledge to the NVQ and are expected to develop their knowledge by working on their own through a learning pack. These learners are making poor progress and the overall level of achievement is unsatisfactory.

59. Progress reviews are carried out regularly. Broad targets are set, but these are not specific enough to help learners. No specific targets are set for the completion of work. Learners are not sufficiently aware of the progress they are making.

60. Assessment practices are inadequate. Learners do not have sufficient knowledge of the requirements of the NVQ process and are not able to drive the assessment process forward. They do not work to the NVQ standards and make little reference to them. They are unclear about the progress they are making. Some learners think that they have completed work when they have not. Assessment plans are completed after the assessment, therefore learners are not well prepared for the assessment process. A significant number of assessments have not been validated. Witness testimonies are not used. This delays the progress of the learner who must wait for an assessor to visit. Learners' signatures are missing from assessment documents. There is insufficient assessment. The requirements to assess learners under commercial pressure are often not met. There are currently no experienced work-based assessors, although four are working towards assessors' awards. The wearing of flip-flops was permitted in the salon during an assessment, despite this presenting a health and safety risk. The training centre does not have sufficient products for the learners to use to meet the requirements of their assessments.

61. There has been no achievement of key skills. None of the learners has started work on the key skills element of the modern apprenticeship framework. A timetable was produced at the beginning of the learners' training programme which scheduled key skills tuition. However, this has not been implemented. The learners are not sufficiently informed about the key skills that they are required to complete for their modern apprenticeship framework. The training centre has started to gather some teaching materials with a plan to start in October. The lack of key skills training is affecting the learners' progress and completion of the modern apprenticeship framework.

62. Internal verification arrangements are inadequate. The training centre had two qualified internal verifiers when it was given approval by the awarding body. However both have since left. There is currently no qualified internal verifier. STS brought in a qualified internal verifier two weeks before inspection, to carry out some portfolio sampling. This revealed significant weaknesses within the assessment practice that had not been identified previously. The only other sampling of paperwork available in the training centre was based around some written work. This was done just before the external verifier was due to visit. There has been no sampling of practical assessment. There are no effective plans in place to assure the quality of assessment.