

# INSPECTION REPORT

## Focus On

03 September 2002



ADULT LEARNING  
INSPECTORATE



**Estyn**

Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrthdydi Dros Addysg  
A Hylloddiant yng Nghymru  
Her Majesty's Inspectorate  
For Education and Training in Wales

## FOCUS ON

### 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

Focus On is a private training company based in Coventry. It provides work-based learning in retailing, customer services and transportation. It also offers training in business administration, management and professional, and information and communications technology. All learners are advanced modern apprentices.

### Overall judgement

The quality of the provision is adequate to meet the reasonable needs of those receiving it. The quality of provision in retailing, customer services and transportation is good. The leadership and management and quality assurance arrangements are good. Equal opportunities issues are satisfactory.

### GRADES

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

Retailing, customer service & transportation	2
Contributory grades:	
Work-based learning for young people	2

### KEY STRENGTHS

- firm and effective leadership
- strong culture of continuous improvement
- good standard of training
- effective and thorough assessment practice
- very productive partnerships with employers
- good training support for learners

## FOCUS ON

### **KEY WEAKNESSES**

- weak strategy for ensuring personal support for all learners
- insufficient promotion of equality of opportunities

### **OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED**

- continue increase in retention of learners
- better scheduling of key skills workshops
- updating of equal opportunities policy

## THE INSPECTION

1. The inspection was undertaken jointly between the Adult Learning Inspectorate and the Welsh inspectorate, ESTYN. A team of five inspectors spent a total of 15 days at Focus On in September 2002. Inspectors visited seven workplaces, where they interviewed 18 learners and nine employers and workplace supervisors. Inspectors conducted 17 interviews with members of the training providers' staff and observed five learning sessions. They examined a wide range of documents, including policies and procedures, initial assessment materials, individual learning plans, induction materials, learners' portfolios and files, progress reviews, assessment documents and records of meetings. Inspectors made use of Focus On's most recent self-assessment report and development plan, produced in November 2001.

Grades awarded to learning sessions

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Total
Retailing, customer service & transportation	0	4	1	0	0	0	0	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>

## THE PROVIDER AS A WHOLE

### Context

2. Focus On was established in 1998. Its administrative offices are in Coventry. The company provides work-based learning and assessment in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Manchester, Bristol, the Midlands and Cardiff. Training is provided in retailing, customer services and transportation. Focus On also provides training in the two areas of business administration, management and professional, and information and communications technology (ICT). As there were only small numbers of learners in these two areas at the time of the inspection they were not inspected. There are two directors and two other office staff based at Coventry. There are also four training consultants employed by Focus On who are all regionally based. Focus On provides off-the-job training and assessment. All training and assessment takes place in the workplace, with a strong emphasis on individual coaching.

3. Training provision is funded by two English local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs), the West of England LSC and Tyne and Wear LSC. Focus On also provides training in Cardiff, funded by Education Learning Wales (ELWa), Southeast Wales. At the time of the inspection, there were 40 learners, all were taking advanced modern apprenticeships. There were 25 learners based in Cardiff. Of these, 22 were funded by ELWa Southeast Wales, and three by the West of England LSC. There were 11 learners in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, three in Ashby de la Zouche and one in Bristol.

4. The unemployment rate in Bristol and for the West of England in May 2002 was 1.8 per cent compared with 3 per cent for England as a whole. The minority ethnic population for Bristol in 2001 was 5.1 per cent, compared to 2.7 per cent for the area covered by the West of England LSC, and 6.2 per cent for England overall. Forty-six per cent of the population of the Southwest gained level 3 qualifications or above, compared with the February 2002 UK rate of 42 per cent. In September 2001, 32 per cent of 16-year-olds achieved five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C or above, compared to 47.9 per cent for England as a whole.

5. The unemployment rate in Newcastle-upon-Tyne for May 2002 was 4 per cent, compared with a rate of 5.2 per cent for the Northeast and 3 per cent for England as a whole. The minority ethnic population of Newcastle-upon-Tyne was 4.1 per cent compared to 1.4 per cent for the Northeast and 6.2 per cent for England overall. Attainment of qualifications at or above level 3 in the working age population of the Northeast was 39 per cent compared to 42 per cent across the UK (February 2002). Thirty-seven per cent of 16-year-olds achieved five or more GCSEs at grade C or above (September 2001).

6. The unemployment rate in Cardiff for May 2002 was 2.8 per cent, compared with a rate of 3.6 per cent for Wales as a whole. The minority ethnic population of Cardiff in 2001 was 6.1 per cent, compared to 1.5 per cent for Wales as a whole.

## Work-based learning for young people

7. The standard of training is good. All learners are in employment. Employers are committed to learners' training and development and provide good learning resources. Focus On trainers form effective working relationships with learners and employers. They are skilful in delivering training to meet individual learner's needs and employers requirements. Training is primarily on an individual basis and is shaped to meet individual learning styles. There is good assessment practice with frequent opportunities for assessment and steady progress towards targets. Portfolios are of a high standard with good-quality evidence based primarily on observation at the workstation. Internal verification procedures are satisfactory, although some aspects of Focus On's procedures are not fully adhered to on all sites. There is effective setting and reviewing of short- and long-term targets, and learners are well supported in achieving these. However, Focus On lacks developed strategies for supporting learners with personal and additional needs. There are too few links made between on- and off-the-job training.

8. Retention rates overall are satisfactory, with a downward trend from a very high starting point. Retention rates were distorted during 2001-02 by the loss, at one site, of a significant number of learners, many of whom left their employment altogether for reasons largely outside of Focus On's control. The training provider and the employer co-operated on a strategy to improve retention rates, and the number of learners have now stabilised. Most learners who remain in learning achieve the full modern apprenticeship framework. Learners develop good levels of personal effectiveness and self-confidence as well as relevant knowledge and skills. The training prepares learners well for promotion within the workplace. Learners take on positions of considerable responsibility.

## LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

**Grade 2**

9. Focus On has two managing directors who established the company together in 1998. The directors are based in Coventry, along with an office manager and a contracts administrator. In addition, Focus On employs four training consultants who are based regionally, and who undertake all of the training and assessment. The company has held the Investors in People award since 1998, most recently renewed in 2002. This is a national standard for improving an organisation's performance through its people. The company has policies and procedures for quality assurance and has an equal opportunities policy. It undertook its first self-assessment report in line with the 'Common Inspection Framework' in November 2001. The company's strategic objectives are outlined in a development plan based on its self-assessment report.

### STRENGTHS

- firm and effective leadership of organisation
- good staff development and appraisal
- very effective internal communications
- good strategies to involve employers in training
- strong culture of continuous improvement
- good monitoring systems

### WEAKNESSES

- weak strategy to support learners with additional learning needs
- insufficient awareness of equal opportunities issues among learners
- inconsistencies in the application of quality assurance procedures

### OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- more training for staff in equality of opportunity
- updating of the equality of opportunity policy
- wider range of management information
- more specific action points in development plan

10. The two directors of Focus On give a strong, clear lead about the values, standards and high levels of commitment that are expected from staff, learners and employers. The directors lead by example. Frequent visits by the directors, well-structured meetings, well-timed training and detailed guidance notes are used to ensure good standards of training and assessment. Training is well planned according to clear targets, which are regularly monitored. There is a firm commitment to planning learners' programmes around their individual learning styles. Management visits are used to identify whether procedures are applied in ways that most benefit the learners.

11. There is strong promotion of relevant staff training and development. All staff members, including the directors, are required to work towards qualifications within given timescales. Staff development requirements are clearly specified in job descriptions and included within the business plan. There are generous time allocations for training and mentoring. Constructive use is made of team meetings for training, staff development and for sharing expertise. Training needs are identified through an established, well-managed appraisal system and through operational visits. Staff are very open about their levels of confidence, performance and motivation and there is a sensitive management response to identified staff needs.

12. Internal communications are good. Focus On is sensitive to the needs of staff as lone workers. It provides mobile phones and laptops to enable training consultants to maintain contact with the directors and each other. Frequent visits, good informal contact and regular meetings enable staff to work well as a team. The communication methods employed are effective in overcoming the potential difficulties of geographical isolation. There are clearly documented strategies for communications between staff, learners, funding bodies and employers. Focus On has set up an innovative 'Programme Review Team' which brings together all stakeholders on a regular basis to discuss the programme and learners' progress. This is an effective tool for internal and external communications and enables learners, employers and funding bodies to contribute their ideas and opinions.

13. Focus On has good strategies for building productive relationships with employers and for working in partnership to improve retention and achievement rates. In particular, there are well-designed procedures for the early stages of contact with employers, in order to ensure their commitment to the values and requirements of the training from the very beginning. A range of methods is used to keep employers and team managers involved and well-informed about the programme and learners' progress. A well-designed questionnaire is completed by employers to rate the programme on its relevance to the business and on changes in learners' work performance. Most employers are well satisfied with the programme.

14. Although there is good support for learners' training needs, Focus On does not have formal and comprehensive strategies for other aspects of support, such as support for personal needs, language and literacy, and for learners with additional learning needs. There is insufficient awareness, expertise and guidance for staff on such issues. There are no arrangements in place for organising, monitoring or evaluating specialist diagnostic assessments and additional support in each region. Differing support needs are not covered in the initial agreement with employers. There is very little mention in promotional material or learners' induction materials, of the range of support which could be made available to those with additional learning needs. Initial assessment of learning needs is undertaken. There are currently no learners with language and learning support needs or with identified additional learning needs.

**Equality of opportunity****Contributory grade 3**

15. Although Focus On does not recruit learners directly, it does seek to ensure that employers are aware of the need to have fair recruitment procedures. In its self-assessment report, Focus On recognised that the company could give a stronger lead to employers on promoting diversity. It is doing this through a range of methods. For example, it sent a questionnaire to employers about their equal opportunities policies and has encouraged them to consider how far their recruitment of employees matches the profile of the local population. Most employers have sent a detailed response. It has also distributed among employers, an example of good practice in recruiting people with disabilities.

16. Equality of opportunity is a standing agenda item at the training provider's bi-monthly team meetings and sometimes is a major item on the agenda. For example, one director recently provided staff with a full briefing after attending a course on managing diversity. There are, however, no firm plans for other staff to attend training courses in equality of opportunity. Focus On collects and analyses data relating to equality of opportunity, but insufficient use has been made of these in planning improvements. Access to employers' premises for wheelchair-users is good.

17. Focus On has an equality of opportunity policy. This makes a strong statement about equal opportunities which is repeated in other documentation. Focus On has updated some of its approaches to equality of opportunity recently, such as in the area of disabilities, but has not updated its formal policy since 1998. The policy is contained in the induction handbook given to each learner. Induction materials give specific examples of how equal opportunities might affect learners in different aspects of training and assessment. A procedure to cover harassment and bullying has recently been written, but it has not yet been introduced. Learners have a good understanding of grievance and complaints procedures, but are not sufficiently aware of the full range of issues associated with equality of opportunity. The reinforcement of learners' understanding of equality of opportunity during their training programme is inadequate. This weakness was not identified in the self-assessment report.

18. A significant number of learners are based in Wales, in areas where pupils are taught in Welsh. Focus On provides training in companies where there are Welsh employees. Focus On has not currently recruited any Welsh-speaking learners. It has not translated any promotional or other materials into the Welsh language, or identified the specific needs of people previously educated in Welsh. However, Focus On has attempted to recruit Welsh-speaking staff and this is a target in its development plan for Wales.

**Quality assurance****Contributory grade 2**

19. There are comprehensive strategies and systems for quality assurance management. Focus On has developed a strong culture of continuous improvement. This is driven by the two directors whose roles and responsibilities in relation to quality assurance are clearly defined. All staff are involved with continuous improvement initiatives. There are detailed, well-documented, standardised procedures to cover most aspects of training and assessment. These are well established and are understood by trainers and by relevant workplace staff. Directors make quality assurance visits to each site every three months, and make frequent meetings to review operational effectiveness. Close contact is maintained with staff and employers. There are regular, formal, two-day meetings for all staff to examine the performance of the company and agree improvements. These are well recorded and define responsibilities and timescales for taking actions forward. Procedures are reviewed and updated to meet the changing needs of the Focus On business. Staff view compliance audits and the close monitoring of their performance as normal practice in maintaining good standards of training.

20. Focus On has devised innovative and useful ways of monitoring performance and measuring improvements. Overall, these are used effectively and draw on a wide range of evidence. Training consultants regularly monitor candidates' progress and produce reports which are shared with all concerned. Training workshops are observed and feedback to training consultants is given on topics such as teaching methods, resources, learning styles and improvement opportunities. Detailed, valuable feedback is collected from learners and employers about different aspects of training provision, mostly through well-constructed questionnaires. Programme review team meetings are used to ensure that employers, learners and funding bodies formally contribute to the monitoring process. Numeric grades are used to score performance so that improvements can be measured over time. Focus On is developing a method of benchmarking its own performance.

21. Focus On produced its first self-assessment report in November 2001. This has been updated to reflect the 'Common Inspection Framework' and the ESTYN quality assurance framework. The self-assessment report is generally accurate in identifying strengths and weaknesses and self-assessment grades are in line with those given during the inspection. The development plan outlines appropriate actions to bring about the improvements identified through the quality assurance management strategy and self-assessment process. The plan is well structured, identifies responsibilities, timescales and evaluation measures. Some action points lack specific detail.

22. Management information data is used appropriately. For example, the initiatives undertaken with employers in order to improve retention rates were based on detailed statistical analyses, as well as feedback from learners and employers. Although management information systems are satisfactory, these lack data in some areas that the training provider wishes to benchmark. A new management information system is being introduced.

## FOCUS ON

23. Although quality assurance is good, there are gaps in the application of some procedures. The evaluation of some aspects of training, such as training methods using laptop computers, is yet to be fully developed. Some learners are reluctant to produce feedback for evaluation. Internal verification practices all meet the requirements of awarding bodies, but there are local variations in the application of some Focus On procedures. There is insufficient monitoring of the early stages of training and mentoring for new staff. Aspects of the quality assurance system have been extended to some new locations and have not yet been tested through the full quality assurance cycle. For example, programme review team meetings are more recently established in some locations than others.

### Good Practice

*One of the call-centre companies for whom Focus On provides training made a presentation to a group of Disability Employment Advisers in order to raise awareness of its recruitment opportunities for people with disabilities. As a result, two people with severe visual impairment have been successfully employed. Focus On asked the company to write a short case study outlining what this involved, emphasising the benefits to the company and to the individuals concerned. Focus On has circulated the case study to other call-centre companies and has offered to put them in touch with the original company to discuss methods of extending employment opportunities to people with disabilities.*

## AREAS OF LEARNING

### Retailing, customer service & transportation

Grade 2

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	40	2

24. Focus On provides work-based learning in customer service and call handling. All learners are employed, most in call-handling companies. Recruitment and selection are carried out by the employers. Learners are based in Cardiff, Newcastle, Bristol and Ashby de la Zouche. It is now Focus On policy that learners gain experience in the workplace for approximately six months before starting on its training programmes. There are currently 40 advanced modern apprentices, three in customer service and 37 in call handling. All work towards a level 3 NVQ in customer service, call handling operations or supervising call handling. Focus On provides off-the-job training which supplements the employers' own training. Focus On employs four permanent training consultants, who visit learners in the workplace every two to three weeks. Focus On provides an informative introductory presentation, a thorough initial assessment and an induction to the modern apprenticeship programme. One-to-one coaching, workshops and assessment are provided in the workplace by Focus On's training consultants. Formal progress reviews are carried out quarterly.

The following table shows 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					
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
	Number of starts	6		62		19		10		11				
Retained*	0		31	50	13	68	8	80	11	100				
Successfully completed	0		1	2	9	47	8	80	10	91				
Still in learning	6		30	48	4	21	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 standard of training
- thorough and effective assessment practice
- effective setting and reviewing of targets
- good training support for learners

## **WEAKNESSES**

- insufficient arrangements for additional support
- inconsistent implementation of internal verification strategy between sites

## **OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED**

- continue increase in retention of learners
- better scheduling of key skills training workshops

25. Overall, retention levels are satisfactory. In the three years up to April 2001, retention levels show a downward trend, from all learners being retained until the end of their programme, to two-thirds remaining for the length of the programme. In the following year, the retention rate fell by half. This was influenced by the loss of a significant number of learners from a new programme in Cardiff where learners voluntarily left employment for reasons mainly outside the control of Focus On. Since this incident, Focus On has worked closely with employers to put in place a strategy to improve retention rates. Recent data indicates that the strategy is effective. Most of those learners remaining on the programmes achieve the full modern apprenticeship framework. Overall, learners make steady progress towards completing their modern apprenticeships. Learners who remain on the training programme develop good knowledge, skills and personal effectiveness, and are confident in their abilities. In addition, learners achieve the skills and qualities required for promotion within their workplaces. Many learners have attained positions with significant levels of responsibility.

26. Training is of a good standard. Learners are all employed before beginning the programme, mostly working in large call centres. Recruitment and selection are undertaken by their employers. Focus On requires employers to show commitment to the training and development of their employees. Employers have well developed, appropriate training schemes which give learners a sound introduction to the industry. Employers' sites have good learning resource centres. Employers continue to develop the learners' knowledge and skills through frequent refresher training and product launch briefings.

27. Before potential learners join the modern apprenticeship programme, they are fully informed about the programme and the levels of commitment required. All Focus On training is skilfully provided in the workplace by training consultants who are appropriately experienced and qualified. Training consultants teach a number of well-designed short courses. There are good supporting materials and workbooks, especially for key skills. These are continually reviewed and tailored to individual needs. Training is provided through workshops or individual sessions, depending on individual requirements. However, learners are not always clear when the next key skills workshop

will take place. Learners who are unable to attend a particular workshop are not aware when that training need will be met. Training consultants have access to the learning resource facilities at employers' premises. Employers and Focus On have good, well-taught training schemes, but there are insufficient links between the two. The training provider identified some aspects of training as a strength and recognised the need for closer alignment of on- and off-the job-training.

28. Assessment is thorough and effective. The prime source of evidence is through frequent and well-recorded observations of performance in the workplace. Competence is further demonstrated by employers' own regular monitoring of performance. Learners' portfolios are well structured and contain a good range of evidence which is clearly and accurately cross-referenced to the standards. Learners are encouraged to recognise the relationship between evidence and standards. They take responsibility for finding good-quality evidence and are proud of their achievements. The development and assessment of learners' key skills is well-planned as an integral part of their programme. In its self-assessment report, the training provider identified frequent and effective assessment visits as a strength.

29. The system for setting and reviewing short-, medium- and long-term targets is successful in encouraging learners' progress. Training consultants review progress with learners every two weeks, setting and reviewing assessment targets. Learners' individual learning plans have individual target dates for the achievement of units, and these plans are updated as units are progressively achieved. Unit certification is available as units are achieved. Training consultants also undertake quarterly progress reviews with learners. At these reviews, targets are set and reviewed for the development of skills and knowledge over the next three-month period. Targets are specific and demanding, but realistic. They cover the full scope of the requirements of the programme and result in learners making good progress towards their qualification aims. Learners' preferred learning styles are continually reviewed, and their views on their training and achievements are sought. Employers are also actively involved in the process, and are encouraged to comment on the learners' performance and development. Target-setting and reviewing was not identified as a strength in the self-assessment report.

30. There is good training support for learners. They have the immediate support of their team manager, who is well briefed by Focus On about the requirements of the training programme. Team managers are sympathetic to learners' needs and provide helpful guidance on the collection of evidence. Training consultants visit learners in the workplace every two weeks. They develop excellent and very productive relationships with learners, team managers, and other work-based staff. Employers regard the training consultant as a member of their own team. There is a good level of effective individual coaching by training consultants, who schedule visits thoughtfully to ensure that there is minimum disruption to learners and employers. Through these visits, training consultants are often able to attend to learners' individual assessment and training needs as they arise. Learners are given contact details for their trainers and have good access to them. Training consultants are flexible and react promptly to make additional visits as required. The training provider identified aspects of support as a strength.

## FOCUS ON

31. No strategy exists to support candidates who may require specialist personal support from an external agency. There are no formal contacts with these specialist agencies at a local level, and no information is available to candidates at the induction programme. This was not identified as a weakness in the self-assessment report.

32. Internal verification procedures are satisfactory. These include a strategy to sample all portfolios on three separate occasions. Sampling confirms the quality of assessment and is sufficiently thorough to identify whether assessment procedures are carried out fully. However, on some sites, sampling does not always take place on three separate occasions, in line with the training provider's strategy.

### Good Practice

*Learners take their key skills tests in the workplace during their normal working day. This makes the tests less daunting, increases the employer's involvement, and reduces disruption to learners and their employer. Since this was introduced, learners' attendance for the tests has improved.*