

INSPECTION REPORT

Acorn Training Consultants Ltd

24 March 2003



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
- **learnirect** provision
- Adult and Community Learning
- training funded by Jobcentre Plus
- education and training in prisons, at the invitation of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons.

Inspections are carried out in accordance with the *Common Inspection Framework* by teams of full-time inspectors and part-time associate inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work which they inspect. All providers are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

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

Acorn Training Consultants Ltd is a private company with a single site in Alfreton. The company has 46 work-based learners in business administration and customer service. It also has a small number of learners on other work-based learning programmes including information technology, management, team-building, and distribution and warehousing. All the training is funded through contracts with Derbyshire Learning and Skills Council.

Overall judgement

The overall quality of the provision is adequate to meet the reasonable needs of those receiving it. More specifically the quality of training is satisfactory. The leadership and management of Acorn Training Consultants Ltd are satisfactory, as are the arrangements for equality of opportunity and quality assurance.

GRADES

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

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

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

KEY STRENGTHS

- good internal communication
- strong support for learners
- good awareness of equality of opportunity by learners
- thorough review process
- good individual training in the workplace
- very effective assessment and review visits

KEY WEAKNESSES

- insufficient planning of on-the-job training
- incomplete procedures for quality assurance
- inadequate targeting to promote equality of opportunity
- insufficiently thorough internal verification in business administration
- inadequate involvement of employers in customer service programmes

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better links between business planning and staff development and training plan
- better short-term target-setting and action-planning
- increased opportunities for learners to meet and share good practice
- more opportunities for staff to develop occupational knowledge and skills
- better promotion and access to learning resources

THE INSPECTION

1. Four inspectors spent a total of 16 days with Acorn Training Consultants Ltd (Acorn). They interviewed 18 learners and 35 staff, visited 16 work placements and interviewed 13 employers. They observed progress reviews, and observed and graded six learning sessions. They examined documents including individual action and learning plans, progress review documents, minutes of meetings, quality assurance documents, policies and procedures. Acorn has 76 learners, but only the 46 business administration or customer service learners were included in the inspection. Inspectors examined the company's most recent self-assessment report, which was completed in October 2002, and its development plan.

Grades awarded to learning sessions

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

THE PROVIDER AS A WHOLE

Context

2. Acorn is a private company which was established in July 1996. It operates from a single site in Alfreton. The company has three directors. One director manages finance and curriculum, a second has responsibility for business development, personnel, marketing and recruitment and the third is the company accountant. The company employs nine full-time and three part-time staff.

3. Most of the training takes place on employers' sites, but Acorn also arranges workshops at its central premises or in other premises nearby. There are 20 advanced modern apprentices and 26 foundation modern apprentices, working towards business administration or customer service national vocational qualifications (NVQ's). All the learners are employed or have work placements in Derbyshire, and the training is funded through contracts with Derbyshire Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

4. The economy of southern Derbyshire has been transformed by the decline in the pottery and textile industry. Employment opportunities are now primarily in construction, distribution, light engineering and private and public service sectors. The unemployment rate in the East Midlands in May 2002 was 3 per cent, the same as the national average rate. At the time of the 1991 census, the proportion of the population from minority ethnic groups in the region was 4.8 per cent, compared with the national average of 6.2 per cent. In 2001, the proportion of school leavers in the east Midlands achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C or above was 47.6 per cent, compared with the national average of 47.9 per cent.

Work-based learning for young people

5. Acorn offers training in business administration and customer service. In business administration there are 31 learners, of whom 11 are advanced modern apprentices and 20 are foundation modern apprentices. In customer service there are nine advanced modern apprentices and six foundation modern apprentices.
6. Internal communication is good. Regular meetings take place to ensure that staff are kept fully informed. They have ample opportunities to share good practice, and work well as a team. Acorn staff are competent and are able to establish a good rapport and effective working relationships with the learners.
7. Learners benefit from regular assessment visits and a thorough review process. They have a good understanding of their rights and responsibilities. Off-the-job training in business administration is good.
8. The planning of on-the-job training is not sufficiently thorough. On- and off-the-job training are not well co-ordinated. Quality assurance procedures are incomplete. On-the-job training is not monitored adequately.
9. Training in business administration and customer care is satisfactory to good. The evidence gathered from the workplace and set out in learners' portfolios is of a very good standard. Initial assessments in customer service are good. Learners' successes are celebrated effectively. Insufficient use is made of assessment by observation in the workplace.
10. Retention and achievement rates are unsatisfactory. Retention and achievement rates for business administration foundation modern apprenticeships are poor. Those for advanced modern apprentices in customer service show a declining trend over time. The retention rate has improved slightly in the past year.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 3

11. All three directors are fully involved in the business and each of them takes responsibility for a group of learners. Two of the directors are also internal verifiers. There are nine full-time staff and three part-time, and three of the staff have managerial roles and report to the directors. The staff meet formally every four to six weeks, and share a buffet lunch each day. Seventy-two per cent of the staff are women, and none is from a minority ethnic group. Acorn is accredited with the Investors in People standard, a national standard for improving an organisation's performance through its people. The company has an annual business plan which deals with all aspects of its provision. Two of the directors share responsibility for quality assurance, and a member of staff oversees equality of opportunity. Acorn produced its first self-assessment report in 1998, and has produced one every year since then.

STRENGTHS

- good internal communication
- good development of learning resources for key skills
- strong support for learners
- good awareness of equality of opportunity by learners
- effective use of feedback

WEAKNESSES

- insufficient planning of on-the-job training
- incomplete procedures for quality assurance
- insufficient monitoring of equality of opportunity
- inadequate targeting to promote equality of opportunity

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better employer contracts
- better links between business planning and staff development and training plan
- more detailed recording of action taken to deal with individual learners' needs

12. Acorn has good formal and informal internal communications. This strength was identified in the company's most recent self-assessment report. Acorn's staff meet formally on a regular basis. All the meetings have a published agenda and detailed minutes of the discussions are produced. Staff are well informed about the issues and developments which affect the company. Standardisation meetings also take place. They are well recorded and include group discussion, a review of reports from the awarding bodies and the sharing of good practice. Good informal communications are enhanced by the daily buffet lunch. This open forum, provides the staff with

opportunities to discuss a whole range of professional issues relating to the learners. There is little staff turnover and they work well as a team. The induction arrangements for all new staff are comprehensive and are carried out over a month. The process includes individual briefing sessions with a director to learn about the company and its culture. Another involves shadowing experienced staff, during which new staff are fully integrated with working practices. At the end of the shadowing period the new member of staff discuss any issues with the director, and individual targets are agreed and set.

13. The development of resources to support the teaching of key skills is good. Practice tests for the key skills are available on a website, the design of which is colourful and innovative. Acorn has invested considerable time and resources in the creation of the website. Learners are given a password which enables them to access a secure part of the website at any time. When a learner logs on to the website for information, or to carry out a practice test, the results are updated. Learners and their tutors can view the results and gauge the learners' progress. The tests promote learning by producing the correct response, with suggestions about how to work out the answers. The site also includes a wide range of recent and relevant practice papers. Learners' responses to the website resource have been very positive.

14. The planning of on-the-job training is insufficiently thorough. Employers and supervisors have an informal discussion at the start and throughout the programme, but there are no records to indicate the quality or the amount of training which will be provided by the employers. For all learners, most of their learning takes place on the job. In some cases, where learners have taken part in off-the-job training led by the employer, it has not been an integral part of the learners' programme. There are no arrangements to assure the quality of on-the-job training. The contracts with employers are too brief. They only cover the basic requirements, and do not explain in sufficient detail the employers' responsibility to provide good on-the-job training.

15. There is no clear strategy for meeting additional support needs. Learners' additional needs are identified effectively during their initial assessment. Support for numeracy and literacy is provided on an individual basis, usually in the workplace. Learners appreciate the assistance they are given and it is recorded satisfactorily. However, the recording system used does not include sufficient detail about the effects of the assistance given to enable judgements to be made about the learners' progress. Tutors and assessors are permitted some flexibility in the amount of time they allocate to respond to individual learners' needs. One of the company's targets is that all tutors and assessors will achieve teaching qualifications. The business plan contains clear objectives on overcoming barriers to learning. Internet and key skills practice is being promoted to develop learners' basic literacy and numeracy skills. It is too early to assess the impact of these developments. Arrangements for assuring the quality of additional support are inadequate.

16. The business plan and the marketing plan are produced annually and both plans set out clear objectives for the future. In the business plan, targets are set for learner

achievement rates as part of a strategy of continuous improvement. The staff development and training plan is comprehensive, but it does not have sufficiently strong links with the business plan. Arrangements for staff appraisal and target-setting are satisfactory. Staff appraisal takes place every six to 12 months. All staff have a personal development plan which sets out their individual targets. The company management information system is used effectively to monitor learners' progress, and visual monitoring displays are posted in staff areas. Relevant records are stored in the main administration office and are kept up to date. The management information procedures are used effectively to record and analyse learner data. The company is aware of the poor achievement rates for apprenticeship frameworks and has taken steps to deal with the concerns.

Equality of opportunity**Contributory grade 3**

17. Acorn has an equal opportunities policy which includes procedures to monitor and evaluate its effectiveness. The policy is reviewed every year and covers a range of issues including individual rights and responsibilities in relation to discrimination, harassment and bullying. All learners, staff and employers have a copy of the policy and a pack of information which includes a candidate charter. The charter sets out the information and assistance to which learners and employers are entitled during the period of training. Acorn monitors its associate employers to ensure that they have appropriate equal opportunities policies of their own.

18. The learners are strongly supported in a variety of ways. Acorn offers all its learners confidential advice and assistance. Workplace supervisors and visiting staff from Acorn offer advice, guidance and assistance as required. Contact and discussion are frequent, and learners benefit from Acorn's good internal communications. Learners who have additional needs are identified effectively and are given extra support. Those learners who have personal problems are steered towards specialist help. Suitable adjustments to placements, working hours and facilities are made to accommodate individual needs. Learners have e-mail and telephone links with a named member of staff who is available to provide support. In appropriate cases staff can be contacted outside normal working hours. Learners speak very positively about the support they are given.

19. Acorn's staff ensure that learners have a good understanding of equal opportunities and discussions take place during reviews. Learners have a good understanding of how policies and legislation can protect them from harassment and discrimination. They feel well protected at work and are confident about who to approach if they want to raise concerns. Off-the-job training is available to all learners who wish to extend their understanding of equal opportunities. Acorn has an effective complaints procedure but few complaints have been received. Complaints are logged centrally and promptly, and are responded to effectively. This strength was partially recognised in the most recent self-assessment report.

20. Monitoring of equal opportunities takes place during the review process. The agreement between Acorn and associate employers has a very brief section on equality of opportunity, but there is insufficient detail and it does not set out the role and responsibility of employers for monitoring the policy. The training materials are not formally checked to ensure equality of opportunity. Some staff have responsibility for monitoring aspects of equality of opportunity, but they have not received recent training. Data relating to equality of opportunity are collected and analysed and relevant reports are produced and discussed at team meetings. Equality of opportunity is a standard item on all agendas. However, the outcomes of monitoring are not always recorded, nor is there any indication that monitoring has affected the recruitment profile.

21. Acorn has developed links with local schools. Staff attend appropriate events to promote work-based learning and to publicise Acorn's provision. However, they do not make any special efforts to improve the gender imbalance in recruitment. Of the 46

learners in business administration and customer care, five are men. The business plan includes objectives to improve the recruitment of minority ethnic groups and disabled learners, but there are no targets to redress the imbalance in gender recruitment. There are no taster days, nor is there literature in community languages. There is no use of positive role models or imagery.

22. Access to Acorn's main centre is inadequate for people with restricted mobility. The company has recognised this and has made suitable alternative accommodation available if required.

Quality assurance**Contributory grade 3**

23. Acorn uses a wide range of methods to gain feedback from all relevant parties. The close working relationships between learners and assessors, and effective teamwork provide the context for good informal feedback. Evaluative information from reviews is fed into the quality assurance process. Since it was established, the company has used formal questionnaires to gain feedback, and improvements have been made to the style and content of the questionnaires over time. The views of learners and employers are sought at key stages of the programme and the return rate is excellent. All questionnaires are analysed, a summary report is produced, and key issues arising from the analysis are considered at management meetings. This strength was recognised in the most recent self-assessment report.

24. Procedures for quality assurance are not fully established. A new quality assurance strategy and associated set of procedures have been introduced recently, but it is too early to assess their effectiveness. The original quality assurance arrangements had evolved over time and were generally informal. They were acceptable when the number of staff and learners was small, but growth has made them inadequate. Some processes are clearly defined and flowcharts are used to ensure that staff comply with the requirements of the contracts. In some cases, information on the standard to which each activity should be carried out and the level of the learners' experience is not set out in sufficient detail. The procedures do not identify how monitoring and the views of learners and employers will improve the training offered. There is insufficient monitoring of training in the workplace. Off-the-job training is observed and monitored satisfactorily.

25. Acorn produced its first self-assessment report in October 1998. The self-assessment report is seen as an integral part of the company's strategy for continuous quality improvement. Acorn also generates development plans which are monitored regularly. The report format has been amended to make reference to, and arrive at judgements in relation to, the questions set out in the 'Common Inspection Framework'. Staff are fully involved in the initial stages of compiling the report, while the commentary is written, and the final edit carried out by one of the directors. The document contains too much commentary and is not succinct. The company was able to identify many of the strengths and weaknesses identified during the inspection, but inspectors identified additional key weaknesses. The grades given by inspectors were the same as those set out in the most recent self-assessment report.

Good Practice
When they are appointed, all tutors are given a toolkit which contains essential reading and useful support materials. For example, eye-catching signs have been created which can be mounted on a desk or hung up. The tutor/assessors use them when working with the learners.

AREAS OF LEARNING

Business administration, management & professional

Grade 3

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	31	3

26. There are 31 learners in business administration. Eleven are advanced modern apprentices and 20 are foundation modern apprentices. Only 6 per cent of the learners are from a minority ethnic group and two of them are men. None of the learners has additional learning or social needs, three have a disability, and 94 per cent of them are employed. Learners are referred by Connexions, by their employers, or they apply directly. Learners can start at any time of the year. The early stages of recruitment include an initial discussion and assessment of basic skills and key skills. All the learners participate in induction on the employers' premises, during which Acorn's staff make two or three visits. Off-the-job workshop sessions take place quarterly or at the request of employers, at the provider's training centre. These are offered to all learners and include extra support for key skills. Acorn's staff visit learners in the workplace every fortnight to carry out assessments, provide individual training and to review portfolios. NVQ progress reviews take place every month and formal reviews every 12 weeks. There are four business administration trainers who report to Acorn's directors. Three qualified internal verifiers sample portfolios and monitor the work of assessors.

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							
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number of starts	9		5						3							
Retained*	0		0						2	67						
Successfully completed	0		0						2	67						
Still in learning	7		4						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)																
	2002-03		2001-02		2000-01		1999-2000		1998-99							
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number of starts	14		13		21		1		4							
Retained*	0		3		13	62	1	100	1	25						
Successfully completed	0		2		13	62	1	100	1	25						
Still in learning	14		6		0	0	0	100	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																
NVQ Training																
	2002-03		2001-02		2000-01		1999-2000		1998-99							
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number of starts			2		2		2		14							
Retained*			1	50	2	100	1	50	8	57						
Successfully completed			1	50	2	100	1	50	8	57						
Still in learning			0	0	0	0	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

- well-informed learners and employers
- good use of evidence generated in the workplace
- good off-the-job training in the workplace
- thorough review process

WEAKNESSES

- poor retention and achievement rates for foundation modern apprentices
- insufficient assessment opportunities
- insufficiently thorough internal verification

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better short-term target-setting and action-planning
- increased opportunities for learners to meet and share good practice
- more occupational development for staff

27. Learners and employers have a good understanding of the requirements of the training programmes. The company keeps both groups informed about changes and developments. Learners are required to make constant reference to the programme standards during progress reviews, and when they are involved in action-planning or generating evidence. Learners are able to negotiate tasks as well as points for action, and can identify the links between NVQ requirements and the jobs they do in the workplace. However, their action plans are not always written clearly. In some cases plans are not followed up at subsequent meetings. Sometimes the tasks set are general, and do not identify priorities or indicate times by which targets have to be achieved. The learners know how to reference evidence and relate it to key skills units. Training advisers encourage the learners to take responsibility for their portfolios and projects. Most employers take an active part in this process and support their learners.

28. Evidence gathered from the workplace is good. Ninety-five per cent of the evidence contained in learners' portfolios is from the workplace and is of a very good standard. This strength was identified in the most recent self-assessment report. Acorn's staff use questions effectively to confirm and reinforce learners' understanding of background knowledge. Employers are required to sign learners' reports. Learners' roles carried out on employers' premises have been investigated thoroughly to ensure that all elements of the programme can be covered adequately. The learners' jobs contain a good range of tasks to ensure their skills are developed. There is very little duplication of work and an insignificant amount of simulation. There are good work-based projects which are used effectively to generate the evidence needed to achieve the NVQ. They also benefit the employer.

29. Off-the job training in the workplace is good. Many learners do not attend off-the-job training at a central location, but Acorn's staff provide training for these learners in the workplace. This arrangement is convenient for the employers, and also benefits the learners. The training is good, as are the learning materials. The sessions are well planned, using additional learning materials and are evaluated. In the follow-up session at the subsequent visit, the tutor tests and reinforces the learning. Employers are asked to comment on changes that the training has made to the learners. Some training sessions have insufficient practical application and an inadequate range of teaching methods. Learners who are taught in the workplace do not have a forum where they can meet and share good practice.

30. The review process is very thorough. The formal review process has recently been changed and is now more effective and better recorded. The training manager carries

out all reviews and is kept up to date with learners' progress by means of regular meetings with trainers and written action sheets. The content of the review is extensive. Each topic is discussed thoroughly, issues and concerns are dealt with firmly and fairly, and the learner participates fully in the discussion. Most reviews involve the employers at an appropriate stage. Part of the review is used to set the learners individual and personal goals, which often challenge them beyond the programme's requirements. Learners find that the review process increases their motivation and assists their development effectively.

31. Retention and achievement rates for foundation modern apprentices are low. In 1998-99, the retention rate was 25 per cent, rising to 62 per cent in 2000-01, and falling back to 25 per cent in 2001-02. In 1998-99, one learner out of four completed the framework, and in 1999-2000, the one learner who started completed the framework. In 2000-01, 13 out of the 21 learners completed the framework. Acorn identified retention and achievement rates as a weakness in its most recent self-assessment report. Action has been taken to deal with this problem including the introduction of a better initial assessment system. However, it is too soon to evaluate the impact of the measures introduced. Information about why learners leave is collected regularly and analysed and the results demonstrate that some of the reasons for early leavers are beyond Acorn's control.

32. Acorn's staff make regular assessment visits to the learners in the workplace. They discuss evidence with the learner and draw up an action plan. All the learners work in busy offices and carry out a wide range of tasks, but opportunities to assess learners are not always taken up. Insufficient use is made of assessment by observation. There is very little use of photographic and audio evidence and very few witness testimonies. The record of discussions between the learner and assessor sometimes does not include judgements or provide accurate notes of questions and answers. Insufficient use is made of accreditation of prior learning or the employers' in-house training. It is difficult to identify from most documents how competency was proven or validated. Assessments are not thoroughly planned. Many of the current learners are making slow progress. During visits to the learners' workplaces, trainers give individual help with literacy and numeracy based on the needs identified at the initial assessment. Learners are very positive about the individual support they are given and are able to apply the new skills they have gained in the workplace. The planning of the support is satisfactory, but it is not always fully recorded. Actions taken are rarely recorded accurately to identify developments and learning.

33. There is an internal verification strategy, but it is not always applied effectively. The sampling is not always sufficient to establish standardisation and consistency across units and between assessors. Some learners' work is not verified until late in the programme. Learners are not given a copy of the portfolio verification, and they usually have insufficient knowledge about this part of the assessment process. Verifiers rely on assessors to relay the information to learners and act upon the action points. Some signatures and dates are missing from the assessment record and confirmation that action points have been dealt with is missing. Assessors are monitored but not regularly

enough. There are no partnership arrangements between experienced and inexperienced assessors or verifiers. Some staff would benefit from more updating to improve knowledge of current business administration practice and developments.

Good Practice

Learners are encouraged to research, develop and design an appropriate work-based project. The implementation of one project made significant financial savings for the organisation and another created an innovative and new promotional outlet through the use of a website. Employers value the projects and the contributions they make to their businesses. Learners find the completed projects help them to establish themselves quickly as useful members of staff.

Poor Practice

Health and safety problems were apparent at two employers' premises. Despite monitoring visits by Acorn's staff, effective action to deal with the problems has been slow.

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

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	15	3

34. There are 15 learners in customer service, nine of whom are advanced modern apprentices and six are foundation modern apprentices. All the learners are employed in local businesses. They can join the programme at any time of the year and are usually recruited from the jobs they are in. Acorn targets its recruitment at employers. Learners are also referred to the company by Connexions, employers or other learners. Employers and learners are given an overview of the programme, and the learners are assessed against the skills required for the NVQ, relevant key skills and additional units against their job responsibilities. The initial assessment ensures that they are placed on the most suitable programme. Acorn provides the off-the-job training and carries out the assessments, and the employer is responsible for the on-the-job training. Acorn has a team of six assessors, two of whom are also internal verifiers. Induction, the teaching of key skills and vocational development all take place in the workplace. Assessors visit learners every two weeks to monitor their progress, provide off-the-job training, and plan and carry out assessments.

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							
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number of starts	1		15		19		38		24							
Retained*	0		0		7		22	58	17	71						
Successfully completed	0		0		9		22	58	17	71						
Still in learning	1		7		1		0	100	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)																
	2002-03		2001-02		2000-01											
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number of starts	4		6		2											
Retained*	0		2		1	50										
Successfully completed	0		0		1	50										
Still in learning	3		3		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																
NVQ Training																
	2002-03		2001-02		2000-01		1999-2000		1998-99							
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number of starts			2		3				3							
Retained*			1	50	3	100			2	67						
Successfully completed			1	50	3	100			2	67						
Still in learning			0	0	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

- very effective assessment and review visits
- very thorough initial assessment
- good celebration of learners' success

WEAKNESSES

- poor retention and achievement rates
- inadequate involvement of employers in learners' programmes
- insufficient use of diverse evidence

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

- better recording of actions and reviews for target-setting
- better promotion of, and access to, learning resources
- more use of additional qualifications to enhance framework
- more opportunities for staff to update occupational knowledge and skills

35. Assessment and review visits are very effective. Assessors visit the learners every two weeks to plan assessments, provide off-the-job training and assess work-based evidence. These frequent visits enable the assessors to develop a good rapport with the learners and to motivate them by providing guidance and support that will help them achieve their target qualification. The individual literacy and numeracy support is also effective. It is well planned and the assessors use a suitable range of learning materials. The content of training sessions is modified to relate to the problems the learners have encountered in the workplace. For example, the need of one learner to develop an understanding of fractions in relation to prices was introduced into a numeracy session. Another member of staff carries out formal reviews with the learners every 12 weeks. Learners find the review and assessment visits very beneficial. However, some of the comments and actions recorded on action plans and the review records are vague and do not give clear direction for the learners. Some of the targets are not always sufficiently detailed.

36. The initial assessment of learners is very thorough. Prospective learners and employers are briefed effectively about the requirements of the programme and are given detailed information about the options available. Initial assessment takes place after the briefing, and the learner and the employer use a diagnostic assessment tool to match an appropriate NVQ to the learners' job role. Key skills are assessed using a computerised system to identify the appropriate level and to identify development needs. Learners are also tested to investigate how their learning style may impact on their progress. Also, their previous qualifications and experience are examined to see whether they qualify for accreditation of previous learning. For example, one learner did not need to study all of the key skills as some of them had already been covered in an advanced general national vocational qualification (GNVQ). Learners are not given sufficient opportunity to gain additional qualifications. They are not given accreditation for in-house training which is provided by the employers. For example, one learner could have achieved additional qualifications in basic food hygiene, and in health and safety, but was not given the opportunity or the information to do so.

37. Learners' achievements are acknowledged effectively. They are given in-house or awarding body certificate when they complete relevant qualifications or projects for their programmes. Photographs are taken when the certificates are presented, and the ceremony often takes place in the workplace. Copies of the photographs are distributed. Many of the learners have copies of the photographs in their portfolios, and some employers have them displayed in reception, or in the learners' work areas. The photographs are also featured in the providers' promotional materials and newsletters. This practice helps raise the learners' self-esteem, boosts their confidence, motivates them, and raises their profile with their work colleagues.

38. Retention and achievement rates for advanced modern apprentices show a declining trend. This weakness is acknowledged in the most recent self-assessment

report. The achievement rate for foundation modern apprentices is poor, but the retention rate has improved in the past year. The staff to learner ratio is good, and staff have the relevant qualifications and experience to assess learners. Some members of staff have not updated their occupational knowledge and skills, although the quality of teaching is satisfactory. The planning of training sessions is effective, teaching materials are satisfactory, and trainers use a variety of teaching methods. Learners demonstrate an appropriate level of attainment for the stage they are at in their programmes.

39. Most employers are co-operative and provide assessors with reasonable access to the learners in the workplace to plan and carry out assessments. However, the employers are not always involved in the planning of assessments and formal reviews. They are given a copy of the action plan or the review record. Employers are often given verbal feedback about learners' progress and are told about the level of support needed to collect evidence. One employer asked to be kept better informed about the learners' progress and their development needs, as well as how these could be met effectively. Some learners are not able to attend the off-the-job training during working hours. Assessors are usually able to meet the learners' needs by arranging individual training sessions in the workplace. Learners are given a password which gives them access to key skills workbooks and practice tests on the provider's website. However, some learners do not have access to the Internet in the workplace and have to print the documents at home at their own expense. Many learners are not aware of how to access resources such as videos, audiotapes, CD-ROM packages and workbooks.

40. Assessors rely too much on documentary evidence. They make insufficient use of observations in the workplace and inadequate use of the very good projects the learners complete. The projects are work-based, and the subject matter is identified, planned and agreed with the employers. The projects focus on work-based issues connected with improvements to customer service, and they provide a considerable amount of relevant evidence. Learners are expected to produce separate portfolios for key skills, knowledge and understanding, the project and the NVQ. This requirement to create and maintain several files is too demanding for the learners, and slows their overall progress.

Poor Practice

Some learners are expected to work on their projects and their portfolios in their own time. This places an additional burden on them and slows their progress.