

INSPECTION REPORT

Slough Borough Council

16 October 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 learning within the remit of a single inspectorate. The ALI is responsible for inspecting a wide range of government-funded learning, including:

- work-based learning 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

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.

INSPECTION REPORT

Slough Borough Council

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INSPECTION REPORT

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROVIDER

1. Slough Borough Council (SBC) has been running training schemes for local young people since 1998, when it became a unitary authority. SBC works with several subcontractors to train foundation and advanced modern apprentices, and learners working solely towards national vocational qualifications (NVQs), in business administration, and customer services. There are 32 learners in total. There were too few learners in customer services for this area to be inspected separately.

2. Staff in SBC's human resources department manage the training. A learning co-ordinator, working with a development officer, carries out the routine management, reporting to SBC's organisational development manager. Two local colleges and a private training provider are contracted to provide training in background knowledge for the NVQ, key skills, and literacy and numeracy support. Learners are placed in around 20 of SBC's services, spread over five sites, where they are supported in their work and training by nominated supervisors. Learners begin their programme with trainee status in the council. Nearly all the learners who complete their main qualification move from trainee status to full employment in the council. The training is funded by the Berkshire Learning and Skills Council.

3. All the learners are residents of Slough. Slough lies within an area of general prosperity but the borough itself has the highest unemployment rate in Berkshire. At 3.2 per cent, this is higher than the national rate of 2.5 per cent, and the rate for the Southeast of 1.5 per cent. According to the 2001 census, the proportion of the borough's population from minority ethnic groups is 36.3 per cent, compared with about 9 per cent for England and Wales as a whole, and 5 per cent for the Southeast. The proportion of school leavers in Slough achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education at grade C or above is close to that for England as a whole.

SCOPE OF PROVISION

Business administration, management & professional

4. There are 30 learners on business administration programmes. Four are completing NVQs in business administration. Twenty-one are working towards foundation modern apprenticeships, and four towards advanced modern apprenticeships, in business administration. One learner is on an accounting advanced modern apprenticeship. Training for a third of the learners is subcontracted to a local training provider, with most of the assessment and development being done in the workplace. For the remainder of the learners, training is subcontracted to a local college, with some learning taking place at the college. Literacy and numeracy support for some learners is provided by another subcontracted local college. All learners have access to SBC's training programmes. These are held in the council's premises and those of nearby training providers.

5. Most learners have trainee status, with weekly allowances. Some, specifically those on advanced modern apprenticeships, have become full-time employees of SBC. Learners will normally complete six months in an SBC service area, before being moved to another area to assist their personal development and ensure that they can gain enough experience to complete their vocational training.

ABOUT THE INSPECTION

Number of inspectors	3
Number of inspection days	12
Number of learner interviews	23
Number of staff interviews	12
Number of employer interviews	15
Number of subcontractor interviews	6
Number of locations/sites/learning centres visited	5

OVERALL JUDGEMENT

6. The quality of provision is adequate to meet the reasonable needs of those receiving it. More specifically, SBC's leadership and management are good. Its approach to equality of opportunity is outstanding, while its quality assurance arrangements are satisfactory. The quality of work-based learning in business and administration programmes is good.

GRADES

grade 1 = outstanding, grade 2 = good, grade 3 = satisfactory, grade 4 = unsatisfactory, grade 5 = very weak

Leadership and management	2
Contributory grades:	
Equality of opportunity	1
Quality assurance	3

Business administration, management & professional	2
Contributory grades:	
Work-based learning for young people	2

KEY FINDINGS

Achievement and standards

7. **Business administration learners develop good personal skills.** Many learners have challenging jobs that allow them to achieve a good practical standard in their vocational

qualification. Nearly all foundation modern apprentices progress to permanent employment with SBC.

8. **Learners' retention rates are good.** Over the past four years, the lowest retention rate on any programme was 50 per cent, and several intakes have exceeded 75 per cent. Achievement rates for foundation modern apprentices are satisfactory. Difficulties with a subcontractor meant that some learners have taken longer than planned to achieve all aspects of their training plans.

Quality of education and training

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	2	0	0	0	0	2
Total	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2

9. Inspectors judged both the learning sessions they observed to be good.

10. **In business administration there is exceptional development of learners' skills.** Learners benefit from a carefully managed and progressively more challenging series of work placements. These placements allow learners to develop self-confidence and an understanding of the demands of routine work, and offer them the chance to cover all the elements of their vocational training. The work placements, in a council that is committed to social justice and equality of opportunity, also mean that learners develop an extremely good understanding of equality of opportunity.

11. **There is particularly good support for learners.** There is a range of people, including 'buddies', mentors, supervisors, assessors and training managers, who fulfil clearly identified roles in supporting the learner on a professional and personal level. Supervisors are notably enthusiastic in their support for the training programme and learners' achievements.

12. **Learners take advantage of an extensive range of additional off-the-job training courses,** offered by SBC, its subcontractors and outside agencies. The courses assist learners in their main qualification, as well as helping with their personal development and improving their performance in their jobs.

13. Key skills development is satisfactory, with on- and off-the-job training linked to the workplace and the training programme. There is appropriate assessment of learners' literacy and numeracy skills. Learners have satisfactory planned support for their literacy needs, but there is no structured numeracy support.

14. Resources are adequate to meet learners' needs. Staff are suitably qualified.

15. **There have been some poor assessment and internal verification practices,** particularly at one subcontractor. Some learners have made slow progress. Internal

verifiers' comments at the subcontractor did not lead to obvious actions and improvements. However, changes have now been made, and in the meantime, SBC used an alternative subcontractor.

16. **There is generally good communication within SBC.** However, supervisors do not get clear initial information on a learner's strengths and weaknesses before they start their work placement.

Leadership and management

17. SBC is committed to a series of key policy priorities, which include community and economic development, equality of opportunity and social justice. These priorities are clearly communicated to staff and learners. A significant effort is put into supporting the training programmes. SBC provides a very positive experience for learners.

18. **The training programmes are particularly well suited to the needs of the local community.** Recruiting is successfully aimed at those who may not have enjoyed other academic or work experiences. Most learners are from minority ethnic groups, and most are women. The training programme, particularly the range of work placements and the close support, helps develop learners to the point where nearly all who complete their main qualification can successfully take on permanent employment.

19. **There is good communication between managers and staff.** A wide range of methods helps to keep staff abreast of developments and to ensure that individual staff members and, ultimately, learners receive appropriate guidance and support. Staff views are fed back to managers and result in appropriate action.

20. **The induction procedures for staff and learners are very effective.** The main five-day induction course is augmented by a series of workplace inductions. Learners also receive an appropriate introduction to their training programme.

21. **SBC provides outstanding staff development.** There is a comprehensive range of short courses to improve job skills and aid personal development. Staff and learners routinely access these courses. SBC also sponsors staff to take more demanding courses. Learners have a range of off-the-job training opportunities to support their training programmes.

22. **Learners and staff show an outstanding understanding of equality of opportunity, and apply their understanding in a sympathetic way.** In their work placements, learners regularly come into contact with people with significant problems, and are helped to understand and deal with these problems. There is good individual advice and appropriate guidelines and policies on equality of opportunity. However, SBC does not provide new learners with a simple guide to its equal opportunities procedures. There are very good links with council and other community projects that tackle equality of opportunity concerns.

23. **There is very good support for learners' individual needs.** Training managers and

staff take their responsibilities very seriously. They work with learners to identify the impact of a range of needs, from physical to cultural, and take prompt and effective action to meet those needs.

24. There is satisfactory management of data. The recently revised staff appraisal systems are satisfactory. Health and safety is promoted in an appropriate manner.

25. SBC's approach to the support of learners with literacy and numeracy needs is satisfactory. Learners' support needs are routinely assessed, and they are given structured literacy support and individual help with numeracy.

26. SBC's self-assessment processes and reporting are satisfactory. There is a range of council quality assurance systems, and training managers act on learners' views.

27. There is insufficiently systematic and thorough monitoring of the quality of training.

Feedback on subcontractors' performance is gained from discussion with learners and subcontractors' staff. There is no routine monitoring of the quality of subcontractors' teaching and training sessions. SBC makes little use of subcontractors' existing quality assurance mechanisms, including internal verification. Support and training provided by workplace supervisors are not systematically monitored, other than at the quarterly reviews.

28. There is good individual communication between the training managers and learners' work-placement supervisors, but SBC does not provide adequate mechanisms to allow supervisors to share good practice directly.

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during this inspection:

Leadership and management

Strengths

- very effective strategic planning to promote learners' development
- good communications between staff and managers
- very effective induction for learners and staff
- outstanding staff development
- particularly good programmes to support the needs of the local community
- outstanding understanding of equality of opportunity by staff and learners
- very good support for learners' individual needs

Weaknesses

- insufficient simple equality of opportunity guidance material available to new learners
- poor systems for sharing of good practice between supervisors
- insufficient systematic monitoring of the quality of training

Business administration, management & professional

Strengths

- good retention rates
- particularly good support for learners
- exceptional development of learners
- extensive and effective additional off-the-job training

Weaknesses

- some poor assessment and internal verification practices
- insufficient sharing of information on learners

WHAT LEARNERS LIKE ABOUT SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL:

- lots of friendly, helpful support
- the different work placements and the wide experience gained, though the changes can be a bit worrying at first
- 'learning while you're working'
- being treated fairly, and feeling valued as part of a team
- plenty of good courses
- 'the fact that my personal development's really gone well'
- the chance to go on and do better courses and get a job

WHAT LEARNERS THINK SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL COULD IMPROVE:

- the training allowance - it could be better
- the handover when assessors change
- the time available at college to work on key skills - learners would like more
- the language of the NVQs - it's too complicated
- the timing of meetings with the assessor - they would like them to take place earlier

KEY CHALLENGES FOR SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL:

- ensure that assessment and internal verification are carried out thoroughly
- monitor the quality of training provided by subcontractors and workplace supervisors in a more systematic and detailed way
- share information on learners with interested parties in a more effective way

DETAILED INSPECTION FINDINGS

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 2

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during this inspection:

Strengths

- very effective strategic planning to promote learners' development
- good communications between staff and managers
- very effective induction for learners and staff
- outstanding staff development
- particularly good programmes to support the needs of the local community
- outstanding understanding of equality of opportunity by staff and learners
- very good support for learners' individual needs

Weaknesses

- insufficient simple equality of opportunity guidance material available to new learners
- poor systems for sharing of good practice between supervisors
- insufficient systematic monitoring of the quality of training

29. SBC carries out very effective strategic planning to develop learning. SBC has a clear commitment to developing a highly trained local workforce. Within the council, a clear three-year human resources strategy aims to develop a multi-skilled workforce drawn from the local community and trained by SBC. The strategy has the full support of senior staff. It requires the enhancement of staff skills as well as the expansion of the modern apprenticeship training scheme. More than 200 first-line managers are undergoing four-day training programmes to develop their supervisory and management skills. The enhancement of these skills directly improves the level of support and guidance available to learners. A substantial reorganisation of human resources activities has given more support to staff development and has put increased resources into the modern apprenticeship programme.

30. There is good communication between managers and staff, and this encourages all employees to support SBC's staff development strategy. There is a widely read and well-regarded in-house monthly newsletter. SBC's intranet is used well to provide general news and details of policies and procedures. Each member of staff and each learner has a monthly individual meeting with their manager to discuss developments and needs. Managers use regular team briefings to pass on news of corporate developments and gather the views of staff. There are minuted weekly team meetings. These are chaired on a rotational basis to encourage staff development. Training staff keep in close contact with their learners using personal interviews, e-mails and telephone calls. Learners benefit from this contact as well as from the close support given by their supervisors and the professional advice from visiting assessors.

31. SBC provides a very effective induction for its staff and learners. Induction courses, which are five days long, take place monthly. Learners and permanent staff attend. Learners, who are often lacking confidence on arrival, are given reassurance and a sense of purpose from this early introduction to other staff and the realities of routine work. The induction provides clear and thorough explanations of policies. There is comprehensive and effective promotion of corporate and individual responsibility for health and safety in the workplace. Equality of opportunity covers individual responsibilities in a clear way, and emphasises the corporate commitment to ensuring equality of opportunity in the local community. Learners and staff were able to recall the key elements of their induction. In addition to the corporate induction, all staff and learners are given a one-day induction to their team or department.

32. There is outstanding staff development at SBC. The council has allocated substantial resources to staff development, and at a strategic level, it links the development of staff and learners with its mission to develop the community. The council guarantees each member of staff a number of learning hours each year. Learners benefit from a series of carefully managed work placements that improve their confidence and skills. Learners at the end of their programme are impressively confident, articulate and knowledgeable. Staff and learners take part in a very wide range of courses and development programmes sponsored by SBC. Courses run regularly and are well advertised. Managers show a very good understanding of training programmes, and actively encourage their staff's development. During learners' routine progress reviews, there are constructive discussions on appropriate additional training to enhance their skills and abilities. As well as the training organised by the council, many staff are taking advanced external courses paid for by SBC.

33. SBC has satisfactory management information systems. Significant amounts of data are available from central council services and the training staff. Data on learners' recruitment, progression and achievement are collected and routinely analysed to review programme success, although there is little target-setting. There are satisfactory systems for staff appraisal. A new system requires all staff to have an annual appraisal and six-monthly reviews. Health and safety awareness is promoted and reinforced in a satisfactory way, particularly during learners' progress reviews.

34. Resources are adequate to support the training programme. The increased staff support to the training programme is having a beneficial effect on learners, and the quality of their training. There is appropriate support from qualified assessors.

35. SBC's approach to the support of literacy and numeracy is satisfactory. All learners' literacy and numeracy skills are tested when they apply for the scheme, and a subcontractor gives literacy support to those with identified needs. Some learners, with apparently adequate levels of literacy, also attend literacy support classes to improve specific job-related skills, such as letter writing. Numeracy support is given individually. Formal classes had just been organised at the time of the inspection, but it was not clear who should attend, or how often.

Equality of opportunity**Contributory grade 1**

36. SBC provides particularly good programmes to meet the needs of the local community. The programmes offer individuals a chance to raise their skills to the point where they may be able to take on employment. They also contribute to the council's wider priorities on equality of opportunity and social justice. Recruitment to the scheme is fair and open, but emphasises the opportunities available to those who have experienced difficulties elsewhere. Extensive recruitment activities are aided by links with council and community projects in deprived areas. These ensure that information about the opportunities available reaches the people who need it. Advertising literature and displays use positive language and examples to emphasise the openness of the scheme. The learners on programme reflect the local groups which are seen to have particular needs. In Slough about 50 per cent of young people come from minority ethnic groups. Eighty-five per cent of the learners are from minority ethnic groups and 76 per cent are women. Learners have very good personal support from enthusiastic supervisors and very supportive training staff, and this helps them settle into a regular regime of work and training. Progression into employment with the council is subject to appropriate rules, but allows for the achievements and experience of the learners to be taken into account. A particularly impressive 96 per cent of learners who complete their main qualification move into employment with the council.

37. Staff and learners have an outstanding understanding of equality of opportunity issues. During their various council placements almost all learners work in posts that bring them into contact with clients who have problems or concerns about disabilities, disadvantages or social problems. Under close supervision, learners visit clients in deprived areas. There are many examples of experienced learners dealing independently with clients' concerns. Learners show a detailed understanding of equality of opportunity, and apply their knowledge in a sensitive and intelligent manner. Supervisors and learners also demonstrate a full awareness of their rights and responsibilities in respect of the training programmes. Throughout the council there is clear reference to action to be taken in respect of harassment and abuse, specifically through posters, notices, intranet messages and the identification of people to contact. Learners' understanding of these procedures is good. Learners from various backgrounds mix easily with each other and with staff. The staff are generally representative of the local community, with 27 per cent being from minority ethnic groups. There are good initiatives within the council to promote equality of opportunity through community projects, internal events and training days. Learners with trainee status are treated inclusively as employees where appropriate, with access to training, and social and other facilities. Aspects of equality of opportunity are checked in detail during the learners' regular review sessions. The checking covers the learners' experiences, for example with questions on whether they can take leave during religious festivals. It also includes intelligent discussion of how to deal with such things as catering for the various needs of clients attending a community conference. Many learners, despite their background, have taken the opportunity to accept more challenging responsibilities as they gain the appropriate skills.

38. SBC's supervisors, training staff and fellow learners go to significant lengths to ensure that the needs of individual learners are met in a prompt, positive and sympathetic

manner. Supervisors show a particularly good understanding of their responsibilities, and are backed up by council support services. Examples include a learner with a speech impediment who received significant individual support from his supervisor to allow him to work confidently with customers. A learner who is deaf and without speech was given support by staff specially trained in sign language, with colleagues being given guidance through a specifically developed intranet site. Learners with restricted mobility are not confined to working in those areas that can easily be accessed. Arrangements are made to allow them to be moved, like other learners, into new areas even if this requires extra adaptations to be made. Special arrangements are made for learners who are visually impaired. Learners with significant literacy problems who are reluctant to accept help, have been guided and encouraged into appropriate support classes. When her family expressed concerns over the area that a young Muslim women was working in, the concerns were dealt with rapidly and sympathetically. At the time of the inspection, 15 per cent of learners had a declared disability

39. There are appropriate policies on equality of opportunity, harassment and bullying. Learners and staff are introduced to these policies, and wider aspect of equality of opportunity, during the effective induction training. There are many references, in posters and through staff briefings, on who to turn to in case of need. However, new learners are not given simple guidance material to remind them of their rights and responsibilities, or the procedures in respect of harassment or other grievances.

40. Data on equal opportunities are satisfactory. There is detailed information available on learners' ethnicity, gender and disabilities. Data are regularly analysed and action is taken where appropriate.

Quality assurance

Contributory grade 3

41. SBC's self-assessment process is satisfactory. The current self-assessment report drew on interviews with learners and supervisors but was written by one individual. The draft report was not reviewed by a range of staff. The report is too descriptive in places, and is not sufficiently thorough in its treatment of weaknesses. A subsequent action plan, based partly on a further review of the programme after the reorganisation of the human resources area, provides more detailed and constructive comment and proposals for action.

42. There are clear and coherent policies and procedures setting out SBC's quality assurance process. The system is based on the action plan developed from self-assessment. Training managers maintain a general check on the main quality assurance elements of the programme, with appropriate use of data and regular feedback from learners and supervisors. SBC's revised organisation means that senior managers now have clear responsibilities for the scheme. They use routine meetings to review the overall quality of the programmes.

43. Learners provide routine written feedback on the effectiveness of their programme, and this leads to action. The regular and detailed review meetings between learners and training managers also supply useful information on the quality of the various

programmes. Again this leads to action. For example, there were major changes in subcontractors' contracts following critical feedback from learners. The training manager carries out formal evaluation sessions with groups of learners after specific events, such as induction.

44. There is insufficient detailed, systematic monitoring of the training, particularly that supplied by subcontractors. SBC has service level agreements to regulate subcontractors' activity, but these focus on legal and contractual requirements. They do not set standards for the quality of teaching, nor do they set targets for learners' progress or achievement. Training managers have meetings with subcontractors' staff, and discuss quality issues. There are no routine checks on assessment or training activity between the learners' quarterly reviews. Little use is made of subcontractors' own quality assurance mechanisms. Subcontractors carry out internal verification. SBC monitors the process but not the follow-up action. Support and training provided by supervisors is not systematically monitored, other than through the quarterly reviews.

45. There is good individual communication between the training staff and learners' work-placement supervisors, but SBC does not provide adequate mechanisms for sharing good practice among the supervisors. Some supervisors are well established in their training roles, but an increasing number are new to the scheme. There are half-day training sessions for new supervisors, but no mechanism for sharing the considerable good practice that has been developed.

AREAS OF LEARNING

Business administration, management & professional

Grade 2

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Work-based learning for young people	30	2

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during this inspection:

Strengths

- good retention rates
- particularly good support for learners
- exceptional development of learners
- extensive and effective additional off-the-job training

Weaknesses

- some poor assessment and internal verification practices
- insufficient sharing of information on learners

Achievement and standards

46. There is good personal development for business administration learners. Learners have a wide range of experiences and additional training, and gain self-confidence. Many learners with trainee status have challenging positions that also allow them to achieve a good practical standard in their vocational qualification. Nearly all foundation modern apprentices progress to permanent employment with SBC.

47. Learners' retention rates are good. Retention rates for foundation modern apprentices have been consistently very good for the past three years, although the self-assessment report did not highlight this. Achievement rates for foundation modern apprentices are satisfactory. Difficulties with a subcontractor meant that one group of learners took longer than planned to achieve all aspects of their training plans.

The following tables show the achievement and retention rates available up to the time of the inspection.

LSC funded work-based learning																
Advanced modern apprenticeships (AMA)																
	2003-04		2002-03		2001-02		2000-01									
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number of starts			2		3		2									
Retained*			2		3		1	50								
Successfully completed			0		0		1	50								
Still in learning			2		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

LSC funded work-based learning																
Foundation modern apprenticeships (FMA)																
	2003-04		2002-03		2001-02		2000-01		1999-2000							
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number of starts	5		17		5		12		11							
Retained*	0		12		5	100	10	83	7	64						
Successfully completed	0		0		2	40	6	50	7	64						
Still in learning	5		12		1	20	3	25	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

LSC funded work-based learning																
NVQ Training																
	2003-04		2002-03		2001-02		2000-01		1999-2000		1998-99		1997-98			
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Number of starts					6		6				8		9			
Retained*					6	100	4	67			5	62	7	78		
Successfully completed					1	17	3	50			4	50	6	67		
Still in learning					4	67	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

Quality of education and training

48. There is particularly good support for learners. Supervisors allocate 'buddies' to help new learners settle into their work placement. Mentors are also allocated to help learners produce evidence for their NVQ portfolios. Time is given to both mentor and learner for regular meetings. New learners often lack confidence and are hesitant about producing evidence for assessment. They value having an experienced mentor from whom they can seek guidance. There are good communications between the training

managers, learners and supervisors, and working relationships are close and constructive. Learners' progress is monitored at quarterly review meetings between the three parties, with detailed discussion and recording of achievements and setting of targets for the next quarter. Training needs are agreed to meet these targets. Learners have monthly individual meetings with their supervisors to monitor their progress and provide further support. Learners can, and do, make regular contact with their training manager, in person, by telephone or e-mail. Learners who are nearing the end of their training have more frequent progress reviews, and many have had their contracts extended to enable them to complete their training programme. Learners also have access to an independent counselling service, and a range of SBC's support services.

49. There is a particularly wide range of effective off-the job training available to all learners. There are regular workshops with subcontractors to support portfolio-building, key skills, and technical certificates. At one subcontractor these sessions are particularly well planned and executed. Learners are challenged and develop independent thinking skills. There is an extensive range of one-day corporate training courses. All learners are encouraged to attend as many of these as are relevant to their personal development. Supervisors guide learners to more challenging skills development through specific courses such as web page design, which often results in learners moving into more demanding roles. New learners are given an initial assessment to identify their literacy and numeracy levels. Literacy support is given in small groups at SBC's premises by a subcontractor. Learning is appropriately targeted, with groups having support at entry level 3 and at level 1. Lessons take place once a week for 10-week blocks, and focus on individual learning needs and learning styles. The lessons are good and learners enjoy and value them. Numeracy support is given individually by visiting assessors, although formal classes are now planned.

50. SBC's development of learners is exceptional. All training is focused on the learners' needs and on widening their skills. Learners report significant growth in confidence during their training programme, and enjoy working with, and being valued by, supervisors and their teams. Potential work placements are analysed to determine the breadth of experience they offer. Learners move between work placements approximately once every six months, increasing the range of challenges and responsibilities. Wherever possible new learners are given suitable first placements in the departments they request. On rotation, learners are invited to try their new work placement for a short period before they move to ensure it is suitable and meets their needs and expectations. Rotation between work placements ensures that a wide range of experience is gained, enabling learners to cover the requirements of the NVQ. The work placements are at all levels in the organisation, from high street advice centres to the town hall. Most involve dealing with members of the public, and the problems that learners encounter help them understand complex issues, particularly in dealing with inequalities. Learners also benefit from notably positive supervisors, who ensure that each work placement has job-related and broader development opportunities. Supervisors and learners plan for the development of the job role, with specific projects and appropriate training arranged, either on or off the job as necessary.

51. Resources are satisfactory. One subcontractor has good resources to support key

skills, and access to a training room with sufficient computers. SBC provides a range of textbooks for modern apprentices on a library loan system. All learners have access to the internet at work, and carry out research associated with their training programme. All staff are suitably qualified and have relevant experience. The subcontractors' staff are occupationally competent.

52. Key skills development is satisfactory. Learners' previous achievements are recognised and accredited. Key skills training runs alongside other aspects of the learners' training programme, and assignments are relevant to the workplace. The key skills of communication and information technology are integrated with the same set of assignments. Learners are entered for key skills tests throughout their training.

Leadership and management

53. The scheme is generally well managed. Full- and part-time training staff deal with all aspects of the programme from recruiting, through work placements and progression, to personal support. Routine contact between training managers, supervisors and learners ensures that the programme is constantly reviewed and updated. The emphasis on equality of opportunity throughout the council, the work placements and the training programme, gives learners a particularly good understanding of the subject.

54. There are some poor assessment and internal verification practices. There have been changes in assessors at one subcontractor. The documents recording learners' progress were inadequate, resulting in new assessors spending too much time reviewing previously assessed work. This reduced learners' motivation and slowed their progress. Internal verification practices at the same subcontractor were inadequate. Internal verification identified that assessment was not to national standards on a number of occasions, but it was not clear what action was taken with the assessor to ensure that practices were changed. SBC acted on feedback from learners expressing their dissatisfaction with the subcontractor, and placed new learners with a second subcontractor. Assessment practice and internal verification procedures at the second subcontractor are satisfactory. In this case, SBC receives regular updates on learners' progress and achievements from the assessor, and feeds this information into the quarterly review process. Managers of the SBC training programme are working with the first subcontractor to improve its assessment and internal verification procedures and practices. New learners have now been placed with this subcontractor again, but it is too early to judge how the new systems have affected learners' progress.

55. There is insufficient sharing of information on learners. There is regular contact between training managers and supervisors when a learner is in a work placement. Supervisors are not normally given learners' details before they arrive at a work placement. They are unaware of what skills the learner already has, and unless the learner is on their first placement, supervisors do not know how much of the training programme has been covered. The supervisor cannot prepare in advance how best to support the learner.