

INSPECTION REPORT

General Physics (UK) Ltd

21 July 2006



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

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 aged 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
- adult information, advice and guidance services (**nextstep**).

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.

Pre-inspection analysis

The resources allocated to a cycle 2 inspection are primarily determined by the findings from the previous inspection. Account is also taken of information about achievement and retention obtained from the funding body, and any significant changes in the size or scope of the provision.

Where a provider has received good grades in cycle 1, the cycle 2 inspection is relatively light. If the provider offers a number of areas of learning, a restricted sample is inspected.

Where a provider has received satisfactory grades in cycle 1, the cycle 2 inspection is less intensive and it is possible that not all areas of learning are included.

Where there are significant unsatisfactory grades from cycle 1, the intensity of the cycle 2 inspection is broadly the same as cycle 1, and all significant areas of learning are inspected.

Providers that have not previously been inspected will receive a full inspection.

Overall effectiveness

The grades given for areas of learning and leadership and management will be used to arrive at a judgement about the overall effectiveness of the provider.

An **outstanding** provider should typically have leadership and management and at least half of the areas of learning judged to be a grade 1. All area of learning grades will be graded 1 or 2.

A **good** provider should have leadership and management and at least half of the area of learning grades judged to be a grade 2 or better. A good training provider should not have any grade 4s, and few grade 3s in the areas of learning.

A **satisfactory** provider should have adequate or better grades in leadership and management and in at least two thirds of the area of learning grades. An adequate provider might have a range of grades across areas of learning, some of which might be graded 4.

Provision will normally be deemed to be **inadequate** where more than one third of the area of learning grades and/or leadership and management are judged to be inadequate.

The final decision as to whether the provision is inadequate rests with the Chief Inspector of Adult Learning.

Grading

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about the quality of provision in occupational/curriculum areas and Jobcentre Plus programmes, as well as to summarise their judgements about the quality of learning sessions. The same scale is used to describe the quality of leadership and management, which includes equality of opportunity and quality assurance. The descriptors for the four grades are:

- *grade 1 - outstanding*
- *grade 2 - good*
- *grade 3 - satisfactory*
- *grade 4 - inadequate*

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General Physics (UK) Ltd

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INSPECTION REPORT

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROVIDER

1. General Physics (UK) Ltd is a UK-based subsidiary of General Physics Corporation, a wholly owned subsidiary of GP Strategies Corporation that trades on the New York Stock Exchange as GPX. The larger company provides training, outsourcing and performance improvement services to industry, utilities, commerce and government organisations. Founded in 1966, it has a worldwide staff of 1,200 professionals, including 110 in the UK. Business Unit 100 (GP) is a work-based learning unit within General Physics (UK) Ltd that specialises primarily in the delivery of government-funded vocational training. GP has five regional centres in England at Halifax, Gateshead, Stockton, Stockport and Birkenhead, with one other in Scotland. The head office is in Bredbury, Stockport. The senior team consist of two directors, two regional managers and an Entry to Employment (E2E) and business development manager. They are responsible for the training operations, financial management and strategic direction of GP. The director of quality and director of operations have responsibility for the implementation of all policies and procedures.

2. GP provides work-based learning for apprentices and advanced apprentices in retailing and wholesaling, customer service, social care and early years. Most of the provider's learners are in these areas of learning. It also provides foundation training for learners on E2E and the Train to Gain programme. Recent changes to the provision have included the withdrawal of training provision for distribution, warehousing and storage. In total there are 930 learners. All learners are employed except for those following E2E programmes. The training provision is funded through contracts with five Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs). The lead LSC is West Yorkshire.

OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS

Grade 2

3. **The overall effectiveness of the provision is good.** The provision in social care, early years, and customer service is good. In retailing and wholesaling the provision is satisfactory. Leadership and management and quality improvement are good. The arrangements for equality of opportunity are satisfactory.

4. **The inspection team was broadly confident in the reliability of the self-assessment process.** The self-assessment report, produced in December 2005, was sufficiently detailed. The grades in the report closely matched those given by inspectors, but a few of the strengths identified were no more than normal practice, and some additional weaknesses were identified.

5. **The provider has demonstrated that it is in a good position to make improvements.** It has taken effective actions to overcome the key weaknesses identified at previous inspections. Overall success rates have improved, as have the grades given by inspectors. The provider has a history of ongoing improvement, together with planned developments. It is committed to increasing the capacity and quality of the provision.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR GENERAL PHYSICS (UK) LTD:

- continue to improve success rates particularly in advanced apprenticeships
- fully develop and implement the additional support strategy
- use equal opportunities data more effectively in analyses and developments
- further develop the observation of teaching, training and learning
- strengthen the co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training
- develop a management information system that is accessible throughout the regions

GRADES

grade 1 = outstanding, grade 2 = good, grade 3 = satisfactory, grade 4 = inadequate

Grades awarded at inspection

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

Health, public services and care			2
Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade	
<i>Social care</i>			
Apprenticeships for young people	51	2	
Train to Gain	32	2	
<i>Early years</i>			
Apprenticeships for young people	85	2	
Train to Gain	11	2	

Retail and commercial enterprise			3
Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade	
<i>Retailing and wholesaling</i>			
Apprenticeships for young people	248	3	
Train to Gain	17	3	

Business administration and law			2
Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade	
<i>Customer service</i>			
Apprenticeships for young people	338	2	
Train to Gain	39	2	

ABOUT THE INSPECTION

6. Only four of the seven learning programmes offered by the provider were inspected. These represent most of the provider's core business and include social care, early years, customer service, and retailing and wholesaling. Other learning programmes, including team leading, administration and E2E programmes were not inspected. Inspectors sampled evidence from all of these areas and the findings contributed to the leadership and management report.

Number of inspectors	7
Number of inspection days	30
Number of learners interviewed	51
Number of staff interviewed	28
Number of employers interviewed	22
Number of locations/sites/learning centres visited	20

KEY FINDINGS

Achievements and standards

7. Overall apprenticeship framework success rates for advanced apprenticeship and apprenticeship programmes combined have risen steadily to 53 per cent, which is above the much-improved national average.

8. **Apprenticeship success rates are now good**, at 60 per cent. For customer services, the apprenticeship success rates are good, and rose by 22 per cent to approximately 70 per cent. In retailing and wholesaling, the overall success rates for Greater Merseyside are particularly good.

9. The overall success rates for advanced apprenticeships remain weak at approximately 30 per cent, but they have improved by almost 15 per cent over a two-year period. In customer service, success rates are not yet satisfactory, but they have remained consistently above national averages and are improving. **In retailing and wholesaling, the success rates are poor.** This weakness was identified at the reinspection of 2004.

10. Overall success rates for Train to Gain and E2E provision are at least satisfactory, and they are improving. The standard of learners' work and the progress they make is good in customer service, social care, and early years, but only satisfactory in retailing and wholesaling, **where some learners make slow progress.** Learners generally have a good understanding of the NVQ process. Learners' portfolios are well presented, clearly signposted and contain a good range of evidence. **Learners' practical and personal skills are well developed.**

11. In social care and early years, learners' progression between levels is at least satisfactory, but in retailing and wholesaling, few learners' progress to higher-level programmes.

The quality of provision

Grades given to learning sessions

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Total
Health, public services and care	0	2	1	0	3
Total	0	2	1	0	3

12. **Assessment practice is good.** Assessments are well planned and detailed, with particularly good involvement of the learners. The required activities and assessment methods are identified clearly. Relevant documents are completed and signed. Learners receive good verbal and written feedback soon after each assessment.

13. Learners are visited regularly, and visits can be increased if necessary. Learners are encouraged to take ownership of their learning. They often suggest more challenging activities when their learning plans are updated. Learners state that assessors are very approachable and supportive.

14. **The development of learners' key skills is good.** The key skills provision is integrated successfully with vocational training and assessment. In early years and social care programmes, learners are encouraged to appreciate the relevance and importance of key skills in the world of work.

15. **Employers' involvement in training is good.** Relationships between employers and GP are well established and effective. Employers provide learners with regular opportunities for coaching, training and portfolio-building. In early years and social care, most employers have a good understanding of the NVQ requirements. Employers feel well informed about learners' progress. GP recognises employers' and learners' achievements in regular award ceremonies.

16. GP's staff are appropriately occupationally experienced and qualified. GP provides a satisfactory range of resources and learning materials, but these are not always fully utilised by learners in retailing and wholesaling.

17. Induction and initial assessment practices are satisfactory. Induction sessions are presented well, and recruitment officers motivate the learners. However, GP does not always check learners' assimilation and understanding of the information provided.

18. The provider's system to identify and support those learners with additional learning needs is satisfactory, but not all learners have their literacy and numeracy needs assessed. GP's staff do not formally record the literacy and numeracy skills support that they provide, or individual learners' progress.

19. Progress reviews are satisfactory and are carried out regularly. Learners are set clear targets and are made aware of what is required of them before the next review. Employers receive copies of all review forms.

20. **In retailing and warehousing, and customer service, the co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training is not fully developed.** The employers' in-house training is not taken into account when assessors plan learners' programmes. Few of these activities are recorded in learners' individual learning plans.

Leadership and management

21. **GP has good strategic leadership.** Challenging targets are set for key aspects of the business such as success rates, equality of opportunity and quality improvement. Staff have a good understanding of business priorities.

22. Since the ALL inspection in 2002, when GP was judged inadequate, the provider has tried consistently to make its quality improvement processes more effective. Changes have been made in the management structure. Responsibilities are now clearer, there is greater accountability, and communications have improved a great deal. More appropriate recruitment criteria have been introduced. Fewer learners are recruited now, and some programmes have closed.

23. **GP has very productive links with employers and partners.** Each region has productive arrangements within local networks. Communications are good. Employers are kept well informed about learners' progress and have frequent contact with GP's staff. GP's employer of the month award is very popular and celebrates the role that employers play in learners' success.

24. **GP has a good performance management system** that is linked well to staff appraisals and staff development. Individual members of staff have regular and very thorough meetings with management. Any developments from an internal verification visit, or through observations, are discussed and if necessary a staff training programme is agreed. Training opportunities for staff are extensive and available in-house and externally.

25. **Quality improvement is good.** Since the reinspection in 2004, the quality of GP's provision has continued to improve. Most of the weaknesses identified during that inspection are now resolved. GP's development and action plans are monitored carefully and have contributed significantly to raising standards.

26. **Internal verification and assessment practices are particularly effective.** Good practice is promoted well throughout the provision. A wide range of improvements has been made.

27. Management information is used satisfactorily. Control and auditing systems are good. Staff's understanding of data and target-setting has improved significantly. However, there is no networked system with which staff can access key reports interactively.

28. GP has satisfactory equal opportunities policies and practices. Learners' understanding of equality of opportunity is satisfactory and reinforced adequately throughout their programmes. Not all assessors understand equality and diversity sufficiently to be able to answer learners' questions.

29. The collation, analysis, target-setting and monitoring functions relating to equal opportunities has improved since the 2004 inspection. GP sets and meets its targets for gender recruitment, minority ethnic learners and learners with disabilities. Some of the criteria used are confusing.

30. Training centres have been upgraded and are now of a good specification. Most

training centres have information and communications technology (ICT) suites, training rooms with electronic whiteboards and data projectors. The resources and equipment for on-the-job training are satisfactory. Assessors increasingly use a range of technologies to record evidence of learners' competences.

31. The self-assessment process is thorough and most of its judgements agreed with those of inspectors. The views of staff, learners, employers and key partners are taken into account. **Staff are involved well in the self-assessment process** and respond positively to improvement initiatives.

32. GP has introduced an annual model for observing the staff who advise, train or support learners. Reports and feedback to staff are well received and there is clear evidence of improvements. **However, not enough attention is paid to the full range of teaching, training and learning activities that take place on and off the job.**

33. GP has begun to implement the government's strategy on training in literacy, numeracy and the use of language, skills for life. However, the current criteria for testing are set at too low a level to identify all learners who might benefit from some form of additional learner support. **Support for learners who are identified as having such needs is often good, but there are not enough formal processes, and learners' progress is not monitored.**

Leadership and management

Strengths

- good strategic leadership
- very productive links with employers and partners
- good performance management
- good quality improvement
- particularly effective internal verification practice

Weaknesses

- incomplete system to support learners with additional needs
- insufficient observation of teaching, training and learning

Health, public services and care

Strengths

- good assessment practice
- good development of key skills
- very effective employer involvement
- strong management of continuous improvement

Weaknesses

- low but improving success rates

Retail and commercial enterprise

Retailing and wholesaling

Strengths

- good assessment practice
- good employer involvement
- particularly effective co-ordination of most improvement strategies

Weaknesses

- poor overall success rates for advanced apprenticeship learners
- slow progress for some learners

Business administration and law

Customer service

Strengths

- good overall success rates in apprenticeship frameworks
- good skills development
- good assessment practice
- particularly good employer involvement
- good involvement of staff in the quality improvement process

Weaknesses

- Insufficient co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training

WHAT LEARNERS LIKE ABOUT GENERAL PHYSICS (UK) LTD:

- opportunity to learn and earn
- chance to be recognised and gain qualifications on Train to Gain programmes
- 'without GP I wouldn't have this job'
- 'GP has given me confidence and self-esteem' - E2E programme learner
- 'support we receive from staff'
- assessors visits, their reliability and availability
- 'GP has given me a bigger opportunity to shine'
- 'doing training in work'

WHAT LEARNERS THINK GENERAL PHYSICS (UK) LTD COULD IMPROVE:

- the time available with assessors and trainers
- the language in some documents - it is too complex

DETAILED INSPECTION FINDINGS

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 2

Strengths

- good strategic leadership
- very productive links with employers and partners
- good performance management
- good quality improvement
- particularly effective internal verification practice

Weaknesses

- incomplete system to support learners with additional needs
- insufficient observation of teaching, training and learning

34. GP has good strategic leadership. The provider has a comprehensive business strategy with clear priorities. The three-year development plan sets out ambitious plans for growth and development. Challenging targets are set for key aspects of the business such as success rates, equality of opportunity and quality improvement. Staff have a good understanding of business priorities. GP communicates its progress in achieving corporate objectives effectively through monthly staff meetings. Staff are very clear about the contributions they are required to make if GP is to meet its business objectives. GP has successfully changed its management structure. The two re-designated national director roles for quality and operations have provided coherence and consistency of approach throughout GP. The provider has also appointed regional managers and sector lead internal verifiers. The changes have led to clearer responsibilities, greater accountability, and much-improved communications.

35. GP has good links with employers and partners. Each of GP's regional centres has productive arrangements within local networks. For instance, in one area, GP is involved in a partnership with three other training providers to identify and procure specialist resources for learners. In another region, GP works as a subcontractor for one of its partners. In the same area, partnership working has enabled GP to become involved in a wide range of recruitment activities that includes schools and colleges. GP is a partner in a retailing Centre of Vocational Excellence, and has worked successfully with another partner to tender for a Train to Gain contract. GP has particularly good relationships with employers. Communications are good. Employers are kept well informed about learners' progress and have frequent contact with GP's staff. Employers support learners well. GP's 'employer of the month' award is very popular and celebrates the role that employers' play in learners' successes. GP also offers equality and diversity training to employers and learners on a quarterly basis.

36. GP has a good performance management system that is linked well with staff appraisals and staff development. All staff have regular and very thorough individual meetings. The meetings have fixed agendas. Issues discussed at the previous meeting are reviewed, and a note is taken of actions for the next meeting. The meetings are

supportive and challenging. Assessors bring evidence of their work, such as learners' logs and monitoring sheets, which are discussed in detail. There is a strong focus on learners and their progress. Issues raised by internal verification visits, or through observations, are discussed, and if necessary, a staff training programme is agreed. Training is available in-house and externally. The cumulative outcomes of these individual sessions are used in the appraisal process. The annual appraisal system is well established and thorough.

37. Staff have good access to a continuous programme of work-based learning training modules. Staff are encouraged to acquire professional qualifications by the business unit. GP has an effective, company-wide incentive scheme, which rewards staff for achieving their targets. For instance, assessors receive a bonus for each learner who completes their training objective within the specified timescale.

38. Health and safety is satisfactory. GP has a revised set of policies for health and safety which promote safe learning practices for learners, employers and staff. Health and safety is covered adequately during learners' inductions and reinforced appropriately at progress reviews. GP promotes health and safety good practice throughout its employer network by offering free health and safety training modules.

39. The provider's use of management information is satisfactory. All data returns are centralised at the Stockport centre and the consistency and accuracy of the data has improved significantly. Control and auditing systems are good. The director of operations produces monthly statistics that are highly relevant at the regional level and for GP in general. Staff's understanding of data and target-setting has improved significantly. GP has begun to introduce the new qualification success rates, but staff's understanding of this system is inconsistent. The management information system is not networked. It is impossible for staff throughout the regions to access key reports interactively. NVQ learning monitoring sheets are completed carefully and assessors record outcomes accurately at the unit level. However, this information is not available electronically, and managers cannot produce reports about learners' progress on demand.

40. GP has begun to implement a skills for life strategy. This includes a clear set of processes for identifying learners' needs, together with staff development targets to support the initiative. All assessors have achieved at least a level 2 qualification in literacy and numeracy teaching. However, the current criteria for testing are set at too low a level to identify all learners who might benefit from some form of additional learning support. For example, learners who have gained general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C or the equivalent, are not assessed for literacy and numeracy. However, it is clear from portfolio evidence that some of these learners would benefit greatly from additional help. Generally, learners are not made aware of their poor spelling skills. Systems to diagnose and support learners with special learning requirements, such as dyslexia, are not yet fully implemented. Support for learners, identified as in need of additional support is often good, but there is a lack of formality and progress is not monitored. GP does not currently have data on how many learners have been identified as needing additional learning support or how many are in receipt of that support.

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade 3

41. GP has a satisfactory policy for equality of opportunity. This policy makes appropriate references to recent legislation and includes sections about discrimination, harassment and victimisation. The policy refers to the need for training and materials to support

equality and diversity initiatives. Every training centre has a nominated member of staff for equal opportunities. Their role is to support the rest of the staff and to offer equality and diversity training. However, the role is too new to be able to assess its effectiveness.

42. Learners' understanding of equal opportunities is satisfactory. Equal opportunities information is covered adequately in induction. Learners are given a clearly written booklet, which explains equal opportunities issues and learners' entitlements. GP reinforces equal opportunities adequately throughout the learners' programmes. Assessors make regular use of a booklet that contains a good range of equal opportunities prompt questions, while they are conducting progress review meetings. However, not all assessors have sufficient understanding of equality and diversity to answer questions or develop learners' understanding.

43. The collation, analysis, target-setting and monitoring functions relating to equal opportunities have improved since the 2002 inspection. The three-year development plan refers to the LSC's requirements, and then uses them as the basis for target-setting. These measures concern gender recruitment, minority ethnic learners and learners with disabilities. GP also sets gender participation targets in occupational areas, such as women into warehousing. However, despite apparent progress, some of the categories and measurements are confusing. For instance, the percentage for participation by learners with disabilities is 9 per cent overall, and in one region it is 31 per cent. It is not clear to managers what types of disabilities are being referred to, and whether they should take action as a result of the data. Overall, GP is meeting its participation targets and there are no significant differences between the success rates of different groups of learners.

44. Training in equality and diversity is satisfactory. All staff are required to attend equal opportunities training once each year as part of their mandatory work-related responsibilities. All staff have recently attended company-wide training. Further training is scheduled as part of the annual learning plan. GP also offers equality and diversity training each quarter for employers and learners.

Quality improvement

Contributory grade 2

45. GP's quality improvement is good. Since the reinspection in 2004, the quality of GP's provision has continued to improve. Most weaknesses identified during the reinspection have been resolved. GP's development and action plans are monitored carefully and have contributed significantly to raising standards. Overall framework success rates have risen steadily, and at 53 per cent are above a much-improved national average. Apprenticeship success rates are now good, at 60 per cent. Advanced apprenticeship success rates remain weak at approximately 30 per cent, but have improved by nearly 15 per cent over a two-year period. Overall success rates on Train to Gain, and the E2E provision are at least satisfactory and improving.

46. Internal verification and assessment practice are particularly effective. Good practice has been promoted well throughout the provider. A wide range of improvements has been made. Internal verifiers hold regular standardisation meetings, and support assessors effectively where any under-performance by learners is identified. Sampling and observation schedules are planned well. Most of the external verifiers' reports are very positive.

47. Since the ALI inspection in 2002, when GP was judged inadequate, the provider has tried consistently to make its quality improvement processes more effective. Key areas for change included standardisation, audit, assessment and evaluation. Changes have been made in the management structure, and there is now a whole-organisation approach to quality improvement. More appropriate recruitment criteria have been introduced. Fewer learners are recruited now and some programmes have closed. At the highest level, a quality forum has been created, supported by a range of quality-related groups. Many staff, such as the lead internal verifiers for each of the four sectors, now work throughout the regions to ensure consistency of practice. GP meets LSC contractual requirements on a regular basis. The provider is accredited as an investor in people, which is a national standard for improving an organisation's performance through its people. Training centres have been upgraded to a good specification. Most centres have ICT suites, training rooms with electronic whiteboards and data projectors. The resources and equipment for on-the-job training are satisfactory. Assessors increasingly use a range of technologies to record evidence of learners' competence.

48. The self-assessment process is thorough and most of the judgements reached matched those of the inspection. The views of staff, learners, employers and key partners are taken into account as a matter of routine. Management information data is collected and analysed more effectively. Performance management has improved. Staff are involved appropriately in the self-assessment process and respond positively to improvement initiatives. There are regular briefings and review meetings at all training centres. An intranet has been developed and staff now have better access to company policies, procedures and programme documents. The quality improvement plan resulting from the self-assessment report is clear. Project action groups have been set up to focus on new initiatives and reduce consultative delays.

49. GP has introduced an annual model for observing all staff who advise, train or support learners. Its breadth is very ambitious. The director of quality improvement is responsible for carrying out all such observations. The model is well considered, but relies too much on auditing techniques. Not enough attention is given to the full range of teaching, training and learning activities that takes place on and off the job. However, reports and feedback to staff are well received and there is clear evidence of improvements. Any satisfactory provision is re-observed. Outstanding staff, branded as 'quality champions', are acknowledged throughout GP.

50. Feedback is collected from learners and employers at the beginning, middle and end of each learning programme. GP analyses the data, but the returns are not comprehensive enough and the analyses are not detailed enough to contribute fully to quality improvement. The questions asked are not appropriate enough. Some employers and learners do not know if any actions are taken as a result of their comments.

AREAS OF LEARNING

Health, public services and care

Grade 2

Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Social care		
Apprenticeships for young people	51	2
Train to Gain	32	2
Early years		
Apprenticeships for young people	85	2
Train to Gain	11	2

51. GP provides offers work-based learning programmes in social care and early years. These include advanced apprenticeships, apprenticeships and level 2 NVQ courses as part of Train to Gain programmes. There are 179 learners. On social care programmes there are 41 apprentices, 10 advanced apprentices and 32 learners on Train to Gain programmes. On the early years programme there are 39 apprentices, 46 advanced apprentices and 11 learners on Train to Gain programmes. Apprentices all follow key skills, technical certificate and employment rights and responsibilities programmes. Learners are referred mainly by Connexions and through GP's own promotional activities. New learners can begin training at any time of the year. Training sessions for individuals is provided in the workplace and at taught sessions in classrooms at GP's training centres. Assessors collect evidence of practical learning in the workplace. Following induction, for the first three months, learners' progress reviews take place every four weeks, and from then on every 12 weeks.

Strengths

- good assessment practice
- good development of key skills
- very effective employer involvement
- strong management of continuous improvement

Weaknesses

- low but improving success rates

Achievement and standards

52. Overall success rates are low, but have shown a strong improvement trend. During the period from 2003-04 to May 2005-06, advanced apprenticeships success rates rose by 13 per cent to 33 per cent. The rate for apprenticeships increased from 12 per cent to 45 per cent. Overall success rates are now at or near national averages. However, there are variations between the performances of social care learners and early years learners. In 2004-05, for example, success rates for advanced early years apprentices were good at 58 per cent, while the social care success rates were very much lower. Timely success rates are improving significantly, and in-year success rates are very good at 73 per cent. Success rates for the Train to Gain provision are at least satisfactory.

53. Learners' progression from level 2 NVQ to level 3 NVQ, and from level 3 to professional training is at least satisfactory and improving. In 2006, almost 30 per cent of all social care and early years' learners progressed to a higher level. Learners have a good understanding of the NVQ process. Some learners' NVQ portfolios are good, but most are satisfactory. Learners' portfolios are well presented, clearly signposted and contain a good range of evidence. Learners' practical skills are well developed. They show confidence when working in care and early years settings. Learners' attendance is good.

Programme	End Year	Success Rate	No, of learners	Provider NVQ Rate	National NVQ Rate	Provider framework rate	National framework rate
Advanced Apprenticeships	2003-04	overall	91	36	51	20	27
		timely	100	17	31	9	16
	2004-05	overall	54	44	47	39	21
		timely	37	11	28	11	12
Apprenticeships	2003-04	overall	153	31	43	12	17
		timely	128	7	18	4	6
	2004-05	overall	122	29	46	25	29
		timely	113	7	21	7	13
Adult training (long courses)	2004-05	overall	6	83		0	
		timely	7	29		0	

For details of how to calculate overall and timely success rates please refer to the "Quality Improvement Pack" (available from the Learning and Skills Council's website: www.lsc.gov.uk).

The quality of provision

54. Assessment practice is good. Assessments are well planned and detailed, and involve the learners particularly well. The required activities and assessment methods are identified clearly. Assessors use a wide range of assessment techniques. These include good use of diverse evidence sources, such as witness testimonies, workplace products and learners' personal reflective accounts. Assessments are thorough and most evidence is recorded well. Referencing and cross-referencing to NVQ and key skills standards, and technical certificate requirements are accurate. Relevant documents are completed and signed. Learners receive good verbal and written feedback quickly after an assessment, sometimes immediately. Support for portfolio-building is good. Learners are encouraged to take the lead when identifying possible sources of evidence. Assessors work flexibly to support the learners. In social care, visits to learners sometimes take place in the evenings or at night, depending on learners' individual work patterns. Learners are visited regularly, by assessors, who have the flexibility to increase the frequency of visits if necessary. Learners comment that assessors are very approachable and supportive.

55. The development of learners' key skills is good. Key skills provision is well developed and integrated successfully with vocational training and assessment. The key skills initial assessment process is good. Tests are available online, or can be paper based, according to the learners' needs. During induction, key skills are introduced as an important

component of the apprenticeship programme. During the apprenticeship, the key skills programme and the NVQ are taught and assessed together. Learners are encouraged to gather key skills evidence from everyday tasks, while working for their NVQ. In early years and social care programmes, learners are encouraged to appreciate the relevance and importance of key skills to work.

56. Employers are involved particularly well in the training and review of learners' progress. Relationships between employers and GP are well established and effective. Employers provide learners with regular opportunities for coaching, training and portfolio-building. Many workplaces provide learners with access to books, journals, and computers, including the internet. Most employers have a good understanding of the NVQ requirements, many have completed a NVQ themselves. Employers provide good guidance and supervision in order to develop learners' practical skills. In-house training is available at all learners' workplaces. This training includes statutory training in moving and handling, fire procedures, first aid and food hygiene. More specialised courses are also available, such as catheter care, and child protection.

57. Learners are able to attend a wide range of additional training activities. Individual learning plans are used well. Employers are involved in discussing and amending learners' targets, and most of them attend learners' progress reviews. They feel well informed about learners' progress and understand the links between on- and off-the-job training. If an employer is unable to attend a progress review, GP's staff ensure that they are kept informed. Managers rearrange learners' work patterns or activities to create opportunities for them to perform new tasks and meet NVQ requirements. Learners value the support that they receive in the workplace very highly.

58. Tutors are occupationally experienced and qualified. They provide regular off-the-job training and coaching sessions. Background knowledge is linked well to the application of practical skills in the workplace. The standard of training sessions held at the GP centre is at least satisfactory. Tutors have detailed session plans which have clear aims and objectives that match the requirements of the NVQ, the technical certificate and key skills qualifications. Appropriate teaching methods are used. Learners are encouraged to contribute and participate. Key learning points are reinforced and learning is checked regularly. GP provides a satisfactory range of resources and learning materials. Relationships between staff and learners are good.

59. Induction and initial assessment practices are satisfactory. A recruitment officer provides an initial interview for each learner. This includes an assessment of their current vocational skills and the appropriateness of the prospective programme. If successful, learners are invited to attend an induction session that covers training, assessment and GP's policies and procedures. These sessions are presented well, and recruitment officers provide good motivation. However, GP does not always check learners' assimilation and understanding of the information provided. Most induction and initial assessment activities take place in the workplace. Learners find these activities motivational. Progress reviews are carried out regularly to a satisfactory level. Learners are set clear targets and made aware of what is required of them before the next review. Employers receive copies of all progress review forms.

60. The system to identify and support learners with additional learning needs is satisfactory, but not fully effective. As a part of their induction, learners complete a

computerised literacy and numeracy diagnostic assessment. This is used to identify any specific learning support needs. However, there is no routine testing for specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia. Learners receive their initial assessment results and planned actions are recorded on the individual learning plans. Sometimes, during visits to the workplace, assessors help learners with literacy and numeracy needs, but not consistently. Laptop computers are loaned to learners with specific learning needs. GP's staff do not formally record the literacy and numeracy support that they provide, or learners' progress. Pastoral care for learners is good. Assessors hold at least level 2 literacy and numeracy teaching qualifications. Some assessors have completed dyslexia awareness training, but none are dyslexia tutors.

Leadership and management

61. The management of the provision contributes strongly to good continuous improvement. Success rates have continued to improve over a three-year period. Area of learning teams meet regularly, and training centre management meetings take place once each month. Minutes of these meetings show a clear focus on achieving the aims of the development plan, on monitoring performance and on quality improvement. Staff are set clear targets that are reviewed and evaluated quarterly. Staff who achieve their targets receive incentive payments. Staff appraisals are ongoing and thorough. Before an annual appraisal, the lead internal verifier for the relevant sector completes a report about the assessor. Staff's training and development opportunities are good. This includes compulsory training every year in equal opportunities.

62. The self-assessment report is evaluative and clearly written. Inspectors' findings match most judgements in the report. Staff, employers and learners are involved appropriately in the self-assessment process. Internal verification is comprehensive, thorough and effective. There are two designated, qualified internal verifiers for care and early years who are very confident in their roles and clear about their responsibilities. The internal verification strategy is detailed and clear. Activities are sampled regularly, and include interviews with learners and employers, portfolios, assessment practice, assessor observations and problem-solving. A clear monitoring schedule is used to record learners' progress and internal verification activity. There are regular monthly standardisation meetings. Each month, internal verifiers from all sectors meet together to share good practice. New assessors and internal verifiers are given a very helpful induction. If a learner is making slow progress, internal verifiers are responsible for visiting the workplace to identify and then resolve any problems.

Retail and commercial enterprise**Grade 3**

Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade
<i>Retailing and wholesaling</i>		3
Apprenticeships for young people	248	3
Train to Gain	17	3

63. At the time of inspection, 15 learners were advanced apprentices, and there were 233 apprentices. Seventeen learners were on Train to Gain programmes. GP has a small number of learners on warehousing programmes, but GP is not recruiting any new learners and warehousing was not included in this inspection. Apprentices are offered in all of GP's training centres, but Train to Gain provision is only offered in Manchester and West Yorkshire. All learners are employed before starting with GP. The provider is a partner in a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) with three other training providers, two colleges and a work-based learning provider. The CoVE status was awarded in January 2006.

Retailing and wholesaling*Strengths*

- good assessment practice
- good employer involvement
- particularly effective co-ordination of most improvement strategies

Weaknesses

- poor overall success rates for advanced apprenticeship learners
- slow progress for some learners

Achievement and standards

64. Apprenticeship success rates in Greater Merseyside are good, with percentage rates consistently around 70 per cent. However, overall apprenticeship success rates are currently only satisfactory. They are improving year on year and have moved 20 per cent above a low national framework completion rate. Advanced apprenticeship success rates are consistently poor. For 2005-06 to date, success rates are 13 per cent. This weakness was identified at the previous reinspection and improvement initiatives have had minimal effect.

65. The standard of learners' work, and their vocational and personal skills development is satisfactory. Many learners are making satisfactory or good progress, but over 14 per cent of current learners are making slow progress. More than 10 per cent of apprenticeship learners and 70 per cent of Train to Gain learners have exceeded their planned programme end dates. Actions to resolve slow progress and strategies to support learners are not always clear. Few learners' progress to other, or higher-level programmes.

Programme	End Year	Success Rate	No, of learners	Provider NVQ Rate	National NVQ Rate	Provider framework rate	National framework rate
Advanced Apprenticeships	2003-04	overall	171	19	21	9	13
		timely	164	14	10	5	5
	2004-05	overall	45	9	21	9	15
		timely	46	7	13	7	9
Apprenticeships	2003-04	overall	332	44	37	39	27
		timely	298	29	18	26	14
	2004-05	overall	227	47	43	43	32
		timely	238	37	26	36	19
Adult training (long courses)	2003-04	overall	18	89		0	
		timely	18	28		0	
	2004-05	overall	37	78		0	
		timely	39	18		0	

For details of how to calculate overall and timely success rates please refer to the "Quality Improvement Pack" (available from the Learning and Skills Council's website: www.lsc.gov.uk).

The quality of provision

66. Assessment practice is good. The planning of assessments is effective and assessors visit learners regularly. Assessors offer effective support and monitor learners' progress well. They have been able to get many learners to take responsibility for their portfolios, and their assessment requirements. Assessors give good feedback to learners about assessment outcomes, and individual learning plans are updated regularly.

67. Employers' involvement in training is good. They are actively involved in the initial assessment process and work with learners to ensure that they join appropriate programmes. NVQ options are matched carefully with the learner's job roles. Employers are fully informed of learners' progress and support their planned course work. Employers organise in-house training to support learners' development, and some employers attend forums to support training improvements. Learners receive good support from their employers, and some arrange job cover to allow learners to attend meetings with their assessor. GP recognises employers and learners' achievements through regular award ceremonies.

68. Most training is in-house and develops learners' work skills and confidence effectively. Assessors coach learners individually in areas that may not be part of their job roles, or where the learner has poor understanding. Qualifications that contribute to completing the apprenticeship framework are carefully planned. The co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training is not developed enough to support the learners. In-house training is not taken into account when assessors plan a learner's programme. Staff are appropriately qualified. Resources to support learners' training are sufficient, but the materials available are not always used to their full extent by learners.

69. Overall initial assessment and induction are satisfactory. They are well planned to be

as clear as possible for learners. Additional learning support is not applied systemically. Learners who have higher levels of qualifications are not assessed for literacy and numeracy skills, although some of these learners would benefit from additional support. Learners are generally not made aware of their poor spelling abilities. Systems to diagnose and support learners with special learning requirements, such as dyslexia, are not fully implemented. Some learners receive additional learning support, but, this tends to be informal. Learners' progress is not monitored systematically.

Leadership and management

70. The co-ordination of the provision to make improvements is particularly effective. The provider's staff fully understand GP's strategic planning, and are well motivated. There is very good teamwork to support learners. The comprehensive and effective internal verification system has been extended to include close monitoring of learners' and assessors' targets to improve performance. Communications throughout GP are good, and staff are constantly updated on best practice. Managers offer good support to staff.

71. The provider has a good understanding of areas for development. For example, a revised action plan has been introduced to improve advanced apprenticeship success rates, although it is too soon to be able to judge the level of success of this initiative. The apprenticeship success rate is steadily improving.

72. Staff are fully involved in the development of the self-assessment report, but the involvement of learners and employers is less clear. The self-assessment report for this area of learning broadly reflects the findings of the inspection, although key weaknesses found in achievements were not evaluative enough. The provider's promotion of equality of opportunity, and learners' understanding of the subject, are satisfactory.

Business administration and law**Grade 2**

Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Customer service		2
Apprenticeships for young people	338	2
Train to Gain	39	2

73. GP offers customer service programmes in five different regions, Manchester, Merseyside, Teesside, Tyne and Wear, and West Yorkshire. Technical knowledge and key skills training takes place at GP's training centres, as well as in the workplace. There are 338 learners following customer services programmes. Sixty-five are advanced apprentices, and 273 are apprentices. Thirty-nine learners are following a level 2 NVQ courses as part of the Train to Gain programme. The learners are employed mainly by retailers, estate agents and local businesses.

Customer service*Strengths*

- good overall success rates in apprenticeship frameworks
- good skills development
- good assessment practice
- particularly good employer involvement
- good involvement of staff in the quality improvement process

Weaknesses

- Insufficient co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training

Achievement and standards

74. The overall success rate for apprenticeship framework completions is good. Over the period 2003-04 to 2005-06, it rose from 42 per cent to 64 per cent. This is well above national averages. Apprenticeship success rates are particularly good, and rose by 22 per cent to approximately 70 per cent. Overall success rates for advanced apprenticeships are not as good, but have remained consistently above national averages and are clearly improving. For example, they rose from 29 per cent during 2003-04, to 38 per cent towards the end of the period 2005-06. Fewer learners are following advanced apprenticeships than apprenticeships. Timely success rates are also improving quickly, and most learners who achieve their NVQs also complete their apprenticeship framework. The overall success rate for learners on the level 2 NVQ Train to Gain programme is satisfactory and increased from 47 per cent during 2004-05, to 86 per cent towards the end of 2005-06. Learners following this programme are generally making good progress.

75. Learners develop good personal and vocational skills. In particular, they gain in confidence when dealing with complex customers' complaints. Learners are encouraged to complete projects in the workplace that are highly relevant to their learning programmes. This approach is much valued by employers and often adds value to their

business. For example, one learner implemented an online archiving system that allowed the employer to monitor its past customers easily. Another learner carried out a comparative analysis between staffing levels and store performance. Learners are valued members of the work teams, and having completed their qualifications, many of them receive promotion. Over the duration of a programme it is common for learners to take on increased work responsibilities and carry out more complex tasks at work. Learners' portfolios are well presented and contain clear and detailed evidence, most of which is gathered through witness testimonies and case histories.

Programme	End Year	Success Rate	No, of learners	Provider NVQ Rate	National NVQ Rate	Provider framework rate	National framework rate
Advanced Apprenticeships	2003-04	overall	56	38	41	29	23
		timely	57	26	27	21	14
	2004-05	overall	49	35	40	33	25
		timely	48	29	30	27	18
Apprenticeships	2003-04	overall	185	51	46	48	32
		timely	174	35	24	34	16
	2004-05	overall	169	53	54	51	41
		timely	180	44	36	43	27
Adult training (long courses)	2003-04	overall	2	0		0	
		timely	2	0		0	
	2004-05	overall	19	47		0	
		timely	20	15		0	

For details of how to calculate overall and timely success rates please refer to the "Quality Improvement Pack" (available from the Learning and Skills Council's website: www.lsc.gov.uk).

The quality of provision

76. The involvement of employers is particularly good. Partnership working is effective, and GP works with a very wide variety of employers. If requested, a business development officer will carry out an in-depth review of an employer's workforce development needs, and match the outcomes to available learning programmes. Employers receive a detailed induction pack that explains their role in the learning process. Most employers are knowledgeable about the qualifications that GP offers. In the workplace, employers provide learners with good opportunities for personal and skills development. GP has a well-established monthly learner award scheme. At the end of each year, an annual awards event celebrates outstanding successes. The event is very successful and involves employers, learners and staff. Many employers act as role models for learners, as they have previously followed a NVQ route themselves.

77. Assessment practice is good. Initial assessment is well structured and learners are given time to understand the processes and the outcomes. This includes the assessment of learning styles. There is good interaction between each learner and their assessor. Learners are generally well supported and assessors visits frequently. Records of visits are detailed and the targets found in action plans have deadlines. Assessment activities are

effective, and enable learners to collect a wide range of evidence. Assessors review learners' understanding of health and safety, and equality of opportunity issues regularly. However, equal opportunities matters are not always reinforced adequately. Learners are encouraged to take ownership of their learning, and often suggest more challenging activities when updating their learning plans.

78. The range of customer service programmes offered by GP is adequate to meet the interests of learners and needs of the local employers. GP offers appropriate advice and guidance to learners, to ensure that they are placed in the right programmes. The monitoring of learners' progress is satisfactory. Sector lead verifiers visit learners who are at risk of leaving their programmes before completing them. The verifiers are effective in ensuring that issues are identified and that appropriate support strategies are established. Induction is very comprehensive and includes all necessary information related to the programme. Although the provider carries out a range of diagnostic tests, learners who hold GCSE exemptions are not tested. In general, the support for learners with identified literacy, numeracy and language needs is not strong enough.

79. There is not enough co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training. When at work, learners receive ongoing training and development. However, not enough of these activities are recorded in learners' individual learning plans. When planning on-the-job training, assessors rarely include employer-led activities. At learners' progress reviews, some assessors ask employers for information about future training, but this is rarely recorded. Most on-the-job training is recorded retrospectively, or as a validation of its contribution to learners achieving the technical certificate.

Leadership and management

80. Staff are well involved in the quality improvement process. Since the 2002 inspection, GP has continued to focus on improving its provision. Staff understand and take responsibility for continuous quality improvement. Staff are involved in a wide range of quality-related working groups. For example, one team is working on strategies to increase overall success rates. There are regular quality forum meetings where ideas are discussed openly. The sector lead verifier is very active and shares good practice among the training centres. Staff attend updating workshops, where changes to systems or processes are initiated. GP has appointed quality champions to act as role models. They provide effective mentoring support for the assessment and verification team.

81. The management of this area of learning is satisfactory. Regional managers are responsible for daily operations at each of the training centres. They are supported by a team of 18 assessors, six internal verifiers and four lead assessors. Staff have a thorough understanding of GP's strategy. Internal communications are regular and effective among the various training centres. Staff appraisals and staff development are satisfactory. Staff development opportunities are good.

82. Internal verification is comprehensive and effective. It is fully compliant with regulatory requirements. Assessors are well supported. Equality of opportunity is promoted satisfactorily, but learners' understanding of equality and diversity issues is not reinforced consistently. Resources are satisfactory. All assessors have mobile telephones and laptop computers, and the necessary equipment to provide online testing facilities for the key skills and technical certificate elements of the programme. Training sites are equipped well with modern facilities. Most of the judgements in the self-assessment

report match those of inspectors. The improvement plan is designed to resolve all of the weaknesses identified in the provision. The process for compiling the self-assessment report involves staff, learners and employers appropriately.

