

INSPECTION REPORT

Strategic Training Solutions (Mansfield) Ltd

08 September 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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INSPECTION REPORT

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROVIDER

1. Strategic Training Solutions (Mansfield) Ltd (STS) is a private training provider set up in 1998. It is owned and managed by its managing director. Its training salon, Kudos, is in the centre of Mansfield, and STS gardening services (horticulture), is based at Crown Farm industrial estate on the outskirts of Mansfield.

2. The company provides work-based learning opportunities for learners aged between 16 and 24. These include apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships in horticulture (levels 1 and 2), retail and commercial enterprise (levels 1, 2 and 3), business administration and law (levels 1 to 4) and preparation for life and work (entry level and level 1). All provision is government funded. There are 192 learners, of whom there are 11 in agriculture, horticulture and animal care, eight in retail and commercial enterprise, 82 in hairdressing, 20 on the preparation for life and work (E2E) programme, and 71 in business administration and law.

3. The company has recently been restructured to include a marketing manager who works with employers to raise the profile of work-based learning opportunities in the region. The work-based learning manager works with a team of internal verifiers and assessors to co-ordinate training and learning activities. Four programme co-ordinators support learners. A quality manager oversees policies and procedures. There are currently 25 full-time and five part-time members of staff.

OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS

Grade 3

4. **The overall effectiveness of the provision is satisfactory.** All aspects of the provision are satisfactory, with the exception of STS's arrangements for quality improvement, which are unsatisfactory.

5. **The inspection team had some confidence in the reliability of the self-assessment process.** Inspectors' judgements matched some of those in the self-assessment report, but the report was insufficiently evaluative, and inspectors consistently gave lower grades than the provider.

6. **The provider has demonstrated that it has sufficient capacity to make improvements.** It acknowledges the weaknesses identified in inspection and is working on measures to rectify them.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR STRATEGIC TRAINING SOLUTIONS (MANSFIELD) LTD:

- develop and focus quality improvement systems
- establish and integrate the skills for life strategy
- develop further external work placements

- raise success rates and timely success rates
- maintain and develop the good support systems for learners
- continue to develop the use of management information to plan improvements.

GRADES

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

Grades awarded at inspection

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

Agriculture, horticulture and animal care			3
Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade	
Horticulture NVQ training for young people	11	3	

Retail and commercial enterprise			3
Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade	
Hairdressing Apprenticeships for young people	81	3	

Preparation for life and work			3
Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade	
Employability training Entry to Employment	12	3	

Business administration and law			3
Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade	
Administration Apprenticeships for young people	72	3	

ABOUT THE INSPECTION

7. A team of five inspectors visited STS for four days at the beginning of September 2006. The team inspected the provision of work-based learning in horticulture, E2E, hairdressing and business administration, as well as STS's leadership and management, and quality improvement arrangements, and its measures to ensure equality of opportunity. Training

in retailing was not reported on and graded separately because there were too few learners.

Number of inspectors	5
Number of inspection days	20
Number of learners interviewed	35
Number of staff interviewed	44
Number of employers interviewed	9
Number of locations/sites/learning centres visited	22
Number of partners/external agencies interviewed	3
Number of visits	1

Leadership and Management

Strengths

- good management response to changing business needs
- very effective communications
- successful strategies to widen participation

Weaknesses

- insufficient use of management information to plan improvements to provision
- slow implementation of skills for life strategy
- weak quality improvement

Agriculture, horticulture and animal care

Horticulture

Strengths

- good personal and vocational support for learners
- extensive project work providing commercial experience for learners
- good efforts to widen participation in horticultural training

Weaknesses

- poor success rates
- insufficient use of external work placements to enhance progression

Retail and commercial enterprise

Hairdressing

Strengths

- good support for learners

Weaknesses

- slow progress towards unit achievement for some learners

Preparation for life and work

Employability training

Strengths

- good progression rates
- very good systems to support learners

Weaknesses

- inadequate planning of learning
- insufficient use of external employer placements

Business administration and law

Strengths

- good acquisition of workplace and social skills
- very supportive assessors and employers

Weaknesses

- slow progress for some learners
- insufficient structured support for learners' additional literacy, numeracy and language needs

WHAT LEARNERS LIKE ABOUT STRATEGIC TRAINING SOLUTIONS (MANSFIELD) LTD:

- the individual attention and support from friendly staff
- the variety of practical work in horticulture
- 'they don't pass you just because you've done something'
- 'I enjoy getting up to come here'
- gaining a qualification

WHAT LEARNERS THINK STRATEGIC TRAINING SOLUTIONS (MANSFIELD) LTD COULD IMPROVE:

- its ways of dealing with latecomers so that learners who arrive on time are not disadvantaged
- the transport to get horticulture learners to and from project sites
- 'employed apprentices should attend once a week' (hairdressing)
- 'less boring sessions'

DETAILED INSPECTION FINDINGS

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Grade 3

Strengths

- good management response to changing business needs
- very effective communications
- successful strategies to widen participation

Weaknesses

- insufficient use of management information to plan improvements to provision
- slow implementation of skills for life strategy
- weak quality improvement

8. STS's managers have responded well to changing business needs. The business plan meets the needs of local communities and employers. The company has been restructured to give priority to key areas for development, and the shape of the provision has changed in accordance with this. The management team has been enlarged by the recruitment of a quality improvement manager, a marketing and recruitment manager and a data specialist. There is an open management system, and there is good rapport between operational and strategic staff, which has been maintained through a period of significant change. Programmes are managed effectively and staff are encouraged to share good practice within and across the areas of learning. STS has extensive and effective links with a wide range of appropriate organisations in the local area.

9. Communications have improved following the changes to the management systems and are now very effective. Meetings have been restructured well to facilitate the flow of information and to ensure that all staff are fully involved in company business. The new structure for meetings has helped staff to share good practice, and there are some good examples of practice being adopted and adapted across different programme areas. There have been recent initiatives to help staff to understand how data can be used more productively in their job roles. There is a staff intranet, and regular newsletters go to all members of staff. Communication with employers and learners is effective. STS has produced a new information pack to guide employers through the qualifications, and to give background information on a wide range of issues. The pack includes useful and relevant information on current legislation affecting employers, especially with regard to equality of opportunity. Communications with Connexions are effective in quickly identifying and solving potential problems faced by E2E learners.

10. STS's processes for the recruitment of staff are satisfactory. Staff training and development is well established and is adequately linked to company objectives. There is an annual appraisal system which helps to identify training and development needs, and all members of staff have a record of their own development. Staff have frequent, relevant training to ensure that they maintain their vocational competence and all have had in-house training in equality of opportunity and diversity. All staff who deal with young people have had police checks. Some staff have had innovative and effective

management training to help them to fulfil their job roles, and have improved their management skills following this training.

11. There is insufficient use of management information to plan improvements to the provision. Data is now being presented regularly to senior managers to give an overview of the provision, and the management information system is starting to be strengthened and used in a more focused way to analyse and interpret this data. However, at present, the staff are not all confident about using management information to plan and monitor improvements to the provision, and senior managers have not given staff sufficient direction about dealing with the slowing improvement in the company's success rates. The information available at present, and the format of that information, does not allow staff to easily identify trends in particular areas, though there are several problems, such as learners' slow progress, which affect all areas of learning. There are plans to refine the system further and to train staff to use the information more effectively, but these have not yet been put in place.

12. STS has been slow to implement its new skills for life strategy. Skills for life is the government's strategy on training in literacy, numeracy and the use of language. The company's current practice does not cater for the specific needs of all learners who require support with literacy, numeracy and language. Staff are inadequately qualified in teaching literacy, numeracy and language. The company is aware of this, and has plans for all members of staff to gain a level 3 literacy and/or numeracy qualification. However, at present, there is insufficient awareness of the effect of some practices on learners with literacy and/or numeracy support needs. For example, documents given to learners sometimes use complex language and are presented in inappropriate formats, making important messages difficult for them to understand. Similarly, important signs and notices are written in capitals, making them harder to read. Learners are given support when they have difficulties with their work. However, they are not taught how to overcome the problem next time it arises. Errors in written work are not always corrected.

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade 3

13. STS has successful strategies to widen participation. The provider has been working with a range of partners for many years, and has well-established and productive links with diverse organisations. It works very successfully with local schools to attract young people into work-based learning, and runs an effective student apprenticeship scheme. Schoolchildren attend taster sessions, and the company runs mock interviews in schools to help prepare pupils for contacts with prospective employers. The company has been successful in attracting young people into work-based learning, and providing them with suitable opportunities in their chosen field. It has extensive links in the local area, and has been involved in providers' forums. It has a strong working relationship with PATRA, a local initiative to place young people from minority ethnic backgrounds in meaningful, and often prestigious, employment. STS has been engaged by PATRA to provide training leading to qualifications for the young people on its programmes. It has done this successfully, motivating the young people well and enhancing their career prospects. The company works with a wide range of statutory and voluntary groups to provide information for learners. This is particularly effective for young people with specific problems such as homelessness or substance misuse. The company uses its hardship fund to enable learners to start programmes before their education maintenance allowance comes through.

14. Staff have had in-house training in equality and diversity, and some have attended external training. There is a comprehensive and thoughtful equality of opportunity policy which is disseminated to staff and to employers. A short version goes to learners. The policy mentions relevant legislation, such as the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, and makes useful reference to guidelines on the legislation. Learners have training in equality and diversity during their induction and this is followed up at progress reviews. Employers are required to have a commitment to equality of opportunity. This is also monitored through the review process. Learners have a satisfactory understanding of their rights and responsibilities. They are aware of the complaints and grievance procedures and know what to do if they have a problem. Staff challenge unacceptable behaviour and make it clear that it will not be tolerated.

15. There is limited access to the STS's town-centre premises, but reasonable adjustment can be made for people with mobility problems. The company refers learners to other providers if it cannot make its provision accessible. Signs and notices around the building are not in fonts and colours that make them easily legible to people with literacy needs or visual impairment. Some learning materials and documents for learners are written in too complex a style for people with literacy needs. These shortcomings have not been identified by the provider. There are numerous posters around the building promoting equality and diversity.

Quality improvement

Contributory grade 4

16. The STS has taken measures to improve the quality of provision by responding to some of the weaknesses identified by the previous inspections in 2002 and 2003. For example, key skills provision is now much better integrated with vocational programmes, and framework achievements are running at a very similar level to national vocational qualifications (NVQ) achievements. Overall, success rates are now satisfactory.

17. STS collects feedback from learners and employers at various stages of the learners' journey. There are suggestion boxes that learners can use, and there is a learners' forum. The company responds to this feedback as appropriate, and some improvements have been made as a result. However, in some cases, problems that have been identified by learners have not yet been dealt with, for example, how to deal with latecomers to sessions without disadvantaging the learners who arrive on time. Inspectors witnessed learning sessions being delayed for up to 30 minutes while tutors waited for latecomers.

18. The internal verification process is satisfactory. Employers' practice is monitored through the review process.

19. The company has identified the need to develop and implement quality improvement systems, and a new member of staff has been recruited as a quality improvement manager. Systems are currently being developed to replace and supplement previous systems. The entire quality cycle is being revised to make it fit for purpose, but there is no method for prioritising particular aspects of quality improvement at present. The quality improvement initiatives are recent, and it is too early to judge their effect.

20. There is a system for observing key processes, as well as for observing teaching and learning. The key processes, such as initial assessment, progress reviews and exit interviews, are observed by staff members' peers. They are planned in a calendar, but are not always conducted when planned. Some members of staff have not been observed at

all in the past year. The system for observing teaching and learning is currently being revised. Assessors observe teaching and learning. The criteria for observations are still being developed. The observations carried out to date give an incomplete and imprecise picture of the quality of the provision. The current system provides a weak foundation on which to plan for improvements.

21. The self-assessment process is insufficiently rigorous. Many of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report are norms, and most of the weaknesses identified by inspectors are omitted. The report is insufficiently self-critical, and does not form a strong basis for action-planning for improvements. The self-assessment process is inclusive. The current self-assessment report was written by the teams responsible for the areas of learning, and includes learners' views. However, the text is descriptive, not evaluative. Judgements about the quality of the provision are too generous, and fail to take into account that the improvements in the provision have been outstripped by the rise in national standards. The action plan arising from the self-assessment report is poor. It does not focus clearly enough on priority areas for improvement. For example, success rates for the 16-18 age group are lower than those for people aged 19 and over, but there is no strategy to deal with this, even though this provision will form the major part of the company's business from now on.

AREAS OF LEARNING

Agriculture, horticulture and animal care

Grade 3

Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Horticulture NVQ training for young people	11	3

22. There are 11 apprentices working towards NVQs at level 2 in amenity horticulture, seven of whom are men. Learners are recruited through Connexions and by word of mouth. They receive an induction at the beginning of their programme during which they are assessed to identify their literacy, numeracy and language support needs. Learners receive off-the-job training each week for a half or full day. This is used to teach relevant related knowledge, key skills and other requirements of the framework.

23. Most learners are unemployed, and gain practical experience through contract work carried out by STS. The learners work in groups of about six to eight to complete this work, supervised by a member of staff. Two learners are employed and receive all their training on the job through visits by a member of STS's staff. Progress reviews are completed every 12 weeks.

24. If learners need specialist support, an external organisation is invited to provide individual off-the-job training sessions. Currently no learner is receiving such support, although some is planned for learners with literacy, numeracy or language support needs who have recently started the programme. Of the current 11 learners, four are identified as having dyslexia.

25. Work is also carried out with school students at key stage four, with E2E learners, and with school students on work experience, some of whom progress onto apprenticeship programmes. Apprentices working towards level 2 qualifications, student apprentices and E2E learners work together in the same sessions, but towards the different qualification aims.

26. There is a full-time programme co-ordinator and assessor, two full-time supervisors and an internal verification associate external to the company. A further part-time supervisor has recently started working one day a week to provide extra support for learners.

Horticulture

Strengths

- good personal and vocational support for learners
- extensive project work providing commercial experience for learners
- good efforts to widen participation in horticultural training

Weaknesses

- poor success rates
- insufficient use of external work placements to enhance progression

Achievement and standards

27. Learners develop good practical horticultural skills. They work on a wide variety of sites and gain skills relating to different aspects of garden maintenance and establishment. They are appropriately involved in completing job sheets, and start generating and referencing evidence for their portfolios early in the programme. Portfolios contain appropriate and diverse evidence. Plant knowledge is covered and meets the requirements of the awarding body, but there are few opportunities to further develop learners' knowledge and understanding of plant names by reinforcing them during practical sessions and by including details on job sheets.

28. Most key skills are now completed in a timely way and do not form a barrier to overall achievement. Key skills are taught alongside the NVQ using evidence gained from horticultural activities, and only generating additional evidence where necessary. Learners' progress towards all aspects of their framework is now monitored effectively by means of an up-to-date wall chart of units started and completed by each learner.

29. Success rates are poor. In 2003-04, the framework success rate was double the national averages, but in 2004-05 it halved to only 30 per cent, while the national average rose to 32 per cent. STS's success rate has risen in the current year, but still fewer than half the learners leaving the programme are achieving their full framework. Most unsuccessful learners leave before the end of their programme, and achievement rates for those who complete are high. Some of the unsuccessful learners have completed parts of their framework. In 2005-06, 75 per cent of leavers had successfully completed at least some of their qualification goals and received certification for this. STS has given some attention to identifying reasons for the low success rates and trying to improve the proportion of successful learners, but this has been insufficiently focused and effective. Little use is made of performance data to identify possible causes or improvements.

Programme	End Year	Success Rate	No, of learners	Provider NVQ Rate	National NVQ Rate	Provider framework rate	National framework rate
Apprenticeships	2003-04	overall	5	80	57	60	37
		timely	7	43	31	29	21
	2004-05	overall	10	30	57	30	42
		timely	8	13	34	13	25

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

30. Horticultural staff give good support to learners both in coping with their vocational studies and with any personal or social issues which may impede their progress. Employed learners receive very frequent and helpful visits to train, assess and support their progress towards their qualification goals. Many learners have achieved little at school or elsewhere, and the assessor effectively motivates learners, provides clear explanations, and stimulates learning. He uses praise effectively to give learners pride in their work, and raise standards. Learners have good involvement in assembling their portfolios, and readily complete job sheets, sometimes at home. Many learners have significant personal barriers to success. Staff go to considerable lengths to ensure that these learners can complete their programme whatever the state of their home or family life, their financial or residential circumstances, and their ability, experience, or temperament.

31. Learners benefit from the extensive project work carried out by the horticultural unit at STS. Approximately 90 gardens are maintained each month by the different teams of learners and supervisors, who complete routine garden maintenance as well as establishing new lawns and borders, and developing hard landscape features. Some sites have large areas needing attention, where groups of learners can experience near-commercial quantities of work to complete. There are sufficient hand and machine tools to allow these areas to be used effectively to develop learners' skills and competence. New learners experience work in the unit for a day before committing themselves to joining the programme.

32. Staff develop and maintain good rapport with learners. Background knowledge and practical sessions provide work that learners can understand and enjoy completing. Schemes of work and session plans have recently been revised. However, they still do not provide a fully adequate guide to effective delivery of the programme to a wide range of learners. Good use is made of humour to engage and maintain attention. Learners, for the most part, work and learn willingly.

33. Staff have extensive life experience and sufficient horticultural experience to work effectively with learners. They hold, or are working towards, horticultural qualifications, but none holds formal teaching or literacy and numeracy support qualifications. Only the co-ordinator is qualified as an assessor, although another supervisor is working towards the relevant units. Learners and external agencies value staff highly.

34. Classroom-based resources are adequate. There is internet access in the classroom and copies of past and current issues of two relevant periodicals. However, STS only keeps a small stock of horticultural books, and there are insufficient new and varied titles to attract learners' interest.

35. Reviews of learners' progress are satisfactory. Regular learning and progress reviews are used to record the progress made and set appropriately specific targets for completion. Learners and STS hold a copy of the review document. Supervisors of employed learners can refer to the review document in the portfolio. Further reviews are held approximately every six to 12 weeks, and used to discuss more substantial issues affecting progress. However, learners do not receive a record of these reviews, and the only record is kept in the administrative file at STS.

36. Initial assessment is satisfactory. An outside organisation is contracted to provide individual support where a need is identified. Many learners have a low level of literacy and numeracy, and others have characteristics of dyslexia. Some of these learners receive formal support. Good, informal support from staff helps ensure that the learners' literacy and numeracy level is not a barrier to successful completion of their framework goals.

37. There is insufficient use of external work placements for the apprenticeship learners to enhance their learning, develop their competence, and prepare them adequately for future employment and progression. Only two learners currently on programme are employed and working on external placements. All others work in teams with STS's staff on the various projects managed by the unit. No unemployed learner has an external placement. Both the employed learners work in placements which approached STS for potential learners or staff. The company places insufficient emphasis on finding and establishing external placements as an integral and essential part of apprenticeship training.

38. While recorded accidents are few in number, STS is not active enough in formally risk-assessing the sites used. Staff do not rigorously record assessments in order to encourage learners to collect better evidence.

Leadership and management

39. STS carries out good work to widen participation and open access to horticultural training to more diverse groups. Work experience is provided within the unit, and student apprenticeships are offered for local schools. A recent contract for adults who have not yet achieved a level 2 qualification has just begun, and the first learner recruited is now working enthusiastically towards his first NVQ in horticulture after a lifetime working in manufacturing. E2E learners carry out horticulture project work and can work towards a level 1 qualification if desired. At least six learners in 2005-06 have progressed to a full level 2 apprenticeship programme from one of these initiatives.

40. Meetings of the horticultural team are held several times each year, and horticultural reports are presented to meetings of the STS management team. Appropriate checks are carried out to ensure the safety of staff working with children, although one recent staff member has yet to have these completed.

41. Most staff have been involved in self-assessment through discussion and team meetings, although employers have not been sufficiently consulted. The self-assessment

STRATEGIC TRAINING SOLUTIONS (MANSFIELD) LTD

report is insufficiently critical, overemphasises perceived strengths and fails to recognise the significance of key weaknesses. A learners' forum has recently been established to help collect learners' views on the quality of provision and possible improvements.

42. Assessment and internal verification are satisfactory. Rigorous and appropriate verification is carried out, and good-quality records are kept by the internal verifier. Constructive reports are completed both for portfolio checks and for observations of assessment practice, which provide useful suggestions for improvement.

Retail and commercial enterprise**Grade 3**

Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade
<i>Hairdressing</i> Apprenticeships for young people	81	3 3

43. STS provides hairdressing training for 81 learners working towards NVQs at levels 2 and 3. Sixty-four of the learners are apprentices and 17 are advanced apprentices. Sixty-five of the learners are employed. STS works with 35 salons. Apprentices attend the training centre one day a week for off-the-job training, and are assessed at their salon or at STS's training centre. All the training and assessment for advanced apprentices takes place on the job. Sixteen unemployed learners train full time at the company's training centre. Some learners enter training by applying directly to STS or are referred to STS by their employer or by Connexions. A three-day induction programme includes information on health and safety, equality and diversity, company policies, the NVQ and a one-day practical skills test. There are three full-time staff and one part-time member of staff who teach and assess. One salon has a work-based assessor. Two members of staff are qualified verifiers. Twenty-two learners have additional learning needs. Learners can join the training programme at any time during the year. The company's assessors visit employed apprentices every two weeks. Formal progress reviews take place every 12 weeks. The review includes the learner, trainer and a member of salon staff.

Hairdressing*Strengths*

- good support for learners

Weaknesses

- slow progress towards unit achievement for some learners

Achievement and standards

44. Timely framework success rates are low on both the apprenticeship and advanced apprenticeship programmes. Seven of the 12 apprentices who have completed their framework in 2005-06 did so after the planned date. No advanced apprentices completed their programme. Some learners make slow progress towards unit achievement. There are learners who have been on programme for a year or more but only achieved one or two units.

45. Overall success rates for apprentices have fallen from 60 per cent in 2003-04 to 40 per cent in 2005-06. Similarly, the overall success rate for advanced apprentices declined from 33 per cent in 2004-05 to 19 per cent in 2005-06. Of the 43 advanced apprentices who started training in the past five years, only one has successfully achieved the full framework.

46. STS has changed the way it manages key skills training. Two new key skills staff have been appointed. Early indications are that the changes are having a positive effect and

learners are achieving earlier.

47. Learners produce satisfactory practical work. They enjoy their salon and centre practical sessions. Portfolios are satisfactory and contain appropriate assessment documents and evidence, as well as fulfilling awarding body requirements. Assignments are satisfactory but little use is made of computers to word process them or to produce visual images.

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	2	0	31	0	21
		timely	2	0	19	0	13
	2004-05	overall	7	33	31	33	22
		timely	11	18	22	18	15
Apprenticeships	2003-04	overall	15	67	45	60	32
		timely	11	27	24	27	18
	2004-05	overall	44	52	45	52	35
		timely	46	15	30	15	23

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

48. The range of support for learners is good. All learners are given an initial assessment, and hairdressing staff sensitively manage any personal and social problems they may have. The frequent salon visits together with the regular progress reviews ensure good communication between learners and STS's staff. All training centre lessons have two tutors. Class sizes are small and learners receive a good deal of individual attention. The training programme is sufficiently flexible to meet the particular needs of learners and employers. For example, one learner wanted to work at a particular pace and negotiated an individual timetable of learning. Learners appreciate the support and flexibility that STS offers. Occasionally a manufacturer visits STS and offers additional qualifications to learners. This training fits well with the NVQ training. Learners who are identified as needing additional literacy, numeracy or language support receive individual attention to help them to complete their tasks. Support is provided by two recently appointed members of staff who teach on the key skills programme. The provider currently has no staff qualified beyond level 3 in literacy, numeracy or language support, but is planning to rectify this.

49. Teaching and learning are of a satisfactory standard. Individual learning styles are catered for. For example, in one background knowledge session the tutor had planned a range of activities to stimulate and motivate learners, including small-group work on a problem-solving task related to various hair and skin tests. Workbooks are the main teaching resource for background knowledge. Learners like the workbooks because they provide them with a permanent record of the knowledge for each NVQ unit. Two

weaknesses in the self-assessment report identified poor co-ordination between the teaching of background knowledge and practice. This has now been dealt with. For example, a background knowledge session on hair colouring is held in the morning, and followed immediately in the afternoon by practical colouring, allowing learners to make the clear link between theory and practice. Most learners have a good understanding of the NVQ structure and the process of assessment. Learners work in a professional manner during practical sessions, and follow health and safety practices satisfactorily.

50. Assessment practice is satisfactory. Most assessment for employed learners takes place in the salon. For unemployed learners assessment takes place at the training centre. Practical and written assessments are recorded accurately and comply with awarding body requirements. Assessors visit salons at least once a fortnight. Additional assessment visits are made when requested by the learner.

51. Assessors work closely with employers. During progress reviews, employers provide written comments on learners' performance. Learners keep a weekly record of the work they carry out in the salon. Assessors and learners find this helpful in promoting discussion on the work. Many employers have been with STS for a number of years, and value the relationship they have with the company's staff. The salons provide stimulating working and learning environments, where learners work alongside competent stylists and trainers.

52. Progress reviews are carried out satisfactorily. The learner, assessor and employer are involved in the review process. Learners complete a review questionnaire which requires them to reflect on any targets set at the previous review. There is also a review of personal development and any issues encountered. Case studies are used to promote discussion on equality and diversity issues. Copies of the completed review document are given to each of the participants to ensure they all have a record of the new targets. However, the assessment targets are often too vague about what learners need to do and when.

53. The pattern of key skills teaching is relatively new and still developing. However, recent early completion by some learners suggests that it is having a positive effect. Key skills tutors attend hairdressing lessons or accompany assessors to salons to work with individual learners. Key skills evidence is generated from the work learners produce for hairdressing assignments.

Leadership and management

54. Accommodation at the town-centre training salon is adequate. The first-floor hairdressing salon has workplaces for nine learners at any one time. There is a small reception area and a satisfactorily resourced consumables dispensary. There is a training room for background knowledge sessions and a small computer suite on the second floor. The building does not have a lift, so learners and hairdressing clients have to be able to walk up stairs. The range and number of clients is adequate for the training, and professional products are used.

55. The most recent self-assessment report was published in August 2006. A number of the weaknesses it identified are being dealt with, but it is too early to judge the effectiveness of the changes.

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56. Hairdressing staff meet once a month to discuss training and learners' progress. In the past year, two members of staff have left, and one has been absent due to illness. One new full-time appointment has been made. The current team works well together. Staff are well qualified and take part in regular professional development. In classes they demonstrate good technical knowledge and enthusiasm for their subject. Learners are allocated to an assessor, who is responsible for managing the salon visits and devising schedules of assessment. Weekly visit schedules are held in the administration office.

57. Internal verification is satisfactory and meets awarding body requirements.

Preparation for life and work**Grade 3**

Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade
<i>Employability training</i> Entry to Employment	12	3

58. STS provides E2E training from two sites at Regent Street and Crown Farm. The E2E team, and assessment paperwork and administrative support is based in Regent Street. Most learners are referred by Connexions but some apply direct to STS. Learners attend the main site for initial interviews. Initial assessments identify learners' social or personal barriers to achievement, and their literacy and numeracy needs, as well as their learning styles. Following induction and completion of the E2E passport, the learners begin their programme. If they are ready, those interested are placed in the commercial hairdressing salon in Regent Street, start on the horticultural projects at Crown Farm, or are found work placements. Progress is reviewed every four weeks. The programme is managed by a co-ordinator and two full-time key workers. Two assessors from hairdressing and horticulture also work with the learners on the vocational aspect of their programme. Learners can gain NVQs at level 1, key skills qualifications and a range of short course certificates including first aid and manual handling. Twelve learners are currently on programme, five on the horticulture programme, one on placement with STS on business administration and six in STS's internal salon. Of the 12 learners, seven are women, and none is from a minority ethnic group or has a declared disability.

Employability training*Strengths*

- good progression rates
- very good systems to support learners

Weaknesses

- inadequate planning of learning
- insufficient use of external employer placements

Achievement and standards

59. Learners at STS have good progression rates. In 2003-04, the rate of progress into work of further training or education was 64 per cent, with a slight dip in the next year to 59 per cent. In the current year, the progression rate is 61 per cent so far. Most learners progress into employment. STS also has some good progressions from its schools programmes into E2E provision. In the current year, out of 47 learners who started E2E programmes, nine had progressed from the schools programmes.

60. Achievement is satisfactory overall. Ten learners gained an NVQ at level 1 in the past year and 20 gained key skills awards. Seventeen achieved their sports leaders awards, 20 achieved first aid certificates, and four a manual handling qualification. Development of skills and knowledge is satisfactory.

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

LSC funded work-based learning																	
Entry to Employment	2005-06		2004-05		2003-04		2002-03										
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Number of starts	47	100	58	100	69	100	33	100									
Progression ¹	19	40	34	59	44	64	0	0									
Achieved objectives ²	12	26	38	66	21	30	2	6									
Still in learning	12	26	1	2	0	0	0	0									

1. Measured in terms of learners' movement to further training, education or employment, during or after their training

2. These being the key objectives identified for each learner while on E2E

The quality of provision

61. STS's systems to support learners are very good. Recruitment procedures are matched to the needs of vulnerable learners. They are encouraged to attend with their Connexions personal adviser. The interview is confidential and very supportive. Good use is made of a proforma which guides the tutor to uncover personal barriers. Learners attend trial days. They are matched well with more experienced learners as their 'buddy'. Initial assessment information is recorded in great detail and a number of accepted support procedures are in place. To ease the financial difficulties experienced by learners whose educational maintenance allowance payments are delayed, STS pays the learner from its hardship fund until the payment arrives. The E2E team uses a range of partners to ensure learners gain the knowledge and specialist help they need. STS provides food packs to learners starting to live independently, clothes for interviews and for the workplace, and hygiene products for those with personal hygiene issues. The aftercare arrangements, while not yet fully systematic, are also effective. Exit interviews are handled sensitively and usually completed in partnership with a personal adviser. Much guidance information is given. After two weeks, if the learner has not contacted STS, the key worker telephones them. Former learners are invited to drop into the centre whenever they need to, or to attend specific out-of-hours reunions. Some learners are using this service well to update their curriculum vitae after having lost their jobs.

62. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Sessions are planned and resourced adequately although they are not always sufficiently stimulating to gain the enthusiastic participation of all learners. Progress reviews are handled sensitively, and learners respond well, although where the vocational tutor is not available, the degree of progress is difficult to assess accurately. Assessments and arrangements for internal verification are satisfactory and meet the relevant awarding body standards. Information, advice and guidance are adequate. Work with the Connexions team is satisfactory and enables learners to gain information as they progress through their courses and at the exit point.

63. Learning is inadequately planned. Planning does not adequately link all parts of the learning programme. Learners are unable to recall their learning targets or their tasks for the week. A six-weekly timetable is designed by the team and is displayed openly. However, this is a guide for the trainers rather than being an understandable or motivational tool for the learner. Individual targets are set at monthly reviews. These outline vocational, personal and social, as well as some literacy or numeracy, goals. Many

of the targets are specific and measurable, although the literacy and numeracy targets are insufficiently clear. Review documents are kept accessible in learners' files. However, learners do not ask for them or take responsibility for their tasks or targets. Interim targets are not set, so there are no mid points at which overall progress is assessed. Learners consistently report frustration with the pace of learning and are keen to do more. In addition, while the key workers and vocational tutors liaise regularly, there is insufficient joint planning of learning to ensure that fundamental literacy and numeracy skills are developed to complement vocational skills. Although some literacy and numeracy targets are set, there is insufficient planning for their specific development in either portfolios or reviews.

64. STS makes too little use of external work placements. None of the current 12 learners is in an external work placements. All but one of the learners are based in the internal hairdressing salon and the horticulture projects. The learner in business administration is on placement in STS's own office. While placements with employers have been used productively for some previous learners, they are not sufficiently pursued as a relevant option for the learners. Learners are keen to gain work experience and to use and develop their skills in a real working environment. Some express frustration with the pace of learning in their current placements. The range of the provision is generally satisfactory, with learners having access to a reasonable variety in their programme.

Leadership and management

65. Staffing and resources are adequate for the needs of the programme. Staff have sufficient training and teaching experience, although they are yet to train sufficiently in skills for life. Communications are effective, and links with outside agencies are satisfactory and in some cases good. Staff have had some training in equality and diversity and display satisfactory knowledge. Quality assurance and audit processes are generally satisfactory though some are too new to assess effectiveness. Data is analysed for recruitment or retention issues but there is little further attempt to analyse trends. Staff contributed to the self-assessment process through discussions and meetings. They identified some of the same strengths as the inspectors, but identified many areas as strengths which are actually norms. Weaknesses were not identified well.

Business administration and law**Grade 3**

Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Administration Apprenticeships for young people	72	3

66. There are 72 learners. Thirty-nine are following business administration programmes, 28 at level 2 and 11 at level 3. Twenty-seven are on customer service programmes, 16 at level 3 and 11 at level 2. The remaining six learners are all at level 3, with two following a management programme and the other four a learning and development programme.

67. All learning takes place in the workplace, except for some home visits. There are five members of staff, two of whom work part time. All staff have assessment qualifications and three act as internal verifiers. A fourth staff member is working towards an internal verification qualification.

Strengths

- good acquisition of workplace and social skills
- very supportive assessors and employers

Weaknesses

- slow progress for some learners
- insufficient structured support for learners' additional literacy, numeracy and language needs

Achievement and standards

68. Learners are gaining good workplace and social skills. Many learners have progressed in their workplaces to become deputy managers, supervisors, or senior staff members. One learner has achieved countywide recognition through an award scheme and another is being nominated this year for a similar award. Just under half the learners in the past two years have progressed from NVQs at level 2 to level 3. All learners have gained additional social and workplace skills. They are all highly regarded as effective team members by their employers and have gained increased communication skills and self-confidence.

69. The standard of learners' work, including key skills, is satisfactory. Portfolios are individual, well constructed and varied. Learners take clear responsibility for their portfolios. Witness testimonies and countersigned assignments provide further evidence of learners' progress.

70. The overall success rates are satisfactory at 63 per cent compared with 50 and 34 per cent in previous years. The current year's success rate for apprenticeships stands at 67 per cent, and advanced apprenticeships at 54 per cent so far.

71. The overall success rates are low but improving. The timely success rates have improved over the past three years, but remain unsatisfactory, particularly for advanced

apprentices. Updated figures produced during the inspection to supplement data already submitted to the LSC show a further improvement, indicating that in 2005-06, 64 per cent of apprentices and 58 per cent of advanced apprentices have completed in a timely fashion.

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	17	53	46	35	28
		timely	16	19	30	19	18
	2004-05	overall	29	59	47	52	31
		timely	28	57	35	54	23
Apprenticeships	2003-04	overall	33	52	51	33	37
		timely	33	12	25	12	18
	2004-05	overall	43	51	56	49	45
		timely	47	19	35	17	28

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

72. Learners are receiving very strong pastoral support both from their assessors and their employers. Assessors visit learners once a fortnight and often once a week. They are also readily contactable in between. Assessors sometimes visit learners in their homes to provide extra learning support. Employers include local councils, statutory bodies, national companies and well-known local businesses. Employers are very supportive and work well with assessors to help learners with housing and other family problems. Assessors have contacts with a series of nationally known specialist support organisations which learners can be referred to or can contact directly. Learners can also win cash bonuses as an incentive. STS has very close working links with a foundation that specialises in finding placements in prestigious organisations for minority ethnic learners. The foundation provides closely targeted support to the learners and works effectively with STS. Learners are also able to achieve their NVQs through e-learning, which enables them to work at home at their own pace.

73. Assessment is satisfactory overall. There is some good assessment practice, such as professional discussion, taking place. Learners' progress reviews, in which employers take an active role, are well planned, with learners playing a leading role. Learners understand the programmes that they are on and are able to contribute to the planning of their training. Training staff are satisfactorily qualified and have acceptable levels of commercial experience.

74. Much work has been done by STS to ensure that achievable targets are set. Target-setting is mainly satisfactory but some targets are still vague, for example, 'Have a go at your sample paper for your technical certificate', 'Don't forget mean, mode, median and range' and 'Have a good look at the mock test paper for application of number'.

75. Several learners are working towards second or third NVQs at a level that they have already been achieved. There is insufficient recording of information to show why learners have been placed on these programmes, or to show that other options have been discussed with them. In some cases, learners are unclear about why they are following a particular programme. Some learners are working towards higher key skills qualifications than their framework demands. A few are also working towards other additional qualifications.

76. There is insufficient structured support for learners' additional literacy and numeracy needs. The help given to learners tends to be a response to either work submitted or being planned. There is no diagnostic testing to pinpoint the specific difficulties of learners who have been identified as needing literacy, numeracy or language support, even though the company's skills for life strategy states that it is taking place. The same strategy also claims that some staff are taking a training programme in information, advice and guidance, which is not correct. There is no linking of any training to the adult core curriculum as claimed in the strategy. The literacy, numeracy and language targets are not sufficiently specific, and incorrect grammar and spelling is not always corrected. None of the staff has any qualifications in literacy, numeracy or language support. This weakness has been fully recognised by STS, and the company is planning corrective action that includes introducing diagnostic testing.

Leadership and management

77. The self-assessment report is insufficiently critical and too descriptive. It identifies no key weakness in this area of learning, and many of the strengths it identifies are normal expectations. The company's 'embedding skills for life' strategy has not been implemented, nor has the advice and guidance training.

78. Overall, the planning and teaching of the occupational frameworks is satisfactory. Internal verification is planned well and has enabled assessors to work together as an effective team. Staff development is also satisfactory, with some staff working towards further qualifications.

