

Mercia Partnership (UK) Ltd

Inspection date

17 January 2008

Inspection number

318306

Contents

Background information	3
Inspection judgements	3
Scope of the inspection.....	3
Description of the provider.....	4
Summary of grades awarded	5
Overall judgement.....	6
Effectiveness of provision	6
Capacity to improve	6
Key strengths	6
Key areas for improvement.....	7
Main findings	8
Achievement and standards	8
Quality of provision.....	8
Leadership and management	8
Equality of opportunity	8
What learners like	9
What learners think could improve.....	9
Sector subject areas.....	11
Information and communication technology.....	11
Education and training	13
Learners' achievements	17

Background information

Inspection judgements

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made on www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of the inspection, inspectors take account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body. Where appropriate, inspectors also consider the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk), reports from the inspectorates' quality monitoring or annual assessment visits, and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.

In addition to reporting on overall effectiveness of Mercia Partnership (UK) limited, its capacity to improve further, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management, this inspection focused on specialist provision in:

- Information and communication technology
- Education and training

The quality of apprenticeship training in information and communication technology offered by Mercia Partnership (UK) also contributed to the findings in the overall effectiveness and main findings sections of the report.

Description of the provider

1. Mercia Partnership (UK) Ltd (Mercia) was formed in 1998 and offers training across the North West. Mercia operates from six centres located in Prescot, Liverpool, Kirkby, Huyton, HM Prison Liverpool and HM Prison Kennet.
2. Mercia offers provision in work-based learning, training in prisons and in the community. This inspection focused on the work-based programmes. Currently Train to Gain training is offered to 242 adults of whom 128 are on information and communication technology (ICT) programmes and 114 are working towards education and training qualifications. Additionally 15 are ICT apprentices.
3. The company is funded by the Greater Merseyside, Cheshire and Warrington, Greater Manchester and Lancashire LSCs for Train to Gain provision. Mercia is the lead Offender Learning and Skills Service provider, delivering a European Social Fund co-financed programme to offenders in the community.
4. Since the previous inspection, the provision has grown significantly. Mercia's management team consists of 14 staff who report to two directors.
5. Liverpool contains some of the most deprived wards in England. Employment is 70% compared with the national average of 74%. Some 28% of people of working age claim key benefits against a national average of 14%. Minority ethnic groups make up 5% of the population compared with 8% nationally and 48% of pupils leaving school achieve five or more GCSEs of grades A*- C against a national average of 56%.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Capacity to improve	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Achievement and standards	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Quality of provision	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Leadership and management	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Good: Grade 2

Sector subject areas

Information and communication technology	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Education and training	Satisfactory: Grade 3

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Satisfactory: Grade 3

6. The overall effectiveness of the provision is satisfactory. Achievement and standards are satisfactory and many Train to Gain learners develop good skills to enhance their job roles. The success rates of ICT apprentices have improved, although they are slightly below national averages. ICT Train to Gain learners retention rates are low.
7. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. The planning and monitoring of the Train to Gain ICT programme are satisfactory, as is the initial assessment of learners. However, mentors are insufficiently involved in planning training for teaching-assistant learners. The planning and monitoring of the progress of these learners is insufficiently thorough.
8. Mercia meets the needs and interests of learners appropriately. Learners are offered effective training to improve their basic literacy and numeracy skills. However, Mercia does not sufficiently assess the training needs of individual learners within the context of their job roles.
9. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Mercia has completed effective actions to improve the operational management of the company, following a period of rapid growth. Although Mercia acts quickly to resolve performance issues when identified, the arrangements for quality assurance and improvement are insufficiently effective to address the needs of this larger company.

Capacity to improve

Satisfactory: Grade 3

10. Mercia's capacity to improve is satisfactory. However, performance has declined since the previous inspection. Mercia has recognised the demands of its very significant growth and has implemented actions to improve the quality of its provision. Mercia has established a new structure including a senior management team. An extensive management training and coaching programme has begun to impact on the improvement of some aspects of performance, such as learners retention rates. The quality systems are being further developed and established to meet the needs of the company. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of these changes.
11. The self-assessment process is satisfactory. The process has been effective in eliciting the views of staff and learners and includes the views of employers collected through employer feedback arrangements. The self-assessment report updated in November 2007 was the first undertaken under the new management structure. The report provides detailed information about the company's operation, the difficulties which it faces and how it has improved aspects of its provision. However, the process is insufficiently self-critical and the report is too descriptive. Areas for improvements identified during the inspection do not match Mercia's self-assessment. Mercia overestimated the effectiveness of leadership and management, its capacity to improve and the overall effectiveness of the provision.

Key strengths

- Good response to meet the local skill needs to enhance economic well-being
- Good promotion of equality of opportunity

Key areas for improvement

- Insufficiently developed quality improvement arrangements

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Satisfactory: Grade 3

12. Achievement and standards on Train to Gain programmes are satisfactory and this was overestimated in the self-assessment report. Success rates for learners on education and training provision are good. Learners develop good work-related skills and progress is at least satisfactory. ICT learners are making good progress. Retention rates for the ICT Train to Gain learners who started in 2007-08 are low at 32%, although in-year retention has improved to around 90%. The success rates of ICT apprentices have consistently improved since 2004-05. However, they remain below national averages at 71%.

Quality of provision

Satisfactory: Grade 3

13. The quality of provision is satisfactory. However, Mercia graded the quality of provision as good in the self-assessment report. Training of ICT learners is satisfactorily planned and monitored and in most cases learners have sufficient opportunities to use their new skills in their work. During training sessions, learners' confidence is developed well. Target-setting and monitoring of learners' progress is broadly satisfactory. However, planning and target-setting for the teaching-assistant learners' training are insufficiently detailed. Teaching-assistant learners' mentors are inadequately involved in the planning of training. Few formal arrangements are in place to record the learners' pace of progress.
14. Mercia meets the interests of its learners satisfactorily. Learners benefit from literacy and numeracy provision. Trainers discuss the benefits of the programme with learners. However, Mercia does not formally assess the training needs of learners within their organisations or within the context of their job roles.
15. Learners support, advice and guidance are satisfactory. Learners have good working relationships with their trainers and can approach them to discuss any difficulties they may experience. Some learners have insufficient opportunities to discuss matters privately.

Leadership and management

Satisfactory: Grade 3

Equality of opportunity

Good: Grade 2

16. Leadership and management are satisfactory, which Mercia significantly overestimated in its self-assessment report. Since the previous inspection Mercia has significantly increased its range of provision, learner numbers and staffing levels. Mercia has recognised the complexities of operating a much larger multi-site training company which operates in many contexts. Managers have developed a structure to improve its operational management. Mercia has good arrangements for delegating budgets to its senior managers.
17. The company has allocated good resources for staff development including an extensive management coaching programme and collaboration with a local university offering management training. The directors suitably support new managers through mentoring arrangements.

18. Managers at all levels support each other and their staff. Open discussion is encouraged. Working relationships between staff are productive and are reinforced by good formal and informal communication about learners' progress and any operational improvements.
19. Staff appraisal is satisfactory and staff are offered the opportunity to discuss their successes and any areas for improvements. The appraisal process does not focus on improving the quality of teaching or training sessions. Information relating to the quality of teaching and training is recorded separately.
20. Staff are suitably qualified and experienced and resources are appropriately deployed. Staff have good access to up-to-date computing facilities. Mercia has developed a detailed information technology (IT) strategy, including email access for all staff. The company has also developed computer based training in literacy and numeracy, but most Train to Gain learners have not benefited from this.
21. The promotion and monitoring of equality of opportunity is good. The company has formed a number of effective partnerships to improve employability skills and enhance the economic well-being of individuals through relevant training. Almost all the employers which the company works with are in areas of high deprivation. A significant number of Train to Gain ICT learners are female. Mercia has clear policies and procedures for equality and diversity, although some learners have an insufficient understanding of equality matters. Mercia fully complies with race, gender and disability legislation and uses learner performance data satisfactorily to monitor the performance of different groups of learners.
22. Quality improvement arrangements are satisfactory. Quality assurance has been insufficiently developed and implemented for the expanded provision now in place. All trainers are observed once each year. However, the standard expected by observers is inconsistent and records are insufficiently evaluative to identify good practice or areas for improvements. The monitoring of the quality of individual learning plans and learners' progress reviews is not systematic. This area for improvement is not identified in the self-assessment report.
23. The self-assessment report provides detailed information about the company's operation, but is insufficiently evaluative. The report identifies many of the strengths identified during inspection, but few of the areas for improvements. Mercia overestimated the quality of its provision in many aspects.

What learners like:

- 'I enjoy learning new things'
- 'I had no IT experience at all. Now I am able to email our customers'
- 'The opportunity to gain a qualification'
- 'Help with organisational skills'

What learners think could improve:

- 'It would be good if the trainer visits were longer'

- 'I would prefer definite targets and deadlines'
- 'Lack of opportunities to raise issues except in a group setting'

Sector subject areas

Information and communication technology

Satisfactory: Grade 3

Context

24. Mercia offers ICT Train to Gain provision to 128 adult learners of whom 63% are female and 14% are from minority ethnic groups. Learners can enrol on the level 2 programme at anytime during the year. All learners receive an induction and initial assessment where basic literacy and numeracy support needs are identified. Currently five trainers deliver this provision and carry out assessments of learners' practical skills in the workplace.

Strengths

- Good learner progress
- Effective training that supports employer needs

Areas for improvement

- Low retention rates
- Insufficient reinforcement of equality of opportunity

Achievement and standards

25. Achievement and standards are satisfactory overall. Most learners are making good progress towards achieving their learning aims. The standard of most learners work is good. Learners are highly motivated and gain new skills and confidence. In addition to learners' main qualification aims they also work towards level 2 qualifications in basic literacy and numeracy skills.

26. It is too early for the first cohort of the ICT Train to Gain learners to have completed their qualification, but the current retention rates of these learners are low at 29%. Comparative in-year retention rates of the most recent cohort of the learners indicate satisfactory improvements.

Quality of provision

27. The quality of provision is satisfactory overall. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. All trainers prepare their sessions thoroughly and manage sessions well. Lessons feature a range of activities including demonstration of software and frequent learner activity. Little use is made of learners' previous experience and knowledge. Trainers record learners' progress well and agree action plans for future learning.

28. Progress reviews are satisfactory and provide learners with the support and encouragement to progress towards completing their qualification. During reviews learners' progress is discussed and targets are agreed for the next visit. However, individual learning plans are often not updated. Too few discussions about the standard of the learners' work take place and some of the review documents are insufficiently detailed.

29. Assessment processes are generally satisfactory. Learners' portfolios of evidence contain a satisfactory range of evidence, including records of observation and learners' statements along with witness testimonies and some evidence of work projects. Trainers observe learners performing tasks and record these observations. However, the planning of assessments is insufficiently clear, and individual learning plans contain little information about assessment target dates.
30. Learning resources are satisfactory. Trainers use laptop computers to support learners in the workplace where computing facilities are not available. Many learning materials are of an unsatisfactory quality. Materials are mostly photocopies from workbooks and are not adapted to learners' experiences or job roles. Some employer-based learning accommodation is inadequate. For example, one training session took place in a hotel bar with the hotel customers present.
31. Mercia offers employers effective training that assists the improvement of their businesses. Effective links between employers and Mercia have contributed to an increasing number of employers offering Train to Gain provision to more of their employees. Mercia works hard to adapt its training programme to cater for the changing demands of the business, for example through suitable adaptation and flexibility of training sessions. Many learners use this training to enhance their working practices, for example through contacting their customers by email.
32. Advice and guidance are satisfactory. All potential learners are interviewed by Mercia staff before starting their programme. Learner induction is satisfactory. The identification and provision of learning support is satisfactory. Learners' literacy and numeracy training needs are appropriately identified during initial assessment.

Leadership and management

33. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Communication between staff is satisfactory with regular team meetings to discuss learner progress and consider operational issues. The company has a clear focus on raising standards and management information is used adequately to monitor and improve learner performance.
34. Reinforcement of equality of opportunities policies is insufficient. Topics such as harassment and bullying are discussed during the induction process and at learner reviews. However, learners have insufficient understanding of equality of opportunity matters in the workplace. Opportunities are missed for raising awareness of cyber harassment and bullying.
35. Internal verification arrangements are satisfactory and meet the requirements of the awarding bodies. Managers respond effectively to resolve issues identified in external verifier reports. Little systematic monitoring of aspects of training takes place and the recording and moderation of teaching and learning observations is insufficient.
36. The self-assessment process and report are broadly satisfactory. Trainers have directly contributed to the self-assessment report and the views of learners and employers are reflected from their feedback. The strengths identified in the report broadly reflect the inspection findings, but Mercia did not identify the areas for improvements found during the inspection. The self-assessment report overestimated the quality of the provision.

Education and training

Satisfactory: Grade 3

Context

37. Currently 114 learners are working towards national vocational qualification (NVQ) level 2 teaching-assistant qualifications. Learners can join the programme at any point throughout the year. Learners work in primary schools and are supported by five full-time trainers. Most learners are employed on a full- or part-time basis. Some learners work voluntarily as teaching-assistants. Learners are selected by their employers to join the programme and attend regular off-the-job training sessions. Some 94.7% of the learners are female.

Strengths

- Good success rates
- Good development of employability skills

Areas for improvement

- Insufficient involvement of school mentors in planning teaching-assistant training
- Insufficient arrangements to monitor learner progress

Achievement and standards

38. Achievement and standards are satisfactory. In 2006-07, 33 learners joined the programme and of these 79% completed. Success rates of these learners are good at 95%. The retention rate of the current cohort of learners has improved. The standard of most learners' work is satisfactory. Learners contribute enthusiastically during off-the-job training sessions and are keen to increase their knowledge and to share good practice. Many learners aspire to progress to a higher level of qualification within the same occupational area.

39. Learners are developing good practical skills in their workplace. Most display an increased knowledge and understanding of their day-to-day role at work. The training has helped learners to improve their knowledge of education policies and practice. Many have improved confidence in dealing with children in the classroom. Some learners have developed improved problem-solving, organisational and time management skills. Learners value the way in which the training programme has enabled them to gain formal recognition for their role in school. One school indicates that their teaching-assistant learners demonstrate more initiative and a higher level of commitment to the role since joining the programme. Level 2 qualifications are available for learners to develop their literacy and numeracy skills.

Quality of provision

40. The quality of provision is satisfactory overall. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Learners benefit from attending well-structured sessions designed to support their qualification. In the better sessions, trainers use a range of teaching and learning strategies to engage learners.

41. Assessment is satisfactory. Trainers carry out an adequate number of observations of learners in their workplaces during the programme. Additional visits are made at the request of the learner. Completed units are promptly assessed and learners are given feedback. Learners communicate with trainers by email and telephone and receive appropriate support from them.
42. The involvement of learners' mentors in planning training is insufficient. Trainers do not meet with the mentors' regularly to discuss the ongoing requirements of the qualification, on-the-job training needs or the progress of the learners. Mentors are insufficiently involved in target-setting or planning on-the-job training. Mentors are insufficiently aware of what the learners have to do in the workplace to complete their qualification. Mentors rely too much on informal communication with learners to establish their progress.
43. Arrangements to monitor learners' progress are insufficient. Trainers work individually with learners at the end of each session to record work completed by learners and to identify their learning goals for the next session. Overall the targets identified are too vague and lack measurable detail. Where targets are set they are insufficiently reviewed at the next session to establish learner progress. Documents used to review learners' progress contain insufficient details and are inconsistently completed by trainers. Learners and mentors at schools are not provided with a copy of the review documents or the targets agreed. Trainers do not have a comprehensive record of their learners' progress at any one particular time. Discussions about learner progress take place informally between trainers on a regular basis. However, too few regular formal meetings take place that focus on learners' progress.
44. Resources are satisfactory. Most learning materials are produced by trainers and are of a satisfactory quality. A limited range of additional resources are available such as textbooks and software to support independent learning. However, laptop computers are available to learners.
45. Support for learners is satisfactory as are the information, advice and guidance provided. All learners complete an induction which introduces them to the qualification, the benefits of the programme, health and safety guidance and equality and diversity.

Leadership and management

46. Leadership and management of learning are satisfactory. Trainers have appropriate qualifications and experience and undertake regular professional development activities. Training accommodation is satisfactory or better. Communication between staff is good and productive in discussing improvements or sharing information about learners' progress.
47. Equality and diversity is promoted well with individual learners at induction. Learners are encouraged to explore equality and diversity issues during training sessions. However, this is not consistent for all learners and some learners have insufficient knowledge and understanding of equality and diversity matters within the training context.
48. The self-assessment process is broadly inclusive. The resulting report recognises some of the strengths identified during the inspection, but not the areas for improvements. The report overestimates the quality of the provision. Internal verification is satisfactory.

Annex

Annex

Learners' achievements

Success rates on **work-based learning Train to Gain programmes** managed by the provider **2004 to 2007**

Programme	End Year	Success rate	No. of learners*	Provider NVQ rate**
Train to Gain ***	06-07	overall	8	75%
		timely	8	75%
	07-08	overall	83	36%
		timely	83	36%

Note: 2007-08 data is 'part year' only and is representative of the first 3 months or greater of the LSC contract year

- * Learners who leave later than originally planned are counted in the year they actually leave. This group of learners are then added to the learners who planned to complete in a given year and did so or left earlier than planned
- ** Provider qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the 'Individual Learning Record'
- *** Includes 'Train to Gain' long course NVQ provision, but not 'skills for life'

Success rates on **work-based learning apprenticeship programmes** managed by the provider **2005 to 2007**

Programme	End Year	Success rate	No. of learners*	Provider NVQ rate**	National NVQ rate**	Provider framework rate**	National framework rate**
Advanced apprenticeships	05-06	overall	3	0%	48%	0%	34%
		timely	4	0%	31%	0%	22%
	06-07	overall	2	100%	53%	0%	44%
		timely	1	100%	34%	0%	28%
Apprenticeships	04-05	overall	10	30%	47%	20%	32%
		timely	12	17%	24%	8%	16%
	05-06	overall	33	33%	51%	36%	39%
		timely	33	30%	29%	30%	22%
	06-07	overall	55	55%	58%	49%	52%
		timely	52	40%	38%	40%	34%

Note 'At the time of the inspection - LSC data for 2006-07 had yet to be fully validated'

- * Learners who leave later than originally planned are counted in the year they actually leave. This group of learners are then added to the learners who planned to complete in a given year and did so or left earlier than planned
- ** Provider and national qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the 'Individual Learning Record'