



Education and Training
Inspectorate

ApprenticeshipsNI Provision in Northern Ireland Electricity

Report of an Inspection
in January 2012



Providing Inspection Services for
Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

CUSTOMER
SERVICE
EXCELLENCE



CONTENTS

Section	Page
PART ONE: SUMMARY	
1. CONTEXT	1
2. PROVISION	1
3. THE INSPECTION	2
4. MAIN FINDINGS	2
PART TWO: OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION	
5. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT	4
6. QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING	5
7. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS	7
PART THREE: CONCLUSION AND KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT	
8. CONCLUSION	8
9. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT	8
APPENDIX	

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

All the statistics in this report have been supplied and verified by Northern Ireland Electricity.

Performance Levels

The Education and Training Inspectorate use the following performance levels in reports:

Performance Level
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

PART ONE: SUMMARY

1. CONTEXT

1.1 Northern Ireland Electricity is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Electricity Supply Board in the Republic of Ireland. It is managed by a Managing Director and an executive committee whose members are all existing employees of the company. It is responsible for the regulated distribution and transmission of electricity throughout Northern Ireland.

1.2 Since September 2008, Northern Ireland Electricity is the only organisation in Northern Ireland which has been contracted by the Department for Employment and Learning (the Department) to deliver the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, at levels 2 and 3, in the professional and technical area of electrical power engineering.

1.3 Northern Ireland Electricity delivers all of the practical training for the ApprenticeshipsNI programme from its three training centres in Ballymena, Craigavon and Londonderry. It has entered into sub-contracting arrangements with two further education colleges to deliver the knowledge-based technical certificate and the essential skills elements of the apprenticeship framework. Since 2008, the Northern Regional College has been sub-contracted to deliver training in the professional and technical area of electrical and electronic engineering, and in the essential skill of information and communication technology (ICT). Since September 2011, the Southern Regional College has also been sub-contracted to deliver training in the professional and technical area of electrical and electronic engineering.

1.4 The apprentices are mostly recruited from across Northern Ireland. Their academic profile on entry to the ApprenticeshipsNI programme is very good. All of the current apprentices have achieved at least four General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes, including English and mathematics, at grade C or above, or equivalent. A majority of the apprentices have also achieved additional vocational and academic qualifications.

2. PROVISION

2.1 At the time of the inspection, 48 apprentices were registered on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme; another nine apprentices were also following the ApprenticeshipsNI framework but were funded privately by Northern Ireland Electricity. Of the 48 apprentices, 31 were in year one and 17 in year two. All of them were employed by Northern Ireland Electricity in a number of internal product areas that were identified as being the most appropriate to meet the company's future business needs. Of the 31 year one apprentices, 21 were following a level 3 apprenticeship, with 16 employed in overhead lines and five in jointing. Of the 17 year two apprentices, nine were following a level 3 apprenticeship and were employed in overhead lines and tree cutting. The remaining 18 year 1 and year 2 apprentices were following a level 2 apprenticeship and were employed in planning, wayleave and survey.

2.2 None of the apprentices were required to undertake training in the essential skills of literacy or numeracy. Of the 37 (69%) apprentices who were required to undertake training in the essential skill of ICT, all of them (100%) had completed the training and achieved the qualification at the level required for their apprenticeship framework.

3. THE INSPECTION

3.1 The Education and Training Inspectorate (the Inspectorate) carried out an inspection of the ApprenticeshipsNI programme in Northern Ireland Electricity in January 2012. The professional and technical area of electrical power engineering and the provision for the care, guidance and support of the apprentices were inspected. A team of four inspectors observed all of the apprentices in eleven directed training and practical workshop sessions in the two further education colleges and Northern Ireland Electricity training centres, and observed ten apprentices carrying out their duties in the workplace. Discussions were held with the construction director, technical training manager, the apprentice training co-ordinator, the stations delivery training co-ordinator, the group safety and risk officer, tutors, team managers, team leaders, apprentices, programme co-ordinators and the lecturers from the sub-contracted colleges. The inspection team also examined samples of the apprentices' work and portfolios of evidence, the online e-portfolio system, the apprentices' personal training plans, the organisation's self-evaluation report, and other relevant documentation.

3.2 The arrangements for the inspection of care, guidance and support and the safeguarding of vulnerable groups includes the opportunity for apprentices to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection, as well as meetings by the inspection team with groups of apprentices. Fifty-four questionnaires were issued to apprentices; 43 (80%) of the questionnaires were returned to the Inspectorate and two of them contained written comments. The returns show that the apprentices' experiences in Northern Ireland Electricity are very good. In particular they appreciate the development of their employability skills, the career and progression opportunities afforded to them by the company and the high levels of personal and professional support that they receive from staff. They also appreciate the opportunities to access further training and development, during and on completion of, their programme. The Inspectorate has reported the outcomes of the questionnaires and the discussions held with the apprentices to the technical training manager.

4. MAIN FINDINGS

4.1 In the areas inspected, the quality of training provided by Northern Ireland Electricity is outstanding. The organisation has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

4.2 The main strengths are the:

- outstanding leadership and management of the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, by managers at all levels, who are highly committed to excellence in apprenticeship training;
- outstanding and effective links with the sector skills council, other electrical supply companies and two of the further education colleges, which are used well to inform the qualification and training programme design;
- outstanding physical resources, specialist tools and equipment provided to support the delivery of the ApprenticeshipsNI programme;
- highly skilled tutors and workplace mentors who deliver outstanding specialist work-based training with an appropriately high emphasis on health and safety;

- very high standards of work demonstrated by all of the apprentices in directed training and in the workplace; and
- very good retention rates, outstanding achievement rates, and excellent opportunities for the apprentices to progress their careers in Northern Ireland Electricity and to access higher education provision.

Table of Performance Levels

Overall Performance Level	Outstanding
Contributory Performance Levels	
Leadership and Management	Outstanding
Quality of Provision for Learning	Very Good
Achievements and Standards	Outstanding
Area of Learning	
Electrical Power Engineering	Outstanding

PART TWO: OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION

5. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

5.1 The quality of the leadership and management in Northern Ireland Electricity is outstanding. A company-wide training committee has been established to oversee training and development and regular meetings take place between managers and staff involved in all aspects of training across the company. The interest and involvement of the directors at executive level, in the planning and development of the training programmes and workplace experiences for the apprentices and other employees, ensures effective strategic leadership. There is a clear commitment to excellence and quality improvement, which is well embedded at all levels of the company. Excellence permeates the culture and ethos of the company and is evidenced in the excellent relationships among the employees, the high quality of workmanship and pride the apprentices demonstrate in their work, and the strong culture of safe working.

5.2 Very effective channels of communication have been developed between staff in the technical training department, staff across the various internal company product areas and the apprentices, and these are used well to inform improvement planning and actions. The apprentices are all well informed about their training programme and are provided with good quality training plans and calendars, which incorporate the key performance targets they need to achieve. All of the apprentices report that they are aware of the key training and support contacts within the company, that they are well informed about their training programme, and that their views are listened to and valued by staff and management.

5.3 Recruitment procedures to the ApprenticeshipsNI programme have been very well developed by management and are matched well to the business needs of the company's product areas. These extend to the company privately financing, either fully or partially, a small number of apprentices, to maintain equality of opportunity or to facilitate the recruitment of the best candidates to meet their business needs; as a consequence, forward planning to develop and maintain the future skills base of the company is excellent. A current emphasis, appropriately, is on trying to attract more female applicants, with only three of the current apprentices being female.

5.4 Excellent links have been established between Northern Ireland Electricity, the sector skills council, Energy and Utility Skills, other electrical supply authorities across the British Isles, and a number of awarding bodies; these are used well to inform qualification development to meet the needs of the local electrical power engineering industry on the qualifications and credit framework (QCF). Very good links have also been developed with two of the further education colleges to inform curriculum design and to monitor the apprentices' attendance, progress and achievements.

5.5 Staff within Northern Ireland Electricity are very well qualified, experienced and have excellent occupational skills; they work hard to support the apprentices and they maintain and expect very high standards of work. They are provided with very good opportunities to undertake specialist professional and technical development, with expectations from management set appropriately high in order to maintain the highest standards of safety, service delivery and training.

5.6 Northern Ireland Electricity makes a significant investment in apprenticeship training. The apprentices are provided with substantial additional training which goes beyond the requirements of their apprenticeship framework, including tree cutting, first aid and health and safety qualifications. The specialist training facilities, resources and equipment provided

by Northern Ireland Electricity to support the delivery of the apprenticeship programme are outstanding. All of the apprentices are provided with high quality tools and personal protection equipment to meet the stringent safety requirements of the industry. Specialist resources include well-equipped specialist training facilities for overhead line training in Campsie (Londonderry), cable jointing in Ballymena, and electrical plant in Craigavon.

6. QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

6.1 The quality of the provision for learning in Northern Ireland Electricity is very good. The apprentices are provided with excellent training, both on-site and in the training centres, to prepare them to work competently and safely on the complex and hazardous high voltage electricity transmission and distribution network. An appropriately high emphasis is placed on health and safety at all levels, including working at heights, road safety, the use of specialist personal protection equipment, environmental hazards, methods and systems to reduce risk, and safe isolation of electrical supplies. Northern Ireland Electricity has a zero tolerance approach for accidents at work, which is evident in the rigorous systems of on-site safety observed by the inspection team, with all apprentices implementing safe systems of work to protect themselves and others from potential hazards.

6.2 Northern Ireland Electricity along with two of the further education colleges have worked well together to develop a bespoke level 3 electrical and electronic engineering programme, which is matched well to the needs of the apprentices. It is noteworthy that the provision has recently been extended to a second college in another region of Northern Ireland, which allows apprentices to train nearer to their home and also reduces the amount of travel they undertake for day-release classes. All of the apprentices do the same qualification which provides sound underpinning knowledge of electrical systems, principles and applications, and it facilitates career progression or promotion routes for them within the company.

6.3 The quality of the directed training provided in the further education colleges is mostly good. The lessons observed range from satisfactory to outstanding. In one of the colleges, the provision is very good and in the other it is mostly good. In a majority of the sessions there is effective differentiation and an appropriate mix of teaching and assessment strategies, including practical demonstrations, practical investigations by the apprentices using calculations and the application of electrical principles to solve relevant electrical or electronic problems. The apprentices have access to, and use, specialist electrical design and simulation software and make use of a range of equipment including multi-meters, oscilloscopes and electrical test equipment. While never less than satisfactory, a minority of the sessions are characterised by a slow pace of learning, insufficient or dated equipment and limited access by apprentices to information and learning technology to enhance their learning. It is clear that the lecturers from both colleges would benefit from some continuous professional development to allow them to update their skills and knowledge of current practices in the electrical power industry.

6.4 The assessment process for the work-based element of the programme is excellent. All of the apprentices are provided with individual technical files and plans for assessment. Assessments are completed with rigour to industry standards and apprentices maintain good records of assessment and training in their logbooks. They are given detailed, constructive and informative feedback by their tutors. The second year apprentices are all completing relevant project work, which are live projects developed by Northern Ireland Electricity aimed at making improvements in the product areas in which the apprentices work. A good start has been made by the tutors in Northern Ireland Electricity in the use of an e-Portfolio to record assessment evidence, but this requires further refinement to improve the quality and amount of work submitted by the apprentices, and to further develop the electronic procedures used by the tutors to monitor and track their progress.

6.5 All of the apprentices are required to hold a GCSE grade C or better in English and mathematics on entry to their apprenticeship programme and consequently do not undertake the essential skills of literacy and numeracy. All of them are required, however, to undertake an initial assessment in literacy and Northern Ireland Electricity plan to introduce an initial assessment in numeracy, to ensure that all of the apprentices can cope adequately with the demands of their programme. Where barriers to learning or progress are identified, appropriate targeted individual support in literacy and numeracy is provided to the apprentices. Apprentices who do not hold a relevant qualification in ICT are required to undertake the essential skill of ICT, and all of them have made very good progress in completing and achieving this framework qualification.

6.6 The quality of the arrangements for the care, guidance and support is very good. There is an effective range of initial and formative assessment processes which are used very well to inform the planning of the training provision. The company takes full cognisance of the training needs of each apprentice and works hard to align these with individual career aspirations and the business needs of the company. Northern Ireland Electricity has established effective links with an appropriate range of external agencies including Blackwell Associates, Clarity Staff Care Services, Health Works and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) to help support and meet each apprentice's individual needs. The very effective support arrangements are consistent across the range of training provision and are well matched to the outcomes of the rigorous initial and formative assessment processes.

6.7 The quality of the careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) is outstanding. Northern Ireland Electricity supports the apprentices very effectively in their career planning within the company. There is an excellent match between the apprentices' career choices and the bespoke, work-related learning offered by the company. The company uses speakers from a variety of internal product areas to good effect to motivate, inspire and advise apprentices on potential career pathways and progression opportunities. The apprentices receive appropriate personal career planning and advice which enables them to set meaningful targets and to make informed career choices. They are actively encouraged to set high personal expectations, to continue their professional and technical development on completion of the apprenticeship programme, and are supported to do so in line with the needs of the industry.

6.8 A comprehensive induction programme is provided for all of the apprentices, and this is supplemented and further developed through the company's monitoring and review processes, including the company's quarterly apprentice briefing processes. All of the apprentices are well informed of their training arrangements, including training support, and the expectations and outcomes from their training. The company appropriately places very high expectations on health and safety practices and apprentices are very well supported to reach and sustain the required industrial standards. The induction programme and the robust monitoring and review process are used very effectively to inform the development of the apprentices' personal training plans.

6.9 The quality of the personal training plans is very good. Northern Ireland Electricity has developed appropriate in-house documentation to supplement the apprentices' personal training plans and assist in the monitoring and review of their progress. The plans are detailed and show clearly the outcomes of initial and formative assessments which are linked effectively to well structured, individualised training plans. The monitoring and review processes of the apprentices' skills development are systematic and rigorous and inform their career pathway choices. The company has also introduced a performance improvement plan process to address barriers to learning and progression, to support the

personal training plan process. While the tracking of the apprentices' acquisition and extension of their professional and technical skills is outstanding, the tracking of the development of their transferable skills is not articulated fully and needs to be further developed within the personal training plans.

6.10 While the arrangements for safeguarding vulnerable groups comply satisfactorily with the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Order (2007), the management of Northern Ireland Electricity are currently updating their safeguarding policy in line with current legislation. There is appropriate planning in place to share formally their revised policy with all relevant groups. In addition, all company policies are available for staff and apprentices on the Human Resources intranet, and relevant policies on Safeguarding Young Persons and Vulnerable Adults, Drug and Alcohol Abuse, and Harassment are also signposted for all apprentices during induction, and in the apprenticeship programme handbook.

7. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

7.1 The achievements and standards of the apprentices in Northern Ireland Electricity are outstanding. Almost all of the apprentices demonstrate very high standards of work, occupational competence and technical knowledge. They can interpret complex instructions and information from a range of sources including circuit diagrams, plans, and written and oral instructions. They are able to make accurate observations from their working environment to identify and minimise health and safety risks to themselves and others, and to plan complex activities. The apprentices can assimilate and apply complex electrical theory and principles in both their directed training and in the workplace. The portfolios of evidence are well organised and show good evidence of the apprentices' own work, which is mostly of a very high standard.

7.2 The apprentices are all very highly motivated and enthusiastic. They speak very confidently about their work and can communicate complex instructions accurately and efficiently using appropriate terminology and technical language within their work teams, in directed training and with customers.

7.3 All of the apprentices enter the ApprenticeshipsNI programme with good levels of literacy and numeracy, which they apply well in their professional and technical work. There are also good opportunities for the apprentices to further develop their numeracy within the knowledge-based technical certificate element of their framework.

7.4 Over the past four years, the overall retention rate for the ApprenticeshipsNI programme is very good at 88%. The achievement rate is outstanding at 100%.

7.5 Over the same period, the overall achievement rate in the ICT essential skill is also outstanding at 100%.

PART THREE: CONCLUSION AND KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 In the areas inspected, the quality of training provided by Northern Ireland Electricity is outstanding. The organisation has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

9. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

9.1 Northern Ireland Electricity has a robust improvement plan which accurately identifies on-going key priorities for development. These key priorities for development match closely with the Inspectorate's findings and include:

- the further development of the quality assurance procedures to ensure a high quality and consistent training provision for the apprentices in the two further education colleges; and
- the further development and quality assurance of the e-portfolio system used by the tutors and apprentices.

APPENDIX

OVERALL SUMMARY TABLE: 2007- 2011

Programme/Strand	Numbers registered who completed 4 weeks training	Retention rate %	Achievement rate %	Number progressed to FE/other training	Number progressed to relevant employment
Level 2 Apprenticeship	10	80	-	2	- (8 are still in training)
Level 3 Apprenticeship	23	92	100	2	11 (10 are still in training)
Overall totals		88	100	4	11

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