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**Department of Education**  
**Department for Employment and Learning**  
**Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure**



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

## **Education and Training Inspectorate**

### **Report of an Extended Inspection**

#### **Action for Employment (A4e)**

**Inspected: April 2008 and February 2009**

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## **PART ONE**

### **1. CONTEXT**

1.1 A4e is a private sector employment and work-based learning organisation. It is one of the largest work-based learning providers in the United Kingdom (UK) and employs approximately 2,500 people in 120 locations across the UK, France, Germany, Poland and Israel. In the UK, A4e is accredited to provide over 200 nationally recognised qualifications to over approximately 30,000 learners, and works with approximately 10,000 employers.

1.2 In September 2007, A4e was awarded a contract by the Department for Employment and Learning (the Department) to offer the Training for Success (TfS) programme. In 2008, this programme was reviewed by the Department and restructured into two separate programmes, TfS and Apprenticeships Northern Ireland (ApprenticeshipsNI). The revised TfS programme provides training provision for learners who have not yet found full-time employment, while the ApprenticeshipsNI programme provides employees, who are in paid employment, an opportunity to work towards the achievement of an industry-approved Apprenticeship Framework. Since September 2008, A4e has been contracted to offer both the revised TfS and ApprenticeshipsNI programmes in the following professional and technical areas: active leisure, amenity horticulture, business administration, customer services, distribution and warehousing, food and drink manufacturing, hospitality and catering, play work, retail, and sport and recreation.

1.3 The Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) carried out an extended inspection of the TfS and ApprenticeshipsNI provision in A4e in April 2008, and also in February 2009. During phase 1 of the inspection, A4e had five regional offices across Northern Ireland (NI) in Ballymena, Belfast, Limavady, Londonderry and Newry, as well as training offices in Larne, and Sandy Row in Belfast. In November 2008, A4e took the decision to reduce the number of regional offices to three: Belfast, Limavady and Newry, and retain the two training offices in Larne and Sandy Row.

1.4 There are currently 27 members of staff working in the three A4e regional offices across NI. Overall contract management and programme delivery in NI is the responsibility of the Head of Operations, Operations Director and the Development Director. They are supported by three operations managers, ten vocational assessors, four tutors and three administrators. The Business Development Manager is supported by four Business Development Advisers, one in each of the Belfast and Newry offices, and two in the Limavady office.

1.5 At the time of phase 2 of the inspection in February 2009, almost half of the apprentices and learners had achieved at least four General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes at A\*-C or equivalent on entry to their programme; 20% had achieved grades D-G or equivalent and 31% had no qualifications. Fifty-four percent of the apprentices and learners had achieved at least a grade C in GCSE English or equivalent and half had achieved at least a grade C in GCSE mathematics or equivalent.

## 2. PROVISION

2.1 Between phase 1 and phase 2 of the extended inspection the overall number of apprentices and learners recruited by A4e has increased from 247 to 641, with the largest growth in the Apprenticeships NI programme. During phase 1, there were 178 registrations on the apprenticeship programmes, 155 (87%) apprentices at level 2 and 23 (13%) apprentices at level 3. In phase two of the inspection, there was 585 registrations on the apprenticeship programme, 550 (94%) at level 2 and 35 (6%) at level 3. Almost all of the apprentices registered on level 2 programmes are following programmes in business administration, customer service, distribution and warehousing, hospitality and catering, and retail. Those registered on level 3 are following programmes in business administration, hospitality and catering, and retail.

2.2 Of those registered on ApprenticeshipsNI programmes, 55% are aged between 16-24 years with the remainder aged 25 plus. The table below indicates the pattern within each professional and technical area and by level.

### ApprenticeshipsNI

<b>Professional and Technical Area</b>	<b>No. registered on Level 2</b>	<b>No. registered on level 3</b>	<b>Total</b>
Business Administration	65	18	83
Customer Services	106	0	106
Distribution	8	0	8
Hospitality and Catering	142	4	146
Retail	229	13	242
Total	550	35	585

2.3 Between phase one and two of the inspection there has been a decrease in the number of learners registered on the TfS programme from 69 to 56. The table below indicates the pattern of registrations within each strand during the two phases of the inspection.

## Training for Success

	<b>Personal Development/Skills for Your life</b>	<b>Skills for Work</b>	<b>Employability</b>	<b>Pre-apprenticeship</b>	<b>Total</b>
Phase 1 (April 2008)	10	42	1	16	69
Phase 2 (February 2009)	12	35	n/a	9	56

2.4 A4e operates a model of work-based training, in which support and assessment are provided for apprentices in the work-place by vocational assessors. The apprentices work in a variety of settings, from small to medium size enterprises, to large regional and national employers. Training for Success programmes are provided in the training offices in Larne and Sandy Row, and in the Belfast, Newry and Limavady regional offices. Essential Skills training is provided by the Workers' Education Authority. There are currently 13 essential skills classes operational; ten for the TfS learners provided in all of the TfS centres, and three for apprentices provided in the Newry and Londonderry offices.

### 3. THE INSPECTION

3.1 The inspection focused on the quality of leadership and management provided by A4e, and the training and standards achieved by the learners and apprentices on the TfS and ApprenticeshipsNI programmes. The first phase of the inspection took place when A4e had been operating in NI for eight months.

3.2 During phase 2 of the inspection a team of five inspectors from the Inspectorate observed 134 learners. This accounted for approximately 21% of the total cohort registered with A4e. The team also inspected samples of work, including vocational portfolios and learning materials supplied by A4e to supplement the work of the vocational assessors, personal training plans (PTPs), and internal and external verification reports, and other relevant documentation.

3.3 During the extended period of the inspection extensive discussions were held with senior managers from A4e, both nationally and locally. These included the: Director of Quality and Audit A4e, National Quality Training Manager within A4e Skills Division, Operations Director A4e, Development Director NI, Head of Operations NI, the three operations managers in NI, the Business Development Manager NI, vocational assessors, TfS tutors, Child Protection Officer, Regional Internal Verifier, workplace supervisors, apprentices and participants on TfS. The inspection was structured to ensure that all of the vocational assessors were inspected during the extended inspection.

3.4 The arrangements for the inspection of pastoral care and child protection include a provision for young people to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection as well as meetings with groups of learners across the contract areas. All participants under 18 (22 on ApprenticeshipsNI and 56 on TfS) were issued with questionnaires; almost all were returned to the Inspectorate and 23 contained additional written comments. Overall, the

learners appreciated the good support they receive from A4e and from the discussions, there is evidence that they are aware of what to do if they have any worries about their care and well-being. The Inspectorate has reported to the Head of Operations in NI on the main issues emerging from the questionnaires and the discussions held with learners.

#### 4. MAIN FINDINGS

4.1 In most of the areas inspected the quality of the training provided in this organisation is satisfactory; the strengths outweigh the areas for improvement in the provision. The inspection has identified areas for improvement in standards, learning and training, and management which need to be addressed if the needs of all the learners are to be met more effectively.

4.2 The main strengths are the:

- commitment and dedication of the staff;
- links to a good range of local, regional and national employers;
- high level of motivation and enthusiasm demonstrated by almost all of the learners and apprentices on the TfS and ApprenticeshipsNI programmes; and
- excellent success rates for those learners and apprentices who complete their programme.

4.3 The main areas for improvement are the:

- inadequate work placement opportunities for those on the TfS programme;
- provision of a more coherent and standardised provision for the TfS programme across all centres;
- inadequate provision for essential skills for those apprentices on the ApprenticeshipsNI programmes; and
- narrow training and learning approaches on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme.

<b>Overall grade</b>	4
Contributory grades	
Leadership and Management	4
Achievement and Standards	4
Quality of Provision for Learning	4

<b>Apprenticeships NI programme</b>	<b>Grade</b>
	4

<b>Training for Success</b>	<b>Grade</b>
	5

<b>Learner Support</b>	3
<b>Essential skills: literacy</b>	5
<b>Essential skills: numeracy</b>	5
<b>Careers education, information, advice and guidance</b>	4

## **PART TWO**

### **OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION**

#### **5. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT**

5.1 The quality of the leadership requires strengthening in key areas of the provision. There is insufficient planning and monitoring at strategic and operational level to ensure that all learners have access to coherent and well-structured training programme. On the TfS programmes there is a lack of consistency in the provision across the organisation. While there are pockets of good practice there is a lack of equity across centres, and in some centres there is insufficient rigour within the delivery that needs to be addressed at a strategic level. On the ApprenticeshipsNI programme there are large numbers of apprentices who do not have access to the full framework requirements. In addition, limited progress has been made by management in implementing the areas for improvement identified in the first phase of the inspection.

5.2 The roles and responsibilities of staff within the organisation are clearly defined. Almost all of the staff across the A4e offices are appropriately qualified and have relevant occupational experience. A small number of tutoring staff do not hold appropriate level 3 qualifications. Although interim measures have been taken by management to address this, staff should be encouraged to achieve the relevant qualifications as soon as possible. The ratio of assessors to the current and growing number of apprentices needs to be addressed urgently by management. During the week of the inspection half of the assessors had case loads of 50 plus apprentices, and three had caseloads of 60 plus apprentices. These are well above the key performance indicator of 40 apprentices per assessor, which has been set by the organisation. On the TfS programme the ratio of staff to learners also needs to be reviewed, to meet more effectively their training, and to support the tutors in dealing with learners with challenging behaviour and other barriers to learning.

5.3 The physical resources across A4e range from very good to inadequate. On TfS programmes, where learners are on site for a substantial period of their training, the quality of the physical resources in a minority of the centres need to be addressed by management to improve the well-being of both learners and staff.

5.4 Internal verification procedures are rigorous and effective, and provide the vocational tutors with constructive feedback regarding their assessment decisions. Learners' portfolios are sampled according to a well-planned schedule, and assessors are observed regularly in completing assessments. Assessors and internal verifiers meet regularly to standardise assessment judgements and identify and share good practice. In NI, A4e has been supported in its internal verification process by the Regional Quality Verifier based in Wales, however, a Regional Verifier for NI has recently been appointed to support the local assessors.

5.5 At both strategic and operational level there is a good understanding of the improvement planning process, including self-evaluation and action planning. Action for Employment has developed a Skills Quality Strategy to support its quality assurance mechanisms. Bespoke software ("Progress") has been developed and implemented by A4e that enables managers at all levels to monitor the work of the assessors, the progress of



learners and apprentices, and also internal verification records. Managers are able to monitor the achievement of key performance indicators that have been set for all roles within the organisation. Feedback from the primary stakeholders, including learners, employers and staff is gathered on a regular basis to ensure that the organisation is meeting their needs.

5.6 The management are committed to the pastoral care of all learners and apprentices and has addressed the areas for improvement identified during phase one of the inspection, including the strengthening of the procedures to inform learners and parents/carers of the organisation's pastoral care/child protection procedures. Appropriate practices and procedures are now in place for safeguarding young people and vulnerable adults.

## **6. ACHIEVEMENT AND STANDARDS**

6.1 Within the ApprenticeshipsNI programme the apprentices demonstrate good levels of motivation, enthusiasm and confidence in the workplace. Almost all are in job roles that provide them with good opportunities to develop appropriate occupational skills and competences in line with the demands and requirements of their industry. The assessors work hard to identify NVQ units that match the specific roles and responsibilities of the apprentices. The majority of employers report that the motivation of their employees and commitment to their jobs have increased as a result of their apprenticeship programme.

6.2 In all professional and technical areas, most apprentices demonstrate satisfactory standards of knowledge and understanding of their programmes. However, almost all apprentices who are required to undertake the essential skills of communication and/or application of number have insufficient information about the requirements of the qualification or the model of delivery.

6.3 Almost all of the apprentices demonstrate good oral communication skills and are able to describe clearly their roles and responsibilities within the workplace and in their training programme. Portfolios of evidence are well organised and most apprentices are making good progress towards the achievement of their NVQ. For those apprentices, however, who do not have a level 2 in English or mathematics opportunities to complete the full framework qualification are restricted due to the lack of provision for the essential skills of communication and application of number. Similarly, for those apprentices undertaking the NVQ in customer service and in distribution there is currently no provision for the key skill of information and communication technology.

6.4 Achievements in the essential skills of application of number and communication are poor across all of the apprenticeship programmes; none have been recorded since the commencement of the programme in September 2007. Over the same period, on TfS achievements in Skills for Your Life were poor in both communication/literacy and application of number/numeracy; in Skills for Work they were modest in communication/literacy and poor in application of number/numeracy; in Pre-apprenticeship they were poor in literacy/communication and modest in application of number/numeracy.

6.5 On the TfS programme the standards of the learners' oral communication skills are mostly good. Learners engage effectively with their tutors, who work hard to provide suitable challenge for those who present with behavioural issues. Attendance and time keeping patterns, however, are variable and range from poor to good. The overall standards of work produced by the learners are variable depending on the rigour of the programme

delivered. For example, where learners have the opportunity to undertake a well-planned TfS programme they are making good progress in developing their employability skills. However, where the content of the programme is less comprehensive and attendance is low, learners make slow progress in developing appropriate employability skills. All learners are making good progress in developing their personal and social skills, self confidence and self-esteem.

6.6 On the ApprenticeshipsNI programme the retention rates for the level 2 and level 3 programmes are good, and the overall retention rate is good. The success rates at level 2 and level 3 are excellent, and the overall success rate is excellent.

6.7 On the TfS programme retention rates are poor overall; there is only a small variance between each of the strands. For those learners, however, who remain and complete the programme, the success rate is excellent. The progression rate to further training or employment is modest.

## **7. QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING**

7.1 A4e has developed good relationships with a wide range of local, regional and national employers. For most employers A4e has been able to provide regular contact between the assessors, and the apprentices, and the quality of provision for learning has been satisfactory. However, where the ratio of apprentices to assessors is excessively high, or where there are staff shortages in A4e the arrangements for assessors and apprentices to meet regularly for training and assessment purposes is inadequate. This has had an adverse affect on the pace of assessment and completion of professional and technical qualifications. A4e needs to, as a matter of urgency, recruit additional assessors across all professional and technical areas to meet the needs of the current and growing number of apprentices.

7.2 All of the assessors are hard working and committed to the service they provide; relationships between the assessors and apprentices are good. Assessors are supportive of the apprentices and are mindful of the needs of the increasing number of apprentices who are returning to education and training; 45% of the apprentices currently enrolled are aged 25 plus. All of the apprentices speak highly of the assessors and their commitment to the training programme.

7.3 Professional and technical training for all of the apprentices is undertaken on a one-to-one basis within the work place. Employers report that they welcome the flexibility provided by this approach. The quality of the on-the-job training provided for the apprentices is satisfactory. The sessions are well planned by the assessors, and generally match the ability, motivation and prior learning of the apprentices. However, the range of training and learning approaches used by the assessors to enhance the up-skilling of the apprentices is too narrow. A wider range of resources should be available to assessors to enhance the training and learning experiences they can provide. The use of information and learning technologies (ILT), for example, the use of mobile technologies and a virtual learning environment (VLE) should be provided to further support the assessors. There is presently no opportunity for the apprentices to attend group sessions to share their experiences. Within the assessment process there is an over reliance on the current knowledge, skills and competences the apprentices already have, with insufficient opportunities for the apprentices to be challenged in their thinking and development of their skills.

7.4 The arrangements for monitoring, reviewing and assessing the progress and achievements of apprentices and TfS learners are good. “Progress”, a bespoke piece of software developed for A4e nationally, is effective in supporting management in this process. The employers are informed well about the requirements of the apprenticeship programmes and are well engaged in the setting of training targets. All assessors maintain detailed records of the progress of their apprentices. The assessment procedures meet the requirements of the awarding body; the apprentices are suitably prepared for assessment and the assessors provide informative and constructive feedback on the process.

7.5 On the TfS programme the relationships between the learners and their tutors are good. There is a strong focus on the learners’ personal and social development, and there is good evidence of them developing their self-confidence and self-esteem during the programme. The number of learners, however, who are currently in placement, is variable across the five centres. In Limavady, eight out of eleven learners are in work placement, while in the two Belfast centres and in Larne, only two learners out of 32 are currently in work placement. At present only 23% of the total cohort of all TfS learners in A4e are in a work placement and this is inadequate. More concerted efforts need to be made to ensure learners, at this stage in their training programme, have the opportunity to experience appropriate training in the workplace.

7.6 The quality of directed training sessions on the TfS programme range from good to inadequate but are mostly satisfactory. In the better provision a wide range of teaching approaches are used, including demonstrations, small group work and discussions, and an appropriate range of outside agencies are engaged to stimulate and motivate the young people. This, however, is not replicated across all centres; opportunities for tutors to share good practice should be implemented. There is no overall co-ordinated management of the TfS programme across the five centres, resulting in a lack of consistency of approach across the programme in terms of its weekly duration, content and overall rigour. This needs to be addressed urgently by management if it is to meet the needs of all young people registered on the programme.

7.7 All learners on the TfS programme attend essential skills sessions delivered by the Workers Education Association. The quality of the directed training is satisfactory. Initial assessment has been completed by all learners, and all are targeting essential skills qualifications at an appropriate level.

7.8 The current provision for essential skills for the ApprenticeshipsNI programme is inadequate. There are currently only three essential skills classes timetabled across all of the centres; one literacy and one numeracy class in Newry, and one numeracy class in Londonderry.

7.9 A4e has good comprehensive arrangements in place for safeguarding young people and vulnerable adults.

## **PART THREE**

### **AREA OF LEARNING REPORTS**

#### **8. APPRENTICESHIPS NORTHERN IRELAND**

**Programmes inspected:** **Business Administration**  
**Customer Service**  
**Distribution and Warehousing**  
**Hospitality and Catering**  
**Retail**

#### **MAIN FINDINGS**

8.1 In most of the areas inspected the quality of the training provided in this organisation is satisfactory; the strengths outweigh the areas for improvement in the provision. The inspection has identified areas for improvement in learning and training, and management which need to be addressed if the needs of all the learners are to be met more effectively.

The main strengths are the:

- good relationships with a wide range of local, regional and national employers;
- committed and hard-working staff;
- high level of motivation and enthusiasm demonstrated by almost all of the apprentices; and
- excellent success rates and good retention rates.

The main areas for improvement are the:

- inadequate ratio of assessors to the current and growing number of apprentices;
- inadequate provision for essential skills; and
- narrow range of training and learning used by the assessors to enhance the up-skilling of the apprentices.

## 9. TRAINING FOR SUCCESS

**Strands inspected:**           **Skills for Your life**  
  **Skills for Work**  
  **Pre-apprenticeship**

### MAIN FINDINGS

9.1 In almost all of the areas inspected, the quality of the training provided by this organisation is inadequate; the areas for improvement outweigh the strengths of the provision. The inspection has identified significant areas for improvement in standards, learning and training, and management which need to be addressed urgently if the organisation is to meet effectively the needs of all of the learners.

9.2 The main strength is the:

- commitment of the staff to the personal and social development of the learners.

9.3 The main areas for improvement are the:

- inadequate approach to the planning and delivery of the provision;
- insufficient rigour and focus on the development of employability skills; and
- poor retention and modest progression rates.

## 10. CONCLUSION

In most of the areas inspected, the quality of the education/training provided by this organisation is satisfactory, and there are comprehensive arrangements in place for safeguarding young people and vulnerable adults. However, the inspection has identified areas for improvement in learning and teaching, and leadership which need to be addressed. In TfS these include, better opportunities for work placements and a more coherent standardised provision across all centres. In ApprenticeshipsNI the provision for essential skills and the development of a wider range of teaching strategies need to be addressed.

### KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

- The implementation, as a matter of urgency, of a more appropriate essential skills provision, and a wider range of training and learning approaches on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme; and
- a standardised and unified approach to the content and model of delivery of the TfS programme, including improved opportunities for work placements for the learners across the five centres.

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