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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
Promoting Improvement*



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

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of an Inspection

TWL Steps to Work Lead Contractor East and South Belfast

Inspected: October 2009

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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%

Statistics

All performance statistics in this report have been supplied by TWL.

Grading system

The Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) has a 6-point grading scale as set out below.

Performance Level	Grade	Descriptor
Outstanding	1	Outstanding characterised by excellence
Very Good	2	Consistently good; major strengths
Good	3	Important strengths in most of the provision. Areas for improvement which organisation has the capacity to address
Satisfactory	4	Overall sound/satisfactory but with areas for improvement in important areas which need to be addressed
Inadequate	5	A few strengths; significant areas for improvement which require prompt action
Unsatisfactory	6	Poor; major shortcomings which require urgent action

PART ONE

SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In September 2008, the Department for Employment and Learning (the Department) introduced its new employment programme, Steps to Work which subsumed the main New Deal programmes. The primary purpose of the Steps to Work programme is to help participants who are unemployed or economically inactive to find and sustain employment. The programme has been devised to ensure a more flexible approach to provision which can be targeted at the individuals' personal barriers to employment. Participation in Steps to Work is a mandatory requirement for all Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) claimants aged 18 to 24 years who have been claiming JSA for six months or more, and those aged 25 and over who have been claiming JSA for 18 months or more. Steps to Work is also available on a voluntary basis to participants who are unemployed or economically inactive and who want to start or return to work.

1.2 Steps to Work is delivered in a '3 step process'.

Step One: Participants receive ongoing one-to-one support and guidance from an adviser from the Jobs and Benefits office with the primary aim of helping the participants find work as soon as possible. Available provision is focused on interventions of short duration such as Short Accredited Courses or Core Gateway.

Step Two: This is targeted at participants who require additional assistance to bring them closer to the labour market and help them find and sustain employment. The participant is offered and provided with a wider range of longer-term support; the provision will normally last for up to 13 weeks but can be longer.

Step Three: This is targeted at participants who have completed Step Two but have not found employment. The participant is provided with follow-up support and advice, for a period of up to six weeks. They may also access some provision such as Short Accredited Courses or elements of Core Gateway, if needed.

2. CONTEXT

2.1 TWL is contracted by the Department as Lead Contractor for the delivery of Steps to Work provision in the East and South Belfast region of Northern Ireland. Participants are referred to the Lead Contractor through the Holywood Road, Knockbreda and Shaftesbury Square Jobs and Benefits offices.

2.2 TWL training is a private company, established in its current form in 2007. As a result of restructuring in April 2009, TWL training was repositioned as a sub-division of the Intraining Group, which is a division of the Newcastle College Group. Overall responsibility for the delivery of the Steps to Work contract sits with the Intraining Group senior management team, based in England. Locally, the Steps to Work contract is managed by a senior operations manager who is responsible for partners and relationships, contract delivery, performance, liaison on a local level with the Department and the Jobs and Benefits offices, and the line management of the two district managers within Northern Ireland

(Antrim and Belfast). TWL employs ten staff in the Belfast contract area; a district manager, four learner-facing skills advisors, three employer-facing skills advisors and two administrators. A further five team members are deployed to support services such as health and safety, contract management, quality assurance, information technology and estates. At the time of the inspection, the Belfast district manager post was vacant.

2.3 TWL operates the Steps to Work contract from three centres located in Belfast; two are used for the delivery of Core Gateway, Jobsearch for Returners and Back to Work provision. The other is the TWL head office in Northern Ireland, which also provides Jobsearch facilities for participants.

2.4 TWL has nine sub-contracted partners to support its delivery of the Steps to Work contract in Belfast, of which Paragon Training and Transition Training offer a complete service to customers including Core Gateway and a range of Step One and Two strands. The remaining seven sub-contractors are responsible for an element of the provision, for example, qualification delivery.

2.5 Across the provision, 68% of the participants on Step One and 42% of those on Step Two had no or few qualifications on entry to their provision. Around 11% of participants on Step One and 13% on Step Two had four or more General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) passes at grade C or above. On the Step Two provision, 19% of the participants had level 3 or higher qualifications on entry to their programme.

2.6 The September 2009 data supplied by the Department indicates that there were 5,095 Jobseekers Allowance claimants in the South and East Belfast region, 670 of whom were eligible for mandatory participation on Steps to Work. The number of mandatory participants in this region has increased significantly in recent months; 445 (January), 500 (March), 580 (July) and 670 in September 2009.

2.7 Statistics provided by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) for September 2009 indicate that the claimant count rate in Belfast District Council area has increased by 2.4%, to 6.9% over the last year. This is above the claimant count rate in Northern Ireland as a whole which increased by 2.2%, rising to 4.9%. While redundancies continue to increase in the Belfast District Council area, up 60% to 4064 over the last year, this is lower than the overall Northern Ireland rate of increase in redundancies, at 80%.

3. PROVISION

3.1 At the time of the inspection, there were 168 participants on the Steps to Work provision across the East and South Belfast region. Forty-eight of them were registered on Step One; 28 on Core Gateway, eight on Self-Employment Basic Awareness, seven on Short Accredited Courses, four on Go For It (the business start programme) and one on the Music Industry strand. The remaining 120 participants were registered on Step Two; 47 on Back to Work, 39 on National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) lasting 52 weeks, 13 on Essential Skills Training, 12 on Vocationally Related Qualifications lasting 26 weeks and nine on Self-Employment Test Trading. On Step One, 80% of the participants were male and on Step Two, 75% were male. Over the last year, data provided by TWL indicates that around 30% of the starts on Steps to Work provision are voluntary. The same statistics show that most participants on the self-employment strands are also voluntary.

3.2 TWL, as the Lead Contractor, was working directly with 38 registered participants. Eight of the main sub-contractors were actively working with participants; Paragon Training (81), Transition Training (16), Mentor Training (7), East Belfast Enterprise (7), Community Service Volunteers Media Northern Ireland (6), Belfast Metropolitan College (3), Castlereagh

Enterprises Limited (5), and Armstrong Learning Limited Northern Ireland (2). A number of specialist sub-contractors were working with the remaining participants; Belfast Skills Development Training (1), Full Circle Life Coaching (1), and Northern Ireland First Aid Services (1).

3.3 Almost all of the participants in Step Two activities were receiving some form of employability preparation, such as Jobsearch, curriculum vitae (CV) building, and interview skills, alongside their main strand of Back to Work placements, essential skills training and self-employment opportunities. In order to raise occupational skills, 52 participants were engaged in NVQs in a range of professional and technical areas, including computing and information technology, business and administration, childcare, retail, health and social care, engineering and hospitality and catering.

4. THE INSPECTION

4.1 This report is based on an inspection of TWL and a sample of the work of five sub-contractors. The inspection took place over two phases; phase one took place in March 2009 and interim findings were left with TWL at that time. The second phase of the inspection took place over three days in October 2009 and involved a team of five inspectors.

4.2 During the inspection, the inspectors:

- visited participants on work experience with 17 employers;
- observed 17 training sessions in centres operated by TWL and its sub-contractors;
- held discussions with 89 participants, individually and in small groups;
- held discussions with the members of TWL's senior management team and senior staff from the main sub-contractors;
- held discussions with key training and support staff;
- examined a wide range of documentation including samples of participants' written work and their Personal Training Plans (PTPs);
- held discussions with 24 employers; and
- held discussions with managers in the Jobs and Benefits offices.

4.3 The arrangements for the inspection of personal support and the protection of vulnerable adults included the opportunity for the participants to complete a confidential questionnaire, seeking their views on the quality of the provision. In addition, discussions were held with groups of the participants during the inspection. Fifty questionnaires were issued to the participants; 37 (74%) were returned to the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) of which nine contained additional written comments.

5. MAIN FINDINGS

Overall performance level (grade)	Satisfactory (4)
Contributory grades:	
Leadership and management	Satisfactory (4)
Employment outcomes and achievement	Satisfactory (4)
Quality of training and services	Good (3)

5.1 In most of the areas inspected the quality of training and services provided by TWL is satisfactory; the strengths outweigh areas for improvement in the provision. The inspection has identified areas for improvement in leadership and management which need to be addressed if the needs of all the learners are to be met more effectively. The Inspectorate will monitor and report on the organisation's progress in addressing the areas for improvement.

5.2 The main strengths are the:

- good support and commitment from the Intraining head office senior management team, including the corporate support for quality improvement;
- high levels of investment by the Lead Contractor in staffing, physical and information and communication technology (ICT) resources to support participants across the contract area;
- good or better quality of the training provided by the Lead and sub-contractors which is well matched to the individual needs of most participants;
- good quality of most work experience placements that are well matched to the career aspirations of most of the participants; and
- good emphasis on the development of the participants' work readiness skills, including essential skills.

5.3 The main areas for improvement are the:

- inadequate local management by the Lead Contractor which does not promote harmonious or effective relationships;
- ineffective procedures for the management of participant referrals; and
- strengthening of the quality assurance processes to ensure that weaknesses in provision are identified and addressed more effectively.

PART TWO

OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION

6. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

6.1 The leadership and management of the Steps to Work delivery by TWL is satisfactory. The corporate support for the delivery of the Steps to Work contract from the Intraining head office is good and this is evidenced through the commitment of significant resources to improve the quality of the provision. A number of improvements have been implemented by the new senior management team following the corporate restructuring of the Newcastle College Group in April 2009 including job tracking, and a new management information system (MIS), both of which have helped improve performance. The quality of the local operational management of the contract, however, is inadequate resulting in poor relationships and ineffective communication, particularly with the smaller sub-contractors and the staff from the Jobs and Benefits offices. The quality of the TWL local management support for most of the sub-contractors is poor and there are significant weaknesses in administrative processes, including inaccuracies in participant records, incomplete documentation, slow payments to sub-contractors and delays in getting participants started on Steps to Work provision. At the time of the inspection, work experience placements were difficult to find due to the adverse economic conditions, however, it is unsatisfactory that there were 156 outstanding referrals waiting four weeks or more. Of these, 22 were from the Holywood Road Jobs and Benefit office, 73 from Knockbreda and 61 from Shaftesbury Square. It is imperative that TWL take immediate action to improve the quality of the local management of the Steps to Work provision.

6.2 The management by the sub-contractors of their elements of the Steps to Work provision is good. Feedback from the employers highlights the positive and effective working relationships they have with most sub-contractors. Most of the participants' responses in interviews, and through the Inspectorate questionnaires, indicate that the sub-contractors' customer services are mainly efficient and effective.

6.3 The Lead Contactor's quality assurance processes are not sufficiently robust at a local level and do not adequately involve all of the sub-contractors, participants and other partners. The analysis of the quality indicators and performance data gathered during the self-evaluation process lacks rigour and does not accurately identify all of the main areas for improvement. There is an over-reliance on head office staff to lead quality improvement, which is based largely on the data provided by the local management team. The Lead Contractor's local capacity to improve quality is a major weakness and needs to be addressed urgently.

6.4 TWL have made a significant investment in physical resources across the contract area. Three local offices have been established by the Lead Contractor, close to each of the Jobs and Benefits offices within the contract area; these are well-resourced, offer a good climate for learning and provide the participants with very good access to appropriate ICT and on-line resources. All of these resources contribute well to the removal of barriers to employment

6.5 The Lead Contractor and sub-contractors have good staffing levels across the contract area. Most of the staff are appropriately qualified and are supported well in their continuous professional development through a range of internal and external training and qualifications. A particular strength of the provision is that both Lead and sub-contractor staff are encouraged to visit Intraining Group's provision in other regions of the United Kingdom to enable them to observe and identify good practice, which is used locally to improve customer services.

6.6 The skills advisory staff from the Lead Contractor and most sub-contractors have established effective links and partnerships with local employers in order to source appropriate work experience placements, which may lead to sustained employment. Most of the skills advisors are supportive of the participants and work hard to find suitable placements which are well matched to their individual needs. The impact of the economic downturn, however, makes finding new placements difficult and there is an over-reliance on the voluntary sector and other placements where there is little chance of participants moving into sustained employment. The Lead Contractor needs to develop more innovative partnerships with employers to increase the number of work experience placements which are more likely to lead to sustained employment.

7. EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

7.1 Over the past year, the overall progression rate from Step Two provision into sustained employment is 18%, which is below the Department's target of 25%. The rate of progression into employment was 15% for the first cohort of participants who commenced the provision in October 2008. The rate of progression for the current cohort of participants has improved to 23%, which is just below the Departmental target. Further action is required by TWL to increase the number of participants moving into sustained employment.

Step Two leavers into employment	TABLE 1 - LEAD CONTRACTOR STATISTICS (EAST & SOUTH BELFAST)					
	(2008-2009) 01/10/08 – 31/03/09		(2009-2010) 01/04/09 – 30/09/09		First year of contract 01/10/08 – 30/09/09	
	Number of leavers	leavers into sustained employment for 13 weeks or more	Number of leavers	leavers into sustained employment for 13 weeks or more	Number of leavers	leavers into sustained employment for 13 weeks or more
Back to Work	49	4 (8%)	32	8 (25%)	81	12 (15%)
NVQ 52 weeks	11	4 (36%)	6	0 (0%)	17	4 (24%)
Vocationally Related Qualifications	10	2 (20%)	2	0 (0%)	12	2 (17%)
Essential Skills Training	9	0 (0%)	4	0 (0%)	13	0 (0%)
Self-Employment Test Trading	6	3 (50%)	3	3 (100%)	9	6 (67%)
Total	85	13 (15%)	47	11 (23%)	132	24 (18%)

The data in the table was provided by the Lead Contractor, TWL.

7.2 Good standards of occupational skills were demonstrated by most of the participants in the workplace and this prepares them well for progression to employment. Two of the participants on the Back to Work strand, for example, have made successful applications for job vacancies with their current work experience placement providers and are due soon to move into full-time employment.

7.3 At the time of the inspection, 47 participants were undertaking NVQs and a further 67 of them were undertaking vocationally related qualifications in a number of professional and technical areas. Almost all of these participants are progressing well towards the achievement of their qualification. The qualifications strands are relevant to the participants'

needs and aspirations and provide them with good work readiness skills which are recognised by employers. A small number of participants on the qualifications strands, for example, have demonstrated good standards of work on work experience placements and their workplace providers have indicated that they will be offered full-time employment when vacancies arise. The statistics provided by TWL indicate that progression to employment rates for participants successfully completing NVQs was 24% over the last year, which is above the rate for those on other types of Step Two provision, at 18%.

8. QUALITY OF TRAINING AND SERVICES

8.1 The responses from the Inspectorate's confidential questionnaire and the comments from the participants showed that most of those who responded were content with the quality of the provision provided by TWL and its sub-contractors. In particular, they appreciated the quality of the work placements and directed training, and the high levels of support provided by almost all of the staff.

8.2 The quality of most work experience placements is good and the participants are provided with good opportunities to develop suitable occupational, personal and social skills that improve their employability opportunities. Most employers are committed to providing high quality provision and they support the participants well. Most of the tutors, across the sub-contractors, maintain effective working links with employers and they are well informed of the progress and achievement of the participants, and of their role in the process. A significant minority of the participants are placed in the community and voluntary sectors, while this can be appropriate for some, there is little chance of gaining sustained employment.

8.3 The planning and overall quality of most Core Gateway provision is good, with an appropriate focus on the acquisition of employability skills. The training sessions are run regularly across the contract area, with considerable flexibility shown by TWL in meeting demand, above and beyond the minimum requirements. The induction process is thorough and the participants have access to good quality support materials. The quality of the directed training observed in Core Gateway is good or better, with appropriate use made of interactive teaching strategies which engage and motivate most participants effectively. Most tutors establish effective relationships with almost all of the participants and provide good levels of support. The learning environment provided by TWL is very good and includes high quality ICT facilities and the provision of refreshments and lunch for all participants. Although guest speakers are used to support the Core Gateway provision, these sessions are not sufficiently well-planned to ensure that the focus and content of the presentations match the individual needs of all of the participants. In addition, few opportunities are provided by the Lead Contractor for the sub-contractors to share good practice across and between the Core Gateway providers, in order to raise standards and promote improvement.

8.4 The quality of the Jobsearch provision is good or better, with some creative and interesting approaches used to help participants prepare, plan and progress towards employment. Most participants have good access to appropriate resources including computers and the Internet, and they are given good support to search and apply for jobs on-line. One of the main sub-contractors has introduced an employability and personal development award into the Jobsearch provision to add structure to the process and to recognise participant achievement. However, the Jobsearch provision for a small number of the participants on Step Two with one of the sub-contractors is poor and this needs to be addressed by TWL.

8.5 TWL have an effective overall policy in place for information, advice and guidance. This focuses mainly on appropriate signposting to other agencies, for example, the Educational Guidance Service for Adults. TWL also provide all participants with very good information leaflets, including simple fact sheets on travel and financial matters.

8.6 Most participants report that the range and quality of support provided by the Department's Advisors, the Lead and sub-contractor skills advisors, and the tutors who provide directed training, is good. Working relationships between most tutors and the participants are good with effective individualised support and encouragement, which enables them to make good progress in their training and learning. There is some confusion across the contract area about the use of Enhanced Support for those participants who require additional help. This has resulted in inconsistencies in applications and approvals, and is an area which requires further clarification by the Lead Contractor.

8.7 The quality of the directed training sessions observed is good or better. Most training sessions are well-planned with an appropriate range of strategies used by tutors to help motivate participants. There is a good match between the training activities undertaken and the participants' workplace experiences. The breadth and depth of underpinning knowledge is good and supports effectively the participants' practical activities. A significant minority of the participants following the Back to Work strand require further training in personal effectiveness to help them overcome major barriers and prepare them more effectively for employment.

8.8 A good start has been made to the delivery of the Essential Skills Training strand by the two sub-contractors visited. The provision has been effective in securing the re-engagement of reluctant learners. There is good use of contextualised learning in numeracy in the area of engineering by one of the sub-contractors. There is a need, however, to improve the links between the initial assessment process and the planning for training, learning and progression. Although TWL supply good on-line learning resources to support the delivery of essential skills, these are not currently being used by the sub-contractors due to a lack of awareness among the tutors of how to access the resources.

8.9 The quality of the PTPs is inadequate. The PTPs need to be more individually tailored to meet the personal, social and work-related development needs of the participants. They need to contain clearly defined targets and outcomes which will prepare them more effectively for progression to employment. Too little cognisance is taken of the outcomes of any initial assessments or the views of employers, and there is insufficient evidence of the use of the plan in monitoring and reviewing the participants' progress. It is inappropriate that only a minority of the participants interviewed are aware of their PTPs or the milestones contained within them.

PART THREE

KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

In order to raise the quality of its provision, TWL should:

- improve the quality of the local management of the Steps to Work provision;
- implement effective procedures for the management of participant referrals; and
- strengthen the local quality assurance processes.

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