

Report of a Pilot Inspection  
DFPF Limited trading as People 1<sup>st</sup>

March 2024



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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

DFPF Limited trading as People 1<sup>st</sup> (People 1<sup>st</sup>) is a private training organisation which delivers externally funded training and employability programmes in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, alongside private corporate training. It was established in 1992 and along with a head office in Belfast, has seven training premises across Northern Ireland\* and three in the Republic of Ireland, in County Donegal\*. People 1<sup>st</sup> supports the principles of low or zero carbon best practice and is actively working to reduce its carbon footprint across its training premises. It is also seeking to achieve accreditation as an employer working to improve Belfast as a more sustainable and healthier city\*.

*Throughout the report, where text is accompanied by an asterisk, this indicates that additional information can be found in Appendix 2: Notes.*

The organisation is contracted by the Department for the Economy (DfE) to deliver the Skills for Life and Work programme (the skills programme) and the ApprenticeshipsNI 2021 programme (the apprenticeships programme); these are delivered from its seven training premises across Northern Ireland.

The senior management team comprises of three directors, two quality assurance/contract managers and three regional managers. They are supported by a central services team of 18 staff with responsibility for: the general administration of the two programmes; internal verification and moderation; finance; and, information and communications technology (ICT) services. Sixty tutors deliver the two programmes across a range of professional and technical (P&T) areas, along with provision for the essential skills. Four of the tutors are currently completing the Certificate in Teaching qualification. The tutors are supported by three vocational technicians, and a sales and mentor team comprising 13 support officers and mentors\*, a counsellor, five employer engagement staff, and a marketing consultant.

At the time of the pilot inspection in March 2024, 271 trainees were registered on the skills programme; 204 at level 1 and 67 at level 2. These were across the P&T areas of administration (6), beauty (16), bricklaying (17), children's care, learning and development (CCLD; 39), electrotechnical (18), hairdressing (47), information technology (IT) professional (37), plumbing (9), retail (30), wood occupations (47), and the remainder in catering and hospitality. The majority of the trainees (171, 63%) have a declared disability or require learning support. Most of them need to undertake essential skills qualifications in ICT (209, 77%), literacy (209, 77%), and numeracy (236, 87%). The majority (171, 63%) have no prior level 1 or level 2 qualifications on entry to the skills programme. Of the 271 trainees, 171 (63%) identify as males, 95 (35%) as females and the remainder as non-binary.

Three hundred and forty-six apprentices were registered on the apprenticeships programme; a significant minority of them (118, 34%) were registered at level 2, with the remainder (228, 66%) at level 3. They were registered across a range of P&T areas: catering and hospitality (62), CCLD (122), electro-technical (60), hairdressing (16), health and social care (36), play work (6), plumbing (19), and wood occupations

(11), with the remainder (14) registered across bricklaying, customer service, IT user, retail, roofing, and warehousing. No apprentices were registered in the P&T areas of administration, beauty, and IT professional. Very few of the apprentices have declared a disability or learning support need. The majority of them (193, 56%) need to complete the essential skill qualification in ICT, while a minority need to undertake essential skills qualifications in literacy (45, 13%) and numeracy (67, 19%). A significant minority of the apprentices (103, 30%) have no prior level 1 or level 2 qualifications. Of the 346 apprentices, 132 (38%) identify as male and 214 (62%) as female.

A small number of the trainees (25, 9%) and the apprentices (9, 3%) do not have English as their first language and require language support. An ESOL\* tutor is employed to support learners across a number of the organisation's training and employment programmes, including the skills programme and the apprenticeships programme when required.

The delivery of the provision for electro-technical and plumbing is sub-contracted to an external provider\*.

*All data used for the inspection and presented in this report has been supplied and verified by People 1<sup>st</sup> at the time of the pilot inspection.*

## **B. VIEWS OF APPRENTICES, TRAINEES, PARENTS AND STAFF**

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to trainees, apprentices, and staff in advance of the pilot inspection.

Overall, just over one-half of the learners\* (314, 51%) responded, with nearly one-fifth providing written comments (61, 19%); three-quarters of the trainees (203, 75%) and 32% of the apprentices (111) responded. Almost all of the learners stated that: their work is assessed regularly, and they are given feedback on how to improve; they are informed regularly of progress across all elements of their programme; they have good access to resources; and they feel safe and secure in the organisation and know who to go to if they have a problem. Almost all of the written comments were positive and highlighted in particular the support they receive from their student support officers/mentors and their tutors.

Inspectors also met and spoke with a sample of the learners during the inspection, who reported that they enjoy the variety of approaches used to support their learning, such as practical activities, extended reading, and group work. They appreciate the informal and flexible way that training is delivered to meet their development needs.

A small number of the learners' parents spoke with an inspector about: the effective channels of communication established with the student support officers/mentors; the reasonable adjustments put in place for their children; and how the expectations of their children are managed well. They spoke about how the organisation has provided 'a lifeline and a breathing space', in order to support their children to re-engage in learning and training and to progress and succeed.

Almost all of the of the staff (87; 97%) from across the organisation completed the online confidential questionnaire. Overall, they are happy with their experiences in the organisation. They have good access to the internet and ICT equipment, and they are given regular feedback on how to improve their work while in the organisation. Most reported that they are well supported to deliver training, that good channels of communication exist, and they have availed of relevant professional learning opportunities. Thirty-one of these staff made additional written comments which were all positive.

## **C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION**

During the pilot inspection and informed by People 1<sup>st</sup>'s quality improvement planning and underpinning self-evaluation processes, the ETI inspectors worked alongside the organisation to consider how well it:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

The skills programme and the apprenticeships programme, across the P&T areas of catering and hospitality, CCLD, construction\*, the provision for essential skills and the arrangements for child and adult protection were evaluated.

## **2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS**

- Effective strategic planning by the organisation, underpinned by monitoring and review processes, has supported the development and delivery of a relevant curriculum aligned to the organisation's vision of '*Together, let's realise your ambition*'. The organisation demonstrates well its company values through an inclusive culture and ethos for learning.
- The planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning is effective. Tutors have high aspirations for the learners; an appropriate range of tailored training delivery models are used to meet their individual learning and progression needs.
- Effective processes are in place to track and monitor the progress the learners are making in their learning. These processes are used well to identify those at risk of leaving early and to inform additional support which enables them, where possible, to continue in their training and work to achieve their targeted outcomes. The variable recruitment levels of the learners has appropriately been identified as a key area for improvement by the organisation, together with retention and progression rates.

- From their individual starting points, most of the learners are progressing well; they are developing good or better standards of occupational skills. Notably, in the essential skills, there are opportunities for them to achieve at a level higher than that required by their training framework.
- The health and wellbeing of the learners, including keeping them safe, is a key focus of the organisation. The impact of the wraparound support provided by the student support officers/mentors is highly effective in meeting their needs, supporting well their holistic development.
- There are well-developed links and partnerships with an extensive range of employers, support agencies, community-based organisations, and other key stakeholders. These are used effectively in the delivery of the programmes and to support the learners to progress to employment or undertake work placements. It is important that those trainees who are work ready but not yet in a work placement are placed as soon as possible.
- The learners would benefit from further information on potential career and vocational progression pathways. Investment has recently been made in a virtual careers resource to support further access to careers education, information, advice, and guidance.
- The professional learning of staff is a key focus of the organisation; staff at all levels report that they are provided with good opportunities to undertake relevant continuous professional development.
- The organisation continues to invest significantly in learning resources and training facilities to support the learners and the staff; those observed during the inspection, both in the organisation and the workplaces visited, were of a good or better quality.
- The organisation celebrates the success of the learners, particularly through its recently revamped website and social media platforms.
- The provision for the skills programme and the apprenticeships programme is effective, as is the provision for the essential skills and the P&T areas sampled: catering and hospitality, CCLD, and construction.
- At the time of the pilot inspection, the evidence provided by the organisation demonstrates that the arrangements for child and adult protection align with current guidance.

#### Areas for further action:

- Continue to implement impactful strategies to improve recruitment levels, and retention and progression rates across the P&T areas delivered.
- Increase the number of trainees undertaking a work placement and provide further information on the potential careers and vocational progression pathways available to the learners.

### **3. MAIN REPORT**

#### **A. SETTING THE VISION**

As part of its ongoing strategic planning and review processes, and aligned to its wider operating context\*, the organisation has recently updated its vision to reflect better a learner centric ethos of supporting all learners to progress and achieve. The revised vision of “*Together, let’s realise your ambition*” is underpinned by the organisation’s long-standing values of commitment, understanding, loyalty, team, unique, respect, and excellence (CULTURE). Staff articulate clearly and uphold these core values and model positive working behaviours for the learners; there is an inclusive culture and ethos for learning.

A well embedded cycle of self-evaluation and quality improvement planning is in place. This includes an annual strategy day when the senior management team meet to: review achievement against the previous year’s targets and plan strategically for the year ahead; and monitor, evaluate and review the effectiveness and impact of its work, including the quality of learning, teaching, and training. The self-evaluation report for 2023/24 provides a detailed reflection of the quality of the provision across the training premises. The associated quality improvement plan is reviewed and updated regularly to include the progress made in addressing areas for improvement.

To strengthen the monitoring and review process, the tutors across the P&T areas need to evaluate effectively the available quantitative and qualitative data; the areas for improvement and the associated actions also need to be more clearly identified. There are elements of highly effective practice in the two programmes which should be captured more clearly in the self-evaluation report. For example, the strong focus on actions taken to ensure the health, wellbeing and safety of the learners and the staff.

A recent strategic review highlighted the need for a greater focus on the quality of the skills programme across the organisation’s training premises, including revised timetabling arrangements for the trainees, and the inclusion of units such as charity, citizenship, and emotional health within the employability programme. Additionally, the apprenticeship team, including the staff responsible for apprentice recruitment and monitoring of performance, has been brought under the responsibility of one line manager; a central services team has also been created to support the development of more centralised and quality controlled administrative processes.

The inspection team’s evaluation of the provision, along with responses to the ETI questionnaires, the inspectors’ discussions with trainees, apprentices, parents, staff, and employers, affirm the commitment of People 1<sup>st</sup> to realising its vision.

#### **B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION**

The curriculum for the learners is relevant and aligned well to the organisation’s vision for them to achieve and succeed. Staff at all levels are well-informed about the targets and key performance indicators to be achieved and meet regularly to plan and review progress. There is a shared commitment to support the learners to

overcome their barriers to learning and progression and redress any previous negative experiences of education. The two programmes are delivered flexibly, to meet the varied learning and progression needs and support well the holistic development of the learners.

The skills programme matches well the trainees' specific learning and development needs and starting points. The personal and social development and employability curriculum is sufficiently broad to support the trainees to develop skills and knowledge around a range of personal and social issues. On the apprenticeships programme, across the P&T areas sampled, the units delivered are matched well to the needs of the employers, and the apprentices' job roles. A well-planned programme of additional training, including paediatric first aid and allergens, dermatitis, the construction skills register, and mental health training further supports the development of the learners' work ready skills.

The planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning is effective. Tutors have high aspirations for the learners and respectful working relationships have been fostered. Across the P&T areas, the learning, teaching and training observed in both the face-to-face and online theory and practical sessions was well-planned and structured, as was the provision for personal and social development and employability. The tutors know the learners well and use a good range of strategies and approaches, including technology enhanced learning, to engage them. Trainees participate competently in purposeful technology enhanced learning activities such as interactive quizzes using digital devices and appropriate software resources. The effective management of the online provision in CCLD for the apprentices, and the quality of the resources provided, should be shared more widely across the organisation.

In the provision for the essential skills, there are examples of the tutors working creatively and collegially with the P&T tutors to build the confidence and self-belief of the learners. An engaging, relevant curriculum is delivered in a number of the training premises through a project-based approach for the learners. The approach is motivating and provides them with very good opportunities to explore a range of contemporary issues such as food poverty, recycling, and sustainability, whilst developing well their transversal skills\* and social responsibility, alongside their essential skills. This approach needs to be disseminated across all of the training premises. The planning for the lessons, however, is too focused on completion of tasks, rather than on the intended impact on the learning and needs to be reviewed.

Health, wellbeing and keeping safe is a key focus of the organisation. Cybersecurity training is embedded in ICT classes and in personal and social development and employability, there is a focus on keeping safe when using social media. The impact of the wraparound support provided by the student support officers/mentors is highly effective in meeting the needs of the learners. It includes a counselling service\* available across the organisation to all learners and if required, to staff; the service is delivered by a fully qualified and accredited counsellor employed by the organisation. Dedicated counselling rooms have been established in two of its



seven Northern Ireland training premises\*, with a view to establishing these rooms in the others going forward. A detailed review by the organisation has identified the positive impact of the counselling service for the learners who have engaged with it, particularly the trainees. Further funding is being sought to undertake research, in collaboration with a local university, looking at the complex mental health issues with which trainees are presenting.

Investment in learning resources and training facilities is significant; those observed during the inspection, both in the organisation and the workplaces visited, were of a good or better quality. This includes in areas where there are low enrolment numbers, such as the catering facilities at the People 1<sup>st</sup> Lurgan premises, in order to try and sustain and grow the provision. Laptops are available for use by the learners and can be taken home if required. Investment has also recently been made in a virtual careers booth which will be accessible to learners across the organisation, to support further the development of careers education, information, advice, and guidance. There is a need to embed further information on potential careers and vocational progression pathways available to the learners.

### **C. BUILDING EQUITY**

Management and staff highlighted the varied range of personal and social issues affecting the trainees across the seven training premises, as well as the different social challenges in each location. The trainees present with multiple barriers and challenges including having been school refusers, having engagement with juvenile justice, experiencing mental health and/or additional challenges, such as feeling increasingly isolated, having very low confidence, or needing to develop further their social skills. Appropriate adjustments are made to meet their needs and support them to overcome these barriers and challenges. The organisation also maintains good contact with the trainees' parents/guardians. A translation application (App) is used to improve communication with the learners who do not have English as their first language.

Trainees were very positive about their learning experiences in People 1<sup>st</sup>. They appreciated being treated as young adults and having their opinions listened to. As a consequence, they accepted that the expectations set for them are fair. Due to the barriers and challenges they experience, many of the trainees are not yet work ready. It is important, however, that those trainees who are, are supported to undertake a work placement as soon as possible. At the time of the inspection, a significant minority of trainees (117, 43%) were undertaking placements.

A number of the organisation's social projects should be shared more widely as they demonstrate effective practice in developing the trainees' wider skills and dispositions. These include a sustainability project in Portadown where the trainees adopted a street which they cleaned up and decorated with art, and carried out a clean-up of the nearby river Bann. The trainees in Portadown also supported a local historical society to carry out an archaeological dig and they were asked to represent People 1<sup>st</sup> at a fundraiser event after working closely with a breast cancer charity\*. These opportunities are promoting well the development of environmental awareness, empathy for others, and responsible citizenship, within the trainees.

The learners are well supported by the support officers/mentors and have access to the full range of support services available across the organisation. When required, the student support officers/mentors advocate on behalf of the learners, for example regarding reasonable adjustments to hours due to carer responsibilities, or engagement with social workers and the probation service in order to maximise their chances of success and progression.

#### **D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS**

Effective processes are in place to track and monitor the progress the learners are making, and to identify those at risk of leaving early and support them in sustaining their training. These include regular team meetings, case conferences, and a review of the progress being made by the learners across all elements of their programmes. The learners spoken to by inspectors in focus groups or in the workplace reported that they are aware of what they have completed and achieved to date. Electronic portfolios (e-portfolios) are in place in catering and hospitality and CCLD; in construction the use of an e-portfolio is in the early stages of development.

Across the P&T areas inspected and in the essential skills, most of the learners demonstrate good or better standards of written work. Their digital skills are developed well through word processing assignments, uploading of work to their tutors, email communications, and access to resources through google classroom, and where applicable through the use of e-portfolios. From their individual starting points, most of the learners are progressing well on their training programmes. They are developing good or better standards of occupational skills, and are developing well their confidence, self-management, independent and team working skills.

The recruitment of learners has been identified as a challenge by the organisation and employers. Through its self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes, the organisation has also appropriately identified the retention and progression of trainees, and the retention of apprentices as an issue. The organisation effectively records the reasons why any learners leave their programmes early. For example, there are documented examples of apprentices moving to other jobs such as retail and call centres for better pay and better and more flexible working conditions. The organisation should continue to implement impactful strategies to improve the levels of recruitment, and the retention and progression rates across the P&T areas delivered.

In the period 2021 to 2023, only a significant minority of the trainees (133, 44%) were retained. Of the 201 trainees who left their programme early, 123 progressed to apprenticeships, employment or further education; of those who progressed to further education, a small number progressed to the level 2 further education traineeship programme. A significant minority (67, 33%) of the trainees who left the programme early, achieved their targeted P&T qualifications at entry level or level one. All of the trainees (43) who have completed their programme to date have achieved their full targeted qualification. In 2023/24, most of the trainees (76%) have been retained to date.

In addition to those trainees approved by the DfE to complete qualifications at level two, People 1<sup>st</sup> funds at its own cost trainees who have achieved their targeted P&T qualification at level one to undertake training at level two. In 2021/22 the organisation supported 37 trainees to progress across a range of P&T areas, and in 2022/23, 41 trainees were supported.

Over the same period, a majority (322, 63%) of the apprentices were retained. A minority (45, 24%) of the apprentices who left their programme early achieved their targeted P&T qualifications at level two or level three. All of the apprentices (222) who have completed their programme to date have achieved their full award; 132 achieved at level two and 90 at level three. In 2023/24, most of the apprentices (87%) have been retained to date.

The outcomes for the essential skills are high for the learners who have completed the programmes. Almost all of them achieved their targeted level in one or more of the required essential skills. Notably, there are opportunities for the learners to upskill and achieve at a higher level. In the period 2021 to 2023, one-fifth of them achieved more than one level of the essential skills in literacy and numeracy.

Significant investment has recently been made by the organisation in rebranding the organisation and in updating its website. Consequently, social media has been used effectively to highlight the work of the organisation and to celebrate more widely the success of the learners. The organisation also presents awards, bonus payments, and organises day trips to recognise the achievements of individual or groups of learners. A staff reward and recognition programme is also in place.

## **E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING**

The organisation has developed links and partnerships with an extensive range of employers, support agencies, community-based organisations, post-primary schools, parents/carers, and other key stakeholders which are used effectively to support the delivery of the programmes. Feedback from employers is positive about the benefits to their business of the apprenticeships programme and the links with the organisation.

The professional learning of staff is a key focus of the organisation. Staff at all levels report that they are provided with good opportunities to undertake relevant continuous professional development. The tutors are well qualified and have a range of relevant industrial experience which is well matched to the qualifications they deliver; a number are current industry practitioners. The organisation has an in-house 'Aspiring Leaders' programme on which staff undertake a range of personal projects to support further improvement in key business areas and functions; twelve staff across the organisation are currently engaged on the programme. An internal taskforce has recently been set-up to consider the further development and implementation of digital technologies across the organisation and the strengths and challenges posed through the use of artificial intelligence.

The delivery of a number of projects and activities has involved collaborative working among the trainees across the organisation, and with a range of other community-based organisations, training providers and stakeholders. These include sports events, a range of fund-raising events, attendance at various careers events; and the use of guest speakers to highlight key events.

## **F. CHILD AND ADULT PROTECTION**

At the time of the pilot inspection, the evidence provided by the organisation demonstrates that the arrangements for child and adult protection align with current guidance.

## **4. GOING FORWARD**

People 1<sup>st</sup> is focused on realising its vision of “*Together, let’s realise your ambition*”. and upholding its values of commitment, understanding, loyalty, team, unique, respect, and excellence. Management and staff have high aspirations for the learners. The impact of the wraparound support provided by the student support officers/mentors is highly effective in meeting the needs of the learners.

The organisation needs to continue to implement impactful strategies to improve the levels of recruitment, and retention and progression rates on both programmes. Those trainees who are work ready but not yet in a work placement should be placed as soon as possible. Along with the investment in a virtual careers resource to support further access to careers education, information, advice, and guidance, the learners would benefit from further information on potential career and vocational progression pathways.

The aspects of effective practice which should be shared more widely are:

- the well managed online provision in CCLD for the apprentices, and the quality of the resources for this provision which includes the use of pre-recorded videos to help support and scaffold the learning; and
- the opportunities for project-based learning activities which support the trainees and apprentices to develop well their social responsibility.

ETI will continue to work with People 1<sup>st</sup> which is well placed to take forward the areas for further action detailed above and in the body of this report.

## 5. APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

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%

## APPENDIX 2: NOTES

### Page 1      **seven training premises in NI\***

[People 1<sup>st</sup> Belfast West](#)

[People 1<sup>st</sup> Belfast South](#)

[People 1<sup>st</sup> Lisburn](#)

[People 1<sup>st</sup> Lurgan](#)

[People 1<sup>st</sup> Newry](#)

[People 1<sup>st</sup> Nutt's Corner – CiTB](#)

[People 1<sup>st</sup> Portadown](#)

### **three in ROI, in County Donegal\***

Buncrana, Dungloe, and Letterkenny.

### **to improve Belfast as a more sustainable and healthier city\***

Belfast city Council and [Climate Essentials](#) – Belfast Business Promise – Pledge 8, Protect Our Environment.

### **support officers and mentors\***

The organisation refers to support officers for the skills programme and mentors for the apprenticeships programme.

### Page 2      **ESOL\***

English for speakers of other languages.

### **sub-contracted to an external provider\***

The external provider is Building Services Academy (BSA), a company which specialises in electrotechnical installation, and plumbing and heating apprenticeships and is located at Kilwee Industrial Estate, Dunmurry Lane, Belfast.

### **the learners\***

In this report, learners refers to trainees and apprentices.

### Page 3      **construction\***

During this pilot inspection, the P&T area of construction focused on bricklaying, roofing, and wood occupations.

**Page 5**      **operating context\***

A range of NI strategies and policies including the NI Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework; the New Decade, New Approach Social Inclusion Strategies, 2020; 10x Economy - an economic vision for a decade of innovation, 2021; and the NI Skills Barometer 2021.

The provision of other programmes through various funding streams such as Shared Prosperity, Labour Market Partnerships with local councils, and the Department of Justice NI; as well as programmes delivered in Donegal through Republic of Ireland funding.

**Page 6**      **transversal skills\***

UNESCO defines transversal skills as: “Skills that are typically considered as not specifically related to a particular job, task, academic discipline or area of knowledge and that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings (for example, organisational skills)”.

**a counselling service\***

The service has been funded with Bridges to Progression funding through the Belfast City Council which was secured for the period from January to June 2023 and again for the period from January to June 2024. In the intervening period from July to December 2023, the organisation self-funded the provision and is committed to its on-going funding post-June 2024.

**Page 7**      **in two of its seven NI training premises\***

People 1<sup>st</sup> Belfast South.  
People 1<sup>st</sup> Lurgan.

**a breast cancer charity\***

The breast cancer charity *Knitted Knockers UK* is a charity that provides knitted and crocheted breast prostheses for women in the United Kingdom who have undergone a mastectomy or lumpectomy.

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