



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT DECEMBER 2000

Four Counties Training Limited

SUMMARY

Four Counties Training Limited provides satisfactory modern apprenticeship training in rail transport engineering. Excellent employer placements offer good training opportunities in a range of disciplines including rail electrification, signalling and permanent way maintenance. All trainees are employed and are supported for additional qualifications at local colleges. Although some of the training is unplanned, the standard of training provided is high. The company demonstrates a satisfactory approach to dealing with equal opportunities and employers show a high regard for equality of opportunity. Both Four Counties Training Limited and the employers involved place strong emphasis on trainee support. Although initial assessment is limited and not fully utilised to guide training plans, training is provided in a flexible way and trainee progress is regularly reviewed. Management of training is satisfactory and Four Counties Training Limited is nationally involved in the development of occupational standards for the rail industry. Assessment practice varies, however, and general awareness of key skills is poor. There are very thorough quality assurance procedures in place and verification is good in many training programmes. However, the company has yet to implement formal systems for the evaluation of training by employers and trainees.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Engineering	3

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	3
Trainee support	3
Management of training	3
Quality assurance	3

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ high retention rates
- ◆ extremely well-qualified and experienced staff
- ◆ good involvement in equal opportunities initiatives
- ◆ excellent links with external organisations
- ◆ thorough quality assurance procedures

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient planning of on-the-job training in some areas
- ◆ delay in assessment of some NVQs
- ◆ lack of formal training in equal opportunities for staff
- ◆ weak initial assessment process
- ◆ ineffective use of management information

INTRODUCTION

1. Four Counties Training (FCT) is based in northwest London. The organisation specialises in a range of training activities which includes research and advice for both the Rail Industry Training Council and the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board. FCT also provides advice, direct assessment, verification and accreditation for national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3. The organisation has awarding body centre status for various qualifications in areas which include engineering production, engineering maintenance, technical services, training and development, rail transport operations, rail transport engineering maintenance renewals and installation, distribution and warehouse operations. FCT also manages and operates an NVQ assessment centre in partnership with a local rail transport engineering company. This centre is approved to offer assessment for a range of training programmes, including administration, retailing, customer service and key skills courses.

2. FCT is a small training provider with a managing director, a commercial director, a programme manager, two assessors and two members of staff who provide administrative support. The organisation currently has a contract for government-sponsored training with the North-West London Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). There are currently 42 modern apprentices at FCT, 31 of whom are training in rail transport engineering, six are following business administration programmes, three are on retailing and customer service courses and two are on funeral services programmes. All trainees are employed and most of the trainees on the rail transport engineering maintenance training programme are employed by one company. Much of the off-the-job training for the rail transport engineering programme is assessed at a centre in Staffordshire. Assessment for the other programmes is carried out in the workplace. Key skills training is supported and assessed by Four Counties Training. Additional off-the-job training is provided through attendance at a variety of further education colleges. Business administration trainees are located in London, while some trainees following funeral service programmes are based in Essex.

3. The 1999 local economic assessment showed that the economy was performing well in northwest London with unemployment levels in the area falling as the economy grew. In July 2000, the average unemployment rate was 4.6 per cent. Unemployment levels remain high in some areas of northwest London; for example, in Brent the overall unemployment rate is 6.2 per cent and 8.3 per cent among men. Long-term unemployment is less of a problem in Harrow at 2.6 per cent. The 1999 employer survey estimated that 17 per cent of workplaces in Brent and Harrow had vacancies in hotels and restaurants, transport and communication firms, and financial and business services. Occupations most in demand in the area are clerical and secretarial jobs. Northwest London is characterised by a high proportion of minority ethnic groups who live and work in the area. In Brent, there



is a minority ethnic population of 45 per cent, and in Harrow the figure is 26 per cent (Population Census 1991). This compares with the figure of 20 per cent for Greater London and 5 per cent for the UK as a whole.

4. In 2000, the proportion of school leavers in northwest London achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 49 per cent compared to the national average of 48 per cent. This represents a 7 per cent increase since 1994. The level of performance in GCSEs and A-levels in northwest London follows a similar pattern to the rest of the UK.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

5. FCT produced its first self-assessment report in 1999. The report was based on a model produced by external consultants and made judgements against the criteria contained in *Raising the Standard*. A new self-assessment report was produced in 2000 for the Training Standards Council (TSC) inspection. This report provided detailed information about the organisation and its training provision. Strengths and weaknesses were highlighted but a number of them related to issues that were no more than normal practice. Following the planning meeting for inspection, FCT reviewed the report and updated it together with the action plan. During the inspection, other key strengths and weaknesses were identified which the company had failed to identify. FCT's own grades for the occupational area and three of the generic aspects were higher than those awarded by inspectors.

6. A team of three inspectors spent a total of 12 days at Four Counties Training in December 2000. During the inspection, inspectors visited nine employers in three counties and one assessment centre. They spoke to 20 trainees, six work-placement staff, and had discussions with the staff at FCT. No instructional sessions were observed. Inspectors also examined a wide range of paperwork, including trainees' files and portfolios, audit reports from TEC and awarding bodies, records of staff meetings, personnel documents, business plans, and policies and procedures. The number of trainees on business administration, retailing and customer service training programmes was too low to warrant the inclusion of these areas in the inspection.

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Engineering

Grade 3

7. FCT provides modern apprenticeship training for young people which leads to NVQs at levels 2 and 3 in rail transport engineering. Training includes courses in track maintenance, electrification, signalling and other rail industry services. There are currently 31 engineering trainees on the programme. Of these trainees, 13 started in September 2000, 12 in September 1999 and six in December 1998. Only three modern apprentices have left since the training programme started. One company employs 80 per cent of all trainees. Employers provide a range of off-the-job training and, in the case of the major employer, there is a dedicated assessment centre staffed with well-qualified assessors. At this centre, trainees participate in a range of training and assessment activities which are offered to all employees. Additional related off-the-job training is provided via attendance at local colleges. This is not a requirement of the modern apprenticeship framework. Trainees following the programme related to rail transportation engineering maintenance in signals and testing receive off-the-job training in short block-release periods by taking places on events which are already organised. These trainees are also

assessed for a license against the industry's standards. Most on-the-job training involves trainees working within teams of experienced employees. All trainees have mentors in the workplace and are supervised by qualified engineering staff. Trainees are based at various locations throughout the Midlands and the south of England. The pattern of training varies and depends on the type of course trainees follow, the year they started and the depot where they work. At the time of inspection, three trainees had achieved an NVQ at level 2 and a further six were awaiting their certificates.

8. The self-assessment report was helpful in describing the background to the programme and the way the training was organised. The self-assessment report accurately identified two strengths relating to good retention and training opportunities at work, while other strengths were regarded by inspectors as no more than normal practice. Inspectors identified an additional strength in the exceptional qualifications and occupational experience of the staff involved. Inspectors agreed with the weaknesses relating to delays with NVQ assessments and the lack of awareness of progress by trainees and identified further weaknesses relating to lack of formal planned on-the-job training in some areas and insufficient off-the-job training for some trainees. Inspectors awarded a lower grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good training opportunities for trainees
- ◆ extremely well-qualified and experienced staff
- ◆ high retention rates

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient planning of on-the-job training in some areas
- ◆ insufficient off-the-job training for some trainees
- ◆ delay in unit accreditation of NVQ for some trainees

9. Trainees are all employed and work in situations that offer high levels of training opportunities. The company, which employs 80 per cent of the trainees, has a well-established internal training and assessment system. Line managers and supervisors introduce trainees to the practices of the railway engineering industry. Trainees have mentors in many cases and are also overseen by qualified personnel in the various locations at which they work. Practical activities are recorded and assessed by work-based assessors. Trainees work in teams that include experienced employees and many have experienced a variety of job situations and locations. Some trainees have completed work-based projects during their training. In some locations, there are specific training schedules which enhance the training opportunities by planning out how trainees move from one location and type of work to another. Trainees also have access to additional off-the-job training

opportunities, which are scheduled as part of FCT's standard training arrangements. These opportunities include engineering craft, technician courses and/or Ordinary and Higher National Certificate programmes.

10. The employers and training provider's staff who work with the trainees are all highly experienced and exceptionally competent in their occupational area. The major employer involved has a competency management framework in place that operates for all employees. This system is co-ordinated by full-time qualified internal assessors who are experienced in the rail industry. The full-time assessors are based at the assessment and training centre attended by all trainees. The assessor who has the most contact with trainees is qualified to NVQ at level 4 in training and development and has recently gained special recognition for achievement by the awarding body. The company's competency management system includes a work-based assessment and recording procedure. All employees, including trainees, are encouraged to maintain evidence in portfolios. There is also a system for employees to be assessed for critical safety work. Most trainees are involved in this process.

11. Modern apprentices following the engineering maintenance in signals and testing route also participate in the licensing scheme, which is externally verified by the industry's licensing body. Nine of the trainees have achieved this license so far and the evidence provided by this and other internal assessment procedures counts towards their NVQ. In the case of the IRSE licence the evidence can be used to support seven of the eight mandatory units for the NVQ at level 2.

12. Retention rates on the modern apprenticeship programme are exceptionally high. Only three trainees have left since the training programmes started in 1998. The total number of trainees involved is 34 and the three that have left are all from the first two years' intake by the major employer. The retention rate among that particular group of trainees has been over 85 per cent and, in general, the retention rate across all programmes has been in excess of 90 per cent.

13. Despite the good opportunities available for training, the way in which most of the trainees progress with their work experience and training is not always formally planned. For example, there is no structured approach to how trainees gain access to internal off-the-job training or how such training integrates with their NVQ achievement. Many trainees do not know when training is available or how it fits in with their progress towards the NVQs they are working towards. The responsibility for the co-ordination of training programmes is left to assessors and verifiers and is only carried out towards the completion of the NVQ at level 2. Many of the decisions about arranging training and progression are left to the discretion of local managers who arrange the trainees' workload.

14. Furthermore, communication between the assessors based at the training and assessment centre and the line managers is mainly informal. The current arrangements for planning training and assessment for most of the trainees is based solely on their attendance at a monthly meeting at the training centre. Here their portfolios are reviewed and they receive advice on what they need to gain evidence

for their NVQ. Trainees then return to their teams and discuss the outcome of the meeting with their line managers or supervisors, who then arrange appropriate training. In some cases this works well. However, the current approach does not always lead to training that supports evidence in line with NVQ requirements and the modern apprenticeship framework. Nor does it regularly lead to assessment. Some trainees lack access to assessment because of this failing. The lack of formal planning also extends to the testing of theory.

15. There is insufficient off-the-job training for trainees who are following the permanent way maintenance training programme. This group forms nearly half of the trainees in the large group employed by one company. There is a two-week block course, which is provided by the company for its employees. This is appropriate for trainees, but most have yet to participate in it. The traditional in-house training route for this occupation does not routinely require much other off-the-job training. Little training has been designed or planned into trainees' programmes to reflect the requirements of the modern apprenticeship framework. Reliance is placed on the achievement of the standards required by the Railtrack Group.

16. There have been some major organisational difficulties with the large employer with whom most engineering trainees are placed for the permanent way maintenance training programme. These have resulted in a late introduction of the current NVQ requirements and national standards into the training programme. While trainees have been assessed against Railtrack Group standards there has been no comparison of this achievement and progress with NVQ units or elements until very recently. One group of trainees still have not had their competence assessed against the national standards and in line with NVQ requirements. Few trainees have any continuous assessment records of their NVQ achievements in their portfolios.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

17. FCT has an equal opportunity policy which meets TEC and awarding body requirements. There is also a complaints and appeals procedure relating to NVQ assessments. Overall responsibility for equal opportunities within FCT lies with the managing director. Equal opportunities is a standard agenda item at staff meetings. The policy and procedures are issued to organisations that employ the company's trainees. These employers are also required to have an equal opportunities policy as a condition of their working relationship with FCT. There are 41 trainees in training, 5 per cent of whom are from minority ethnic groups and 20 per cent of whom are women. Few trainees are placed in London. Many are located in other areas in the Midlands and the South of England. There are no trainees with registered disabilities. Most training locations have access for people with mobility difficulties. Although the company's head office is situated on the

third floor of an office block serviced by lifts, trainees are not required to attend FCT's head office for any activities.

18. In its self-assessment report, the company recognised that its trainees were working in gender-stereotypical industries. This situation requires concerted efforts on the part of the training provider and the employers involved to promote equality of opportunity. The self-assessment report correctly identified the efforts made to improve employment statistics as a strength. However, it did not identify the two weaknesses highlighted by the inspection process. Inspectors agreed with the overall grade given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective involvement in equal opportunities recruitment initiatives
- ◆ high level of commitment to equal opportunities by employers

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ missed opportunities to promote equal opportunities
- ◆ insufficient planned equal opportunities training for staff and trainees

19. Most FCT trainees are employed in industries which are traditionally dominated by white male participants. The training provider is represented on the modern apprenticeship working party of the Rail Industry Training Council and, in that capacity, has offered constructive advice on the business benefits of an active commitment to equality of opportunity. This advice has been adopted so that recruitment policies are being revised to include campaigns aimed at increasing applications from women and from minority ethnic groups. The results of this national campaign are not yet known. However, FCT has recognised the challenge and has acted upon it. There are plans to interview the two female engineering modern apprentices on the programme in order to identify their perspectives on current recruitment practices. The company's own recruitment practice shows evidence of a commitment to inclusiveness, as 42 per cent of its staff are from ethnic minority groups and 58 per cent are women. There has been an increase in participation on the company's training programme from no ethnic minority occupancy at all in last year's programme to 5 per cent in the current year.

20. Employers working with the training provider demonstrate a strong commitment to equal opportunities in their employment practices. Both men and women are recruited into non-stereotypical roles. For example, one funeral service employer has a 50 per cent split between male and female employees in all aspects of its business. None of the working areas in any of the employers' premises contain inappropriate material and all trainees feel that they are working in environments which promote mutual respect and security. Recruitment materials from participating organisations attempt to show positive role models. All trainees receive written guidance from their employers on equal opportunities, for example

those relating to grievance procedures. These guidelines vary in their usefulness. Some are easily accessible, while others are rather more complicated. However, there is clear evidence of employers' commitment to the protection of trainees from harassment and discrimination.

21. Nevertheless, FCT misses opportunities to promote its own commitment to equal opportunities. The company's policy has not been revised since 1998 and does not contain references to current legislation. Despite the assertions in its equal opportunities policy, there are few identified procedures to monitor the success of the policy. The company's policy is not routinely issued to trainees and its commitment to equal opportunities is not publicised on its recruitment, training or assessment materials. Complaints are dealt with promptly and effectively, but there are no procedures in place to monitor complaints or to monitor employers' modern apprenticeship recruitment practices relating to applications, acceptances and rejections.

22. Trainees are aware of the broad issues relating to equality of opportunity but are not clearly aware of their rights under recent legislation. Equal opportunity is referred to during workplace induction. However, the trainees' understanding of equal opportunities is not systematically checked following induction and is not always monitored during the review of trainees' progress. There has been no formal staff training in equal opportunities. The need for such training has been recognised, however, and there are plans for staff to attend training.

Trainee support

Grade 3

23. Trainees are referred to FCT by their employers. The company has developed relationships with national and local companies who use their own recruitment and selection procedures to fill vacancies. All trainees are employed at the start of the training programme. Recruitment methods include advertisements in local publications and newspapers, as well as liaison with local schools, colleges and the careers service. There are various selection methods including interviews and standardised tests. Each participating employer offers its own induction programme. During this workplace induction, an FCT representative explains the modern apprenticeship framework and completes the necessary TEC paperwork. Each trainee's individual training plan is drawn up during induction. A progress review is carried out at three-monthly intervals.

24. The self-assessment report correctly identified the detailed induction trainees receive in the workplace as a strength. Other strengths were considered by inspectors to be no more than normal practice. The self-assessed strength relating to the trainees' review process was identified by the inspectors as a weakness. Inspectors identified other strengths and weaknesses and awarded the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ thorough workplace induction
- ◆ flexible response to training needs
- ◆ high levels of employer support for trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ weak initial assessment process
- ◆ lack of rigour in trainee reviews

25. Workplace induction for all trainees is thorough and effective. The induction fully informs trainees of what is expected of them, thus helping to ensure high retention rates. Typical employer induction includes structured training on a range of health and safety topics, the employer's background, its organisational structure and policies, the terms and conditions of employment and its discipline and grievance procedures. Additional induction takes place when trainees move into new locations. Detailed written instructions and guidelines are issued to trainees by the employers to support the induction process.

26. FCT makes strenuous efforts to support both trainees and their employers. Most employers receive advice on the modern apprenticeship programme and the trainees themselves receive individual support. In one situation, the company took full responsibility for all training and assessment in a modern apprenticeship programme when an employer's training manager resigned. This responsiveness ensured that one of the trainee's concerns over an equal opportunity matter at the time was brought to the attention of the appropriate senior manager and dealt with quickly and effectively. Evidence of strong support and flexibility of training is also shown in the way one modern apprentice has been fast tracked through his framework in less than six months in order to facilitate his promotion within the company he worked for. This involved FCT restructuring the trainee's training and assessment programme and meeting with him every two weeks to ensure success within the timescale.

27. Trainees are employed in various industries, but all employers offer training opportunities over and above those required by the modern apprenticeship frameworks. Trainees in engineering attend day-release at colleges of further education at their employer's expense. A trainee working in funeral services has undergone a driving training course provided by Essex police and has also taken an additional office administration course. Another trainee has taken a foundation module in funeral services. Employers are actively involved in the trainee review process. Trainees employed in the railway industry receive constant updating in personal safety and maintain current licenses relating to safe working practice. They also receive free rail passes. Trainee achievements are celebrated in such publications as in-house newsletters and national publications relating to modern apprenticeships.

28. The training provider does not assess trainees on entry to the training programmes. Initial assessment is carried out by the potential employer concerned and takes the form of recruitment tests to gauge applicants' suitability for the advertised vacancies. These tests are very thorough and include verbal comprehension, numeracy, spatial recognition and occupational competence. However, these tests are undertaken for selection purposes only. The results are not routinely communicated to the trainee or to Four Counties Training. The assessments do not systematically influence the training programme. Training plans are not individualised and trainee support needs are not identified and recorded in most cases. Furthermore, basic skills and key skills are not systematically assessed.

29. The training review process is not at all rigorous. Any targets are vague and have no time restrictions. Reviews are carried out regularly and are recorded, but trainees are not given a copy of the review as a matter of routine. Where targets are identified, there is no defined process whereby trainees and their employers have a record of what targets have been agreed. Some employers carry out the review themselves and the review document is signed by FCT, while in other cases, the training provider completes the review and the employer signs it. The company had, however, recognised some weaknesses in its training review arrangements and had started to introduce changes.

Management of training

Grade 3

30. FCT operates from its main administrative headquarters in northwest London. All its modern apprenticeship programmes are offered in various counties and are contracted by the Northwest London Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). FCT has a managing director and a commercial director who jointly own the company and together manage the TEC-sponsored training provision. Other members of the organisation include a modern apprenticeship programme manager, two administrative support staff and two part-time assessors. The directors also have roles as assessors and, together with the part-time assessors, are responsible for the internal verification of the training programmes. There are formal contracts with subcontracted assessors. Much of the training is provided by employers and, in one case, a large employer for rail transport engineering with its own centre provides in-house training and assessment for most of the trainees.

31. FCT has awarding body approval for a range of qualifications to meet the need of all of its training provision. The employer providing in-house training and assessment also has awarding body approval. FCT manages an NVQ assessment centre in partnership with a local rail transport engineering company which recruits modern apprentices in administration, retailing and customer service and rail transport programmes. The company has staff recruitment policies and procedures and a formal staff review system. The business plan is shared with staff and all members of FCT are involved in the review. Since the self-assessment and subsequent action-planning process, some areas of weakness, particularly those relating to the development of management and quality procedures, have been

successfully remedied. Inspectors agreed with the strengths relating to the links with national training organisations and the business planning process. However, further weaknesses were identified which FCT had failed to highlight. Inspectors awarded a lower grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-established links with external organisations
- ◆ effective staff review system
- ◆ good business planning process

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ ineffective use of management information
- ◆ lack of understanding of NVQ process in some training programmes
- ◆ insufficient awareness of key skills in some training programmes

32. FCT operates with a small number of key staff. Internal links are strong and staff are well-qualified and experienced. In addition, the company has long-standing well-established relationships with many external agencies. These relationships have enabled FCT to play a significant role in developing modern apprenticeship frameworks for rail transport engineering and other training programmes such as funeral services. The training provider has also worked extensively to develop national occupational standards for the rail industry and has taken a lead role in integrating key skills training into the NVQ programmes. Four Counties Training has awarding body approval to offer a wide range of NVQs to all its trainees and also provides satellite centre status for many employers of modern apprentices. Employers also use the services of FCT for training work-based assessors and internal verifiers.

33. FCT has an effective business planning process, which is carried out annually and involves all staff in the organisation. All staff, including subcontracted assessors, are aware of the business plan and its contents. Formal staff meetings provide a platform for the regular review of business objectives. These meetings include quarterly updating and moderation meetings, NVQ development and modern apprenticeship development group meetings. The current business plan addresses issues raised in the previous plan and includes market analysis and a comprehensive marketing and operational plan. It also provides detailed strategies for all of the organisation's business activities. Furthermore, the plan contains realistic and measurable targets for activities related to the development of assessment materials and staffing levels, as well as the implementation of evaluation systems for all services. These are in addition to FCT's financial targets. Further targets relate to staff review and development. Targets are reviewed regularly and the outcome used effectively to inform business planning and decision-making.

34. FCT has a thorough training and development plan. The overall responsibility for this plan lies with the managing director. The plan includes details about staff roles and responsibilities, induction, performance review and staff development. All agreed staff training and development are funded by the company itself and this extends to a range of activities including, for example, coaching and management qualifications. The company's training and development plan also involves an effective staff review and development process. This process provides a review three times a year, in which all staff participate. It includes part-time assessors employed by FCT and subcontracted staff, who are also invited to participate. The documents for the staff review include simple, easy-to-understand guidelines and all staff are given the opportunity to complete a set of forms which provide a prompt for discussion at the review. Previous performance against targets is reviewed and new targets are negotiated. The outcome of the review is written down and provides the basis for any future reviews. Staff appreciate the opportunity to review their role on a regular basis. Many of the staff development activities relate to TEC requirements and the TSC inspection. Furthermore, there are events planned for 2001, which include equal opportunities awareness courses.

35. FCT collects information on a weekly basis to meet the contractual requirements of the TEC. This information includes, for example, trainee attendance and achievement data. Although the main administrative centre is based at the company's head office in northwest London, much of the training provision is offered in counties outside the London area. Information relating to NVQ achievement is not routinely collected by training offices in these various counties. Where data are collected, they are not effectively communicated to the head office in London. Some data held by the head office do not clearly identify trainees on programmes or accurately reflect trainees' achievement.

36. The training provider's staff and employers have a good understanding of the NVQ process in the business administration and funeral services training programmes. This is mainly because of the historical involvement of FCT staff in the development of occupational standards and the fact that FCT staff act as assessors and internal verifiers for these training programmes. However, in the training programme for rail transport engineering, the emphasis is on Railtrack Group standards or the licence rather than the modern apprenticeship NVQs. FCT relies on the employers to assess trainees' competence against rail industry standards. Some employers have little knowledge of either the requirements or the levels of the NVQs involved, nor are they fully aware of the methods of assessment.

37. FCT has played a key role with the awarding body for the modern apprenticeship programme in supporting key skills development. These have recently been cross-referenced to industry standards and the requirements of the NVQ, where appropriate. However, employers and trainees have a poor understanding of key skills in terms of the range and level required for the modern apprenticeship. Key skills relating to information technology and application of

number are not integrated into the NVQ programme. A learning package has been developed for key skills development and this is taught by FCT's staff towards the end of the apprenticeship programme.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

38. FCT has a number of quality assurance procedures, which are clearly written and shared with all staff in the organisation, as well as with partners that are involved in the various modern apprenticeship programmes. Quality assurance arrangements meet awarding body and Northwest London TEC's requirements. The procedures cover training, assessment and administrative activities. The commercial manager has overall responsibility for quality assurance within FCT. A quality manual contains a range of policies relating to such issues as equal opportunities and health and safety. Documents are controlled and are regularly reviewed and updated.

39. There are partnership agreements with organisations and subcontracted staff responsible for training and assessment. Staff meet every four to six weeks to discuss training issues and quality assurance is a standard item on staff meeting agendas. Senior training provider staff and employers also meet at NVQ development meetings. FCT staff are actively involved in training work-based assessors and internal verifiers. Inspectors agreed with the strengths identified by the FCT self-assessment report that related to the thorough procedures and commitment to continuous improvement. The company failed to identify some weaknesses highlighted by inspectors that related to the formal evaluation of training and assessment of the rail transport engineering training programme. Inspectors awarded a lower grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ thorough quality assurance procedures
- ◆ good verification in some training programmes
- ◆ high level of involvement in continuous improvement

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some ineffective monitoring of quality assurance arrangements
- ◆ no systematic evaluation of training provision
- ◆ self-assessment not fully established in the quality assurance system

40. FCT has a wide range of quality procedures, which relate to its activities as an NVQ centre. Two major employers use these documents to support their assessment and verification processes. The company also has a quality assurance

plan, which includes training specifically designed for the rail transport engineering's modern apprenticeship programme. The quality plan is detailed and provides excellent guidance for contractual arrangements with partner organisations responsible for the provision of training and assessment. The procedures also provide guidance about monitoring policies such as equal opportunities and health and safety. There is a good range of procedures for internal verification and guidelines for dealing with external verification, which include advice on action-planning issues arising from external verification reports. FCT's staff responsible for the business administration and funeral services training programmes also follow the same quality assurance procedures.

41. The responsibility for internal verification of NVQs lies with FCT staff. Staff carrying out these duties are qualified to the appropriate standard and experienced in the occupational areas concerned. In some cases, staff have been actively involved in their occupational area for over 30 years and have assisted in developing the occupational standards for the NVQ. In rail transport engineering, internal verification is currently limited because of the late introduction of the modern apprenticeship framework and the delay in unit assessment of the NVQ. In both the business administration and funeral services programmes, internal verification is very thorough and effective. In these training programmes, where assessments are carried out by direct observations in the workplace by work-based assessors, the FCT internal verifier monitors the training observations. Assessment planning and internal verification sampling is rigorous and clear guidance is provided by FCT. There are monthly standardisation meetings and regular modern apprenticeship and NVQ development meetings which all assessors and internal verifiers attend.

42. FCT places strong emphasis on continuous improvement and is constantly looking for ways of improving its training provision. Written assessment and internal verification procedures provide examples of best practice gained from experience with other agencies. The company has also identified a weakness in the trainee review process and has developed new procedures in an attempt to improve this area. Other procedures have been written in respect of trainee induction and the formal recording of work-based training. Some of these procedures, although developed, have yet to be written down and fully implemented.

43. FCT staff are responsible for some work-based assessment, internal verification and also primarily for carrying out trainee reviews in the workplace. Where trainees attend the employer assessment centre in the north of England, trainee reviews are carried out on site. This process, together with formal meetings between employers' senior staff and other FCT's staff, provides the only planned arrangements for monitoring the training provision in the occupational area of engineering. Assessments are not routinely monitored by internal verifiers and assessment decisions are left solely to the professional judgement of employer training staff. Consequently, weaknesses relating to the lack of planned training, the insufficient off-the-job training and the delays in unit accreditation of the NVQ have not been identified by the training provider.

44. Although links between FCT and employers are good and effective, there is no systematic evaluation of training either by the employer or by the trainee. Views of trainees and employers are only collected informally during the trainee review process or the programme review meetings. The information from these discussions is not routinely shared or used to inform changes to the training provided. Targets for improvements in customer satisfaction are set, but these are based on assumptions rather than on accurate data.

45. Self-assessment has yet to be fully embedded into FCT's quality assurance framework and arrangements. The first self-assessment report was compiled without support and was prepared by making statements against the criteria given in *Raising the Standard*. The company subsequently received support from the contracting TEC and an external consultant, and a revised self-assessment report was written prior to the inspection-planning meeting. Following the planning meeting, the revised self-assessment report was then rewritten both to incorporate areas which had been looked into and to define any strengths and weaknesses more clearly. While the self-assessment report identified a number of the strengths and weaknesses highlighted by inspectors, many of the key weaknesses were not identified by the company.