

TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL INSPECTION REPORT
JUNE 2000

ADULT LEARNING INSPECTORATE REINSPECTION JULY
2001

A.F. Blakemore and Son Ltd



ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

Adult Learning Inspectorate

The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) was established under the provisions of the *Learning and Skills Act 2000* to bring the inspection of all aspects of adult learning and work-based training within the remit of a single inspectorate. The ALI is responsible for inspecting a wide range of government-funded learning, including:

- ◆ work-based training for all people over 16
- ◆ provision in further education colleges for people aged 19 and over
- ◆ the University for Industry's *learndirect* provision
- ◆ adult and community learning
- ◆ training given by the Employment Service under the New Deals.

Inspections are carried out in accordance with the *Common Inspection Framework* by teams of full-time inspectors and part-time associate inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work, which they inspect. All providers are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

Grading

In summarising their judgements about the quality of provision in curriculum or occupational areas and about the quality of leadership and management, including quality assurance and equality of opportunity, inspectors use a five-point scale. The descriptors for the five grades are:

- ◆ grade 1 – outstanding
- ◆ grade 2 – good
- ◆ grade 3 – satisfactory
- ◆ grade 4 – unsatisfactory
- ◆ grade 5 – very weak.

SUMMARY

The original inspection of A.F. Blakemore and Son Ltd was carried out by the Training Standards Council's inspectors. The inspection resulted in less than satisfactory grades being awarded for retailing and customer service, equal opportunities, trainee support, management of training and quality assurance. These areas have been reinspected against the requirements of the *Common Inspection Framework* by the Adult Learning Inspectorate, which replaced the Training Standards Council on 1 April 2001. The sections of the original report dealing with retailing and customer service, equal opportunities, trainee support, management of training and quality assurance have been replaced with the findings of the reinspection. Also, the report summary, report introduction and introduction to the inspection findings have been updated and reflect the findings of the reinspection. Sections of the report, dealing with areas which have not been reinspected, have been left in their original form. The amended inspection report is published on the Adult Learning Inspectorate's website (www.ali.gov.uk).

A.F. Blakemore and Sons Ltd now offers satisfactory training in warehousing and customer service. Training is carried out effectively in the workplace. Trainees are assessed regularly by qualified assessors. Assessment is arranged flexibly to meet the needs of trainees on shift work. Trainees receive regular reviews of their progress. Retention rates have improved from 21 per cent to 64 per cent. Modern apprentices have received inadequate training in key skills. No modern apprentice has completed the apprenticeship framework. Initial assessment of trainees has been introduced but is not effective as a means of identifying trainees' needs for additional learning support. Although staff have received training related to equal opportunities, promotion of equal opportunities is still given insufficient priority. All staff have helped to rectify many of the weaknesses identified during the original inspection. The company and training department have been restructured. Provision of effective training is now one of the company's main objectives. The management of subcontractors, however, has been weak. Key skills training is not carried out properly. The company now has a sound quality assurance system. There are good arrangements for collecting and acting upon feedback from trainees, employers and company staff.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Retailing & customer service	4

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	5
Trainee support	5
Management of training	5
Quality assurance	5

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A.F. BLAKEMORE AND SON LTD: JUNE 2000 ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE REINSPECTION JULY 2001

REINSPECTION	GRADE
Retailing & customer service	3

REINSPECTION	GRADE
Equal opportunities	4
Trainee support	3
Management of training	3
Quality assurance	3

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good training activities
- ◆ thorough and comprehensive induction to trainees' job roles
- ◆ good work-based assessment
- ◆ regular and effective liaison between assessors and trainers
- ◆ good deployment of staff
- ◆ good arrangements for collecting and acting on feedback

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ low achievement and retention rates
- ◆ inadequate key skills training
- ◆ unsystematic initial assessment
- ◆ failure to give sufficient priority to equal opportunities
- ◆ insufficient analysis of data
- ◆ weak management of subcontractors

INTRODUCTION

1. A. F. Blakemore and Son Ltd is a nationally known distribution company for the retail and catering industries. The company started in 1959, becoming part of the Spar group in 1975. The company opened one of the first cash and carry warehouses in the country in Wolverhampton in 1962. New headquarters were opened at Longacres Industrial estate in Willenhall, near Walsall in the early 1980s and in 1990 the company started a shop-fitting company on the same site. It is the largest employer in the Walsall area. The training department is based on the Longacres site. The company offers training leading to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in warehousing and distribution, business administration, and customer service to their own employees.

2. NVQs were introduced for company staff in 1998, with the aim of improving staff retention and the skills of existing and potential staff of the organisation. External advisors managed the recruitment of the current NVQ trainees approximately 15 months ago. There was no initial assessment or induction. The company decided to become an approved NVQ training centre in June 1999. This was managed initially by an NVQ training manager who left in October 1999. The company's training manager then integrated the management of the NVQ training provision into her role. The company was approved as an assessment centre by the awarding body at the beginning of 2000. Following an inspection by the Training Standards Council (TSC) in June 2000, the company decided to restructure the training department. It currently has seven full-time members of staff and one part-time member of staff who is an assessor and an internal verifier. All staff are occupationally qualified and have either achieved, or are working to achieve, assessor and internal verifier qualifications.

3. The company currently holds a contract with the Black Country Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to provide training for modern apprentices and training leading to NVQs in warehousing and distribution, customer service and business administration. All the NVQ trainees are employed by the company. In warehousing, there is a three-months' probationary period, which includes a thorough induction to the company with on- and off-the-job company training and assessment. All staff aged under 25 years, in the warehousing and administration areas of the company on the Longacres site, are given the opportunity to apply for NVQ training schemes. In the financial year 1999-2000, there was a 58 per cent turnover in the company workforce, compared to 37 per cent in the previous year. In June 2001, staff turnover had fallen to 34 per cent.

4. The main industry in Walsall in 1996 was manufacturing, with the wholesale and retail trade the next largest. The growth in employment in the wholesale and retail trade was 4.8 per cent below the national growth rate in this sector, though forecasts point to expansion in the future.

5. Walsall's 16-24 age group represents 19.6 per cent of the long-term unemployed in the area, which is 5.3 per cent above the national average. Unemployment in the area is high at around 17 per cent.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

6. The training manager and the personnel resources manager compiled the self-assessment report four months in advance of the inspection. There was little involvement of the training department staff and no involvement from trainees and workplace staff. The self-assessment report included much detail about the delivery of the training provision, especially the company induction period for the new warehousing employees and the new NVQ induction session. Many of the strengths listed are normal practice for work-based training provision. There were no weaknesses identified for the business administration provision. Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths in the self-assessment report and with most of the weaknesses identified. Some of the 'strengths' in the report were found to be weaknesses by inspectors, especially in management of training and quality assurance. Many further weaknesses were identified and in all areas the inspection grades were lower than in the self-assessment report, significantly so in three areas.

7. Prior to the reinspection, the company produced a second self-assessment report. All staff in the training department and key staff in the company were consulted about the findings in the self-assessment report. When writing its first self-assessment report, the company followed guidelines in *Raising the Standard*. When drawing up its second self-assessment report, however, the company drew on guidance from both *Raising the Standard* and *The Common Inspection Framework*. For example, the company awarded one grade for leadership and management but did not include a separate section on, or a grade for, the management of training. The second self-assessment report does not include any strengths or weaknesses for trainee support and does not give a grade for quality assurance. At the reinspection, some of the grades the inspectors awarded were higher than those given in the revised self-assessment report.

8. A team of three inspectors spent a total of 12 days with A. F. Blakemore and Son Ltd, in June 2000. Warehousing was the only occupational area inspected due to very low numbers in the other areas. Trainees and staff from the other occupational areas were involved in the inspection to contribute to the generic report. Inspectors interviewed 19 trainees, including two people who had recently withdrawn from the NVQ training provision, but still worked at the company. Twenty-five staff of A. F. Blakemore and Son Ltd were interviewed by inspectors, including all the training department staff, the personnel resources manager, operations director and his deputy, workplace trainers and managers and two internal verifiers who work part-time within the training department. Inspectors visited the main warehousing workplace areas on the Longacres site. Documentary evidence was examined, including trainees' files, portfolios, individual training plans, training materials, awarding body reports, contract details, minutes of meetings and the training provision policies.

9. For the reinspection, a team of three inspectors spent a total of 12 days at A. F. Blakemore and Sons during July 2001. They visited five workplaces and had discussions with five managers. They interviewed eight trainees in the occupational areas of warehousing and customer service. They conducted 14 interviews with company staff. Inspectors looked at the quality assurance manual, trainees' files and records, portfolios, minutes of meetings, written procedures for staff, agreements with subcontractors, and the action plan to improve training. They observed four training and assessment sessions. All four were graded as grade 3 on the seven-point scale.

Grades awarded to induction, training and review sessions

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Business administration		2				2
Retailing & customer service	2	3				5
Total	2	5	0	0	0	7

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Retailing & customer service

Grade 3

10. A. F. Blakemore and Sons Ltd offers training leading to NVQs in warehousing and customer service at level 2. All the trainees are employees of the company. Trainees work at the Longacres site in various departments. There are currently 12 trainees on all programmes. There are 11 foundation modern apprentices and one trainee working towards an NVQ. Eight trainees are working towards an NVQ in warehousing and distribution at level 2 and four are working towards an NVQ in customer care at level 2. Since the original inspection, the company has begun to take trainees from its own workforce. The revised self-assessment report acknowledges that although many of the weaknesses identified during the original inspection have been rectified, it has not been possible to eradicate all of them. The company now recognises the advantage of having a multi-skilled workforce which can operate in both the distribution and wholesale depots. Training leading to NVQs is offered to all employees, irrespective of their age.

11. All new warehousing employees complete an on- and off-the-job induction training and assessment programme as part of the three-month company probationary period. Workplace assessors carry out assessments against company criteria after four, eight and 12 weeks. The induction programme covers health and safety, food hygiene and includes customer care training. The company has very recently updated the induction workbooks, which are used throughout the 12-week induction process. Trainees complete these during the induction period to demonstrate their understanding of induction topics. When trainees have completed their three-month probationary period successfully, they can apply to work towards achievement of an NVQ. They then attend a special induction session about the NVQ process. NVQ practical assessments are carried out in the

trainees' workplace. Trainees receive extra training and are moved to different areas of the company for further work experience, skills training and assessment.

At the original inspection, the following weaknesses were identified:

- ◆ slow progress and poor NVQ achievement
- ◆ missed assessment opportunities
- ◆ lack of understanding of NVQs
- ◆ poor retention rates

Following the original inspection, the company drew up an action plan to rectify these weaknesses. Effective arrangements for monitoring and recording trainees' progress have been established. Assessments and reviews of trainees' progress are now carried out more frequently. Seminars for assessors, workplace trainers and managers are held regularly to identify ways of helping trainees acquire the requisite NVQ competences through their workplace activities. Inspectors considered some of the strengths identified in the revised self-assessment report to be no more than normal practice. They found additional strengths and weaknesses and awarded a grade lower than that given in the revised self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good use of well-constructed training plans
- ◆ good training activities
- ◆ good assessment and frequent practice in the workplace

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient structured on-the-job training to help trainees acquire NVQ competences
- ◆ inadequate and insufficient key skills training
- ◆ unsatisfactory achievement and retention rates

12. Training activities are varied and are carried out effectively. Training sessions are well resourced. Resources include training aids, such as interactive workbooks, videos, flipcharts, overhead transparencies and photographs. There is an effective mix of training methods. Off-the-job sessions are timetabled to take account of trainees' work patterns. The off-the-job training room is adjacent to a warehouse area in the training department and is appropriate for the small groups of six to eight trainees who use it. Trainees are given a little time off the job to complete their NVQ portfolios. Some trainees receive additional training in order to acquire NVQ competences they may not necessarily develop at work.

13. Trainees can be moved to different departments of the company in order to broaden their experience and cover the range of skills they need to obtain the NVQ. The NVQ trainers/assessors and the workplace trainers and assessors have up-to-date occupational experience. Some trainees can complete company-based fork truck training and receive a certificate that is used as evidence towards their

achievement of the NVQ. The standard of trainees' work is good. Trainees' portfolios are well presented. Evidence is clearly referenced to NVQ standards.

14. Assessment of trainees in the workplace is carried out well. Assessment methods include observation of trainees' performance in the workplace and working procedures, witness testimony, oral and written questioning of trainees, and discussion between the assessor and trainee. The evidence in trainees' portfolios demonstrates that trainees acquire a wide range of competences. Evidence is cross-referenced effectively to the NVQ units and standards. Trainees are assessed regularly in the workplace. In some instances, they are assessed using the latest and most up-to-date equipment.

15. Individual training plans are detailed and thorough. They are revised regularly to take account of trainees' progress and new learning and support needs the trainees may have. The trainees themselves are involved in drawing up their plan and in revising it. All trainees undergo initial assessment in order to find out which programme is most appropriate for them.

16. There is insufficient structured training in the workplace to help trainees acquire the requisite NVQ competences. Trainees spend a disproportionate amount of time watching and working with a trainer in the workplace. Many people provide signatures on witness testimonies to confirm that work has been carried out to their satisfaction. In some instances, however, workplace trainers do not understand the NVQ process and procedures for collecting evidence fully, particularly if they have not obtained an NVQ themselves. The workplace trainers make little contribution to training plans.

17. During 1999-2000, of the 55 trainees who began working towards NVQs in warehousing and distribution, only 13 carried out their training plan in full. Forty-two left without gaining any qualifications. In 2000-01, 18 trainees have joined programmes and to date, seven have left early. Retention rates have improved from 24 per cent to 61 per cent. No apprentice has yet completed his or her framework.

18. Some foundation modern apprentices have not received any assessment of their key skills. The company has taken action to remedy this. A local college was subcontracted to provide training in key skills but did not do so to the company's satisfaction. Consultants were then employed to carry out key skills training but they also failed to meet the company's requirements. The company has recently engaged consultants from a different firm to draw up action plans for each trainee to receive key skills training. It is the intention of management to find another subcontractor to carry out this training. Some trainees are gathering evidence for their portfolios of their acquisition of key skills, but at the moment, there are no arrangements for assessing this.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 4

19. The company has a written equal opportunities policy, which is distributed to each member of staff through the staff handbook. The policy has recently been rewritten to take account of relevant legislation. At the time of the reinspection, eight of the 12 trainees were female and none was from an ethnic minority group or had a physical disability. The proportion of female trainees was similar to the proportion of female employees in the company.

At the original inspection, the following weaknesses were identified:

- ◆ no monitoring of equal opportunities in work-based training
- ◆ lack of staff training on equal opportunities
- ◆ no promotion of equal opportunities

The equal opportunities policy has been revised since the last inspection to make it more comprehensive but it is not yet operative. Many of the weaknesses identified in the original inspection still remain. Inspectors agreed with the grade given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good training for staff on equal opportunities

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ failure to give sufficient priority to the promotion of equal opportunities
- ◆ no specific action to recruit more female trainees
- ◆ no targets for the recruitment of trainees from under-represented groups

20. Since the original inspection, staff have benefited from some particularly good training workshops related to trainees' recruitment and equal opportunities. A consultant who is also a barrister was engaged to carry out this training. Staff said that they found the training most helpful and they now have good understanding of equal opportunities. This training has now been extended to senior and some middle managers.

21. The company has a recently updated equal opportunities policy. It is clearly written and staff and trainees understand if the policy is discussed at the induction session when the company handbook is issued. However, the time allocated for the discussion of equal opportunities is only two and half minutes and is inadequate. Trainees are also told whom they should speak to if they have any problems. It is explained to trainees that they can make complaints but there is no written complaints procedure. Action is taken, however, to deal with complaints. After induction, no checks are made on trainees' understanding of equal opportunities.

22. The company places great importance on health and safety. Much of the

induction programme relates to health and safety matters. In contrast, equality of opportunity receives far less coverage. During the trainees' induction, only two and a half minutes are allocated for discussion of equal opportunities. Thereafter, trainers and staff make little reference to equality of opportunity and seldom discuss it with the trainees. Recently, however, the company has included a statement about its commitment to upholding equal opportunities in all advertisements of job vacancies.

23. The company maintains that women are not attracted to working in this occupational sector. The majority of the company's middle and senior managers are men. The company has not taken any specific action to recruit more female trainees. Data on trainees' gender, ethnicity and disabilities are not collected systematically and analysed regularly. The company does not set itself recruitment targets for proportions of trainees from groups under-represented on training programmes.

Trainee support

Grade 3

24. All potential trainees are treated as applicants for full-time posts and are subject to the company's standard recruitment procedures. They are given the same one-day induction to the company which all members of staff receive. This covers grievance procedures, health and safety, equal opportunities and issues related to their welfare and support. All employees have a three-month probationary period. Following successful completion of this, they are invited to apply for further training. Staff who are interested in enrolling on an NVQ programme are invited to a session in which they are given information about it. After enrolment on their chosen course, the new trainees are allocated a trainer and assessor who is responsible for their training, assessment and support throughout the programme. They are also assigned to a work-based trainer. Reviews of trainees' progress are carried out in the workplace at least once every 12 weeks. Visits from staff to monitor trainees' performance are made more often by arrangement with the trainees' line manager. Wherever possible, trainees are assessed in the workplace through observation of their performance, although some use is also made of witness testimonies to the trainees' competence. Assessments are often arranged at short notice at the request of the trainee. The company produces training materials relating to information technology, health and food safety, customer care, security, and various occupational skills.

At the original inspection, the following weaknesses were identified:

- ◆ no initial assessment to identify additional support and training needs
- ◆ poor individual training plans
- ◆ no strategies for providing additional support
- ◆ lack of NVQ reviews and poor monitoring of progress

The company has taken action to rectify weaknesses identified in the original inspection. Initial assessment has been introduced but this has not proved effective as a means of identifying trainees' additional learning needs. Individual training

plans have been improved and are updated to take account of trainees' progress and changing needs. Trainees' progress is now reviewed more frequently.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ thorough and comprehensive induction to trainees' job role
- ◆ frequent and highly productive contact between workplace trainers and trainees
- ◆ willingness of assessors to work unsociable hours to help trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficiently systematic initial assessment
- ◆ no accreditation of trainees' prior learning

25. During their induction, the objectives of their training are explained to the trainees. They are made aware that it is important for them to be highly motivated. Induction is thorough and well planned. The trainees find their induction valuable and remember its content. Trainees are told what their rights and responsibilities are and they are given comprehensive information on health and safety. All trainees receive a useful induction handout about facilities available to them, equal opportunities and team building. It also includes problem-solving exercises. Each of the divisions of the company provides trainees with a separate induction to the workplace.

26. Assessors visit the trainees frequently, particularly at the beginning of their programme. The trainees establish a strong and productive working relationship with the trainers in the workplace. The trainers give the trainees comprehensive advice and substantial support, especially in the early stages of their training, through one-to-one tutoring. Trainees are well pleased with the support they receive. They are also given helpful advice on other training available to them through the company's in-house training programmes.

27. Assessors work unsociable hours to carry out assessment of trainees and reviews of trainees' progress. Assessors are prepared to make themselves available at short notice, and outside normal working hours, to assess the competences of trainees on shift work. For example, assessors will visit the workplace in the early hours of the morning to help trainees.

28. As the self-assessment report acknowledges, initial assessment is insufficiently diagnostic and systematic. Initial assessment is carried out mainly by interview, during which staff discuss trainees' prior achievements and personal circumstances, and aim to identify trainees' needs for additional learning support. This method of initial assessment is not always effective as a means of identifying the help trainees require. Tests devised by external agencies are not used. The company now has an action plan to improve its arrangements for the initial assessment of trainees.

29. There are no systematic arrangements for the accreditation of trainees' prior learning and experience. For example, some trainees have already achieved key skills certification, but little or no account is taken of this when planning their training. The company lacks staff who are qualified to accredit trainees' prior learning and experience.

Management of training

Grade 3

30. The human resources department has recently produced human resources and training strategies, which have recently been approved by the board. There has been a recent restructuring of the training department, which now consists of two training managers, a quality assurance controller, two assessors and a training administrator. There is also a subcontractor who works on a part time basis as an assessor and internal verifier. All assessors are occupationally qualified and hold appropriate assessor qualifications. Job roles and responsibilities are outlined in job descriptions. The computerised management information system produces a range of data. These data cover the number of NVQ units individual trainees complete, information on trainees when they start programmes and when they leave them, and include summary reports from trainees and staff who have attended training courses. Meetings of training department staff take place every month and are minuted. The meetings cover general training issues, quality assurance matters, and issues relating specifically to NVQ training.

At the original inspection, the following weaknesses were identified:

- ◆ ineffective co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ lack of strategic planning for training
- ◆ no systematic staff reviews
- ◆ lack of clarity in NVQ training responsibilities
- ◆ little involvement of workplace managers in NVQ training
- ◆ no accurate information and data to assist management decisions
- ◆ poor understanding of training scheme documents by training staff

31. All these weaknesses have been addressed since the last inspection. Recently, an appraisal process has been introduced for staff in the training centre and also in the sales department. In other divisions, managers review the work, punctuality and attendance of staff. Staff now have clear job descriptions specifying their responsibilities and stating to whom they are accountable. Workplace managers are now more closely involved in the NVQ process and understand it better. Workplace managers take part in reviews of trainees' progress. Training staff are familiar with training scheme documents and use them effectively. On- and off-the-job training are now co-ordinated effectively. There is, however, no off-the-job training away from the workplace. All theory training is carried out in the workplace.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ successful management of strategies for improvement
- ◆ effective deployment of staff
- ◆ good internal communications

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient analysis of data
- ◆ insufficient external networking
- ◆ weak management of subcontractors

32. The progress made by the company since the original inspection is impressive. Numerous complex changes have been implemented successfully. Restructuring at board level has been the catalyst for change, and the implementation of training is now given higher priority. The company acknowledges that training and the achievement of NVQs by employees bring tangible benefits to the business. The 'quality councils' for each division emphasise the importance of planning and managing training well. Managers speak enthusiastically of what they consider to be the beneficial results of training. For example, in one division, the retention rate for staff has increased from 30 per cent to 50 per cent, and managers believe staff training has been a cause of this improvement. The company recognises, however, the need for managers themselves to receive training and priority is being given to management training.

33. The company now deploys staff across divisions of the organisation to broaden their experience and to aid networking between divisions. For example, the recently appointed training manager, responsible for management development, has several years' management experience in three different divisions of the organisation. Many operational managers have worked in different divisions to broaden their experience. Managers from different divisions network effectively. They consider that the standards of customer service have improved, following more co-operation between divisions. The company's effective deployment of staff has led, in turn, to a broader range of learning experiences for trainees.

34. Communications within the training department are good. There are monthly team meetings of staff where training issues are discussed. Training staff share good practice informally and have close working relationships. The company has launched a number of successful initiatives to improve internal communications. The quality councils are an important means of planning and implementing improvements. They use feedback from staff and customers as the basis for much of their work. The management style is consultative and effective. Most managers have access to e-mail. An intranet system is being developed and this will be accessible to all staff, including trainees on NVQ programmes. There is a team briefing system whereby key messages from the most senior levels in the organisation are disseminated to staff. The company acknowledges that there is a need to develop and encourage more communication upwards, from staff to senior

managers.

35. The company now carries out strategic planning for training. There is a clearly defined human resources strategy, and from this, an operational plan for the training department has been drawn up. This plan was completed recently and has yet to be approved. In the human resources strategy, there are clear objectives relating to the retention and turnover of staff. Staff in the training department have a firm understanding of how they can help the company achieve these objectives.

36. Staff in the training department have made significant progress in ensuring that managers now have accurate information on trainees' performance to help them in their decision-making. Assessors now follow common procedures for reporting to the centre manager every month on trainees' progress. The information they provide is collated and used by the centre manager to identify potential problems, and plan internal verification. Although more information is collected than at the time of the original inspection, insufficient analysis and use are made of it. For example, equal opportunities monitoring data are collected, but are not analysed, interpreted or acted upon. Data are not used to make comparisons between, for example, the performance of different groups of trainees, or to identify trends. Achievement rates are not compared and analysed with the aim of finding out how trainees' performance may be improved. The training department has recognised that there is a need to disseminate more information about trainees' progress to workplace managers.

37. The only firm links between the company and external organisations are those it has with the awarding body and the local LSC. The company has taken little action to establish productive relationships with other organisations in the field of education and training.

38. In the past, the training department has used the services of external providers and consultants for a variety of purposes, and continues to do so. Management of subcontractors is weak. The company had an arrangement with a local college whereby the college would provide training in key skills for trainees on modern apprenticeships, and help staff in the training department implement key skills training themselves. The company has no formal agreement with the college. Staff in the training department were aware that trainees were making slow progress in developing key skills. It was not, however, until two trainees complained formally about their lack of progress in acquiring key skills that the company took any action and terminated its informal arrangement with the college. The company now subcontracts a freelance assessor and verifier to provide training in key skills. The written agreement with this subcontractor merely clarifies the number of days to be worked and the fee payable. The agreement does not specify precisely the services to be provided, the standards required of them, the timescales within which they will be carried out, and how their effectiveness will be monitored. Another subcontractor is currently producing a report on the extent to which trainees have been adversely affected by their lack of training in key skills. The company has not, however, entered into any written agreement with this

GOOD PRACTICE

A system has been recently introduced for recording contact between assessors. Every informal contact between assessors about assessment-related matters is recorded on a log. The company is now able to monitor the frequency of contact between assessors and keep a record of their discussions.

subcontractor.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

39. The 'quality first' initiative was first implemented in the cash and carry division a number of years ago, and has now been developed and extended to other divisions. Each division has a 'quality council', with representatives from the division, including the training department. The role of the quality councils is to implement initiatives to improve the quality of training and services and develop divisional training plans. Quality councils meet monthly. Senior managers chair meetings and are responsible for ensuring that actions agreed are carried out. 'Quality councils' are responsible for planning and implementing arrangements for gathering feedback from customers, staff and managers. Staff on the councils analyse the feedback to identify issues related to training. Feedback on training is also obtained from course evaluation forms which the trainees complete. There is a policy on quality assurance and set procedures relating to activities such as assessment and verification, workplace training and appeals.

At the original inspection, the following weaknesses were identified:

- ◆ no formal quality assurance arrangements for the NVQ provision
- ◆ poor internal verification
- ◆ inadequate arrangements for sharing good practice
- ◆ little analysis of data for improving the quality of training
- ◆ non-compliance with some aspects of the training contract
- ◆ lack of established self-assessment procedures

The company has taken effective action to rectify the weaknesses identified during the original inspection. The internal verification process is now satisfactory. Verifiers give assessors detailed feedback, orally and in writing, on the quality of their assessment practice. Assessors' activities are co-ordinated. A chart shows which particular assessor is responsible for which group of candidates. There is a clear rationale for sampling an adequate number of assessments for the purposes of internal verification. The company now ensures that it complies fully with the terms of its training contract.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ full involvement of staff in planning and implementing continuous improvement
- ◆ good arrangements for collecting, analysing and acting on feedback

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some gaps in the quality assurance process
- ◆ some ineffective, operational planning

40. Staff play a key role in helping the company carry out the continuous improvement of its provision and services. Staff, managers, trainees and customers provide feedback and this is highly valued. Trainees respond to questionnaires well. For example, 74 per cent of questionnaires issued to trainees recently were answered and returned. Action is taken on responses to questionnaires. For example, through their answers to a questionnaire recently, managers revealed that they had a poor understanding of the NVQ process. The company has now provided training sessions on NVQs for managers and they have welcomed these. Staff are encouraged to put forward ideas for improving current systems and processes and these are acted on. Problem-solving groups are established by the quality councils. They are made up of representatives from the division, and their role is to investigate a problem identified by the quality council and suggest ways of overcoming it. Self-assessment procedures have been firmly established. The training department now formulates an action plan for the improvement of provision. New systems have been introduced, such as those for monitoring and recording trainees' progress. The process for reviewing trainees' progress has been improved. Trainees now receive more effective induction to the NVQ programme.

41. There are two sets of policies in use in the company. One set of policies has been in place for many years and applies to the company as a whole. These policies are reviewed every two years by the human resources manager who seeks approval from the board for any modifications to policy statements. Policies cover areas such as health and safety, equal opportunities and staff development, and they are summarised in the employees' handbook. Another set of policies has been in place for two years. These policies relate specifically to the NVQ training programme rather than the company as a whole. They cover, for example, activities specifically related to training such as assessment and internal verification, key skills and the monitoring and recording of trainees' progress towards achieving the NVQ. These policies are the responsibility of the centre manager who reviews them annually. Some staff are not fully aware of the policies they have to follow. For example, the subcontracted internal verifier was unaware of the company's policy on equal opportunities. The recently appointed training manager did not know of the company's policies relating to the NVQ process.

42. Policies are made available to staff but they receive insufficient guidance on how to implement them. The implementation of policies is monitored both formally and informally. For example, the implementation of the assessment policy and procedures is monitored through the internal verification process. The implementation of the policy for reviewing and recording trainees' achievements is monitored at team meetings and through monthly reports on trainees' performance. Internal audits of the quality of the NVQ programmes have been introduced recently. The implementation of some policies, however, is not monitored systematically. There is no formal monitoring of the policy on arrangements for special assessment, although the training centre manager feels confident that all staff are carrying the policy out. There are some gaps in the coverage of the quality assurance process. For example, the process does not cover the initial assessment of trainees, or procedures for gathering feedback. Although there is a clear quality

assurance procedure for monitoring induction to the workplace, this does not extend to the induction trainees receive to the NVQ process.

43. All staff understand the company's key priorities. There is, however, no formal strategic plan for the company as a whole. Strategic planning for the human resources department is effective. Across the company, action plans are drawn up to deal with identified problems. For example, there is very effective action-planning in response to feedback. This has led to improvements. In some instances, however, there has been a lack of effective action-planning in the training department. For example, there has not been enough systematic planning to implement action recommended by the internal verifier, and no follow-up to check that this action has been carried out. There was a similar lack of action-planning when the company received a report from the local LSC containing recommendations for action on some feedback from trainees. The report was passed to assessors but they did not draw up a plan to implement the recommendations, identify who had responsibility for specific action, and state timescales within which action had to be carried out. The quality assurance process does not cover operational planning adequately to check it is prioritised properly and carried out effectively.