



Education and Training
Inspectorate

ApprenticeshipsNI Provision in A4e Northern Ireland

Report of an Inspection
in March 2013



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

CUSTOMER
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In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

All the statistics in this report have been supplied and verified by A4e Northern Ireland.

Performance Levels

The Education and Training Inspectorate use the following performance levels in reports:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

Key Performance Indicators and Definitions	
Retention	The percentage of enrolments at week 4 of year one who completed their occupational training framework, measured over the full duration of their course.
Achievement	The percentage of trainees/apprentices who completed their occupational training framework and who fully achieved their framework qualification.
Progression	The percentage of successful completers who progressed to further/higher education/training or employment.

Glossary of terms and abbreviations

ANI	ApprenticeshipsNI
DEL	Department for Employment and Learning (The Department)
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate (The Inspectorate)
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILT	Information and Learning Technology
IT	Information technology
NI	Northern Ireland
PLA	Programme - Led Apprenticeship
PTP	Personal Training Plan
TfS	Training for Success
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

SECTION ONE – OVERALL PROVISION

1. Introduction

1.1 Context

Since 2007, A4e Northern Ireland (A4e) has been contracted by the Department to supply training for the ApprenticeshipsNI programme. A4e Northern Ireland is part of A4e, which is a large for-profit employment services and work-based learning provider operating across the United Kingdom. In November 2012, A4e restructured and closed its administration and training premises in Belfast, Limavady and Newry. The organisation located its administration base in its Larne Steps to Work office, and all managers and tutors became home-based workers with access to secretarial services in A4e's Antrim Steps to Work office.

The organisation is contracted to offer a range of apprenticeships at level 2 and level 3 across a number of geographical contract areas within Northern Ireland. The apprenticeships include the professional and technical areas of aeronautical engineering, horticulture, business and administration, customer services, early years care and education, financial services, food and drink manufacturing, hospitality and catering, property services, retail, and warehousing and storage. The range of contract areas covers most of Northern Ireland and extends to Belfast, Enniskillen, Newry, Larne, and Londonderry.

The organisation is led by the head of operations for Northern Ireland, who is supported operationally by the skills contract manager and four administrators. The training is managed by two business leaders and delivered by 16 vocational learning assessors, and nine essential skills tutors. Three business development advisers support the apprenticeship recruitment process, and the regional internal verifier, the quality and training manager and the regional quality verifier provide and manage a range of quality assurance processes.

The organisation has a number of sub-contract arrangements in place: Babcock Training Northern Ireland deliver retail; Global Horizons Skills Ltd deliver customer service and warehousing and storage; the Miller Group deliver hospitality and catering; and Dunbia, Moy Park and the Scottish Association of Master Bakers deliver food and drink manufacturing. At the time of the inspection, these sub-contractors collectively were providing training and assessment to 161 apprentices.

1.2 Current registrations by programme

Programme	Number of apprentices	% of total registrations
ApprenticeshipsNI level 2	872	89%
ApprenticeshipsNI level 3	111	11%
Total	983	100%

1.3 Current registrations by professional technical area

Professional and technical area	Number of apprentices	% of total registrations
Business and administration	46	5%
Customer service	349	35%
Food and drink manufacturing	144	15%
Hospitality and catering	270	27%
Retail	70	7%
Warehousing and storage	104	11%
Total	983	100%

1.4 Qualifications of current apprentices on entry to their programme

Programme	ApprenticeshipsNI % (Number)
% of apprentices with 4 or more GCSEs or equivalent at Grades A*-C including English and mathematics	9% (88)
% of apprentices with 4 or more GCSEs or equivalent at Grades A*-C	10% (98)
% apprentices with GCSE English and mathematics or equivalent at Grades A*-C	13% (128)
% of apprentices with 4 or more GCSEs or equivalent at Grades A*-G	12% (118)
% apprentices with no qualifications	76% (747)
Overall Total	983

Note: All data sourced from A4e at the time of the inspection.

1.5 Scope and method of the inspection

The inspection of A4e focused on achievements and standards, the provision for learning and leadership and management, including the organisation's processes for self-evaluation leading to improvement. The key questions and quality indicators which guide inspection and self-evaluation in these three aspects of training supplier organisations, which were applied to this inspection, are available in the Inspectorate's publication *Improving Quality: Raising Standards, Work-based Learning* <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/improving-quality-raising-standards/improving-quality-raising-standards-iqrs-work-based-learning.htm>.

A team of 12 inspectors and four associate assessors observed a total of 92 apprentices in 58 training sessions, and a further 196 apprentices were interviewed in the workplace. The inspectors also held discussions with the sub-contractors, key staff and 96 employers' representatives. In addition, the inspectors examined samples of the apprentices' work, schemes of work and session plans and the apprentices' personal training plans. The organisation's self-evaluation report and other relevant documentation were also scrutinised.

The inspection also focused on the arrangements for care, support and guidance and safeguarding of vulnerable groups. The arrangements for the inspection included the opportunity for the apprentices to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection.

Questionnaire	Number issued	Number returned	Percentage returned (%)	Number with comments
Apprentices	400	172	43	41

The returns show that the apprentices' experiences in A4e are mostly good. While almost all of the apprentices surveyed through the questionnaire were positive about their experiences within A4e, a minority of those interviewed during the inspection raised some concerns regarding the regularity and frequency of their training and assessment.

The Inspectorate has reported the outcomes of the questionnaires, and discussions held with the apprentices, to the relevant managers.

2. Overall findings of the inspection

2.1 Overall, the quality of training provided by A4e is inadequate; the areas for improvement outweigh the strengths in the provision. The inspection has identified significant areas for improvement in the standards achieved, the quality of the training, teaching and learning, and the leadership and management, which need to be addressed urgently if the organisation is to meet effectively the needs of all of the apprentices. The Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor and report on the organisation's progress in addressing the areas for improvement, over a 12-18 month period.

2.2 Overall summary of main findings

There is inadequate strategic planning and appropriate investment in ICT infrastructure and information systems, to support effective management and quality improvement of the provision.

The curricular leadership and planning of the provision is inadequate; there is a lack of strategic vision for delivering cohesive, high quality apprenticeship training programmes.

The quality of the apprenticeship training in hospitality and catering, and retail and customer service, which account for just under 70% of all enrolments, is inadequate.

The self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes are inadequate. There is an insufficient focus on improving the quality of the apprentices' training and learning experiences, and the processes are not supported well enough with an accurate collation, analysis and interpretation of data.

There is insufficient accommodation to support the full range of management and training functions, and there is too little use of ILT to support and enhance the apprentices' learning.

There are links and partnerships with a wide range of employers, from micro-business to large employers. The effective involvement of employers in the apprentices' learning is, however, underdeveloped.

The majority (60%) of the directed training sessions observed were good or better; the learning assessors work hard to set a positive tone for learning and use questioning effectively to extend the apprentices' knowledge and understanding. In the remainder, there is an excessive focus on meeting the requirements of the apprentices' targeted vocational qualification, with missed opportunities to broaden their understanding and develop their transferable skills.

While the essential skills provision is satisfactory, there is insufficient planning, tracking and monitoring to ensure the apprentices have timely training sessions which are integrated to their professional and technical training. Most of the apprentices are making satisfactory progress in improving the standard of their literacy and numeracy skills, but a minority are making slow progress in achieving their qualification.

The careers education, information, advice and guidance is inadequate; there is a lack of pre-entry guidance to ensure the apprentices are on the most appropriate training and progression pathway.

Although a majority of the apprentices achieve at least satisfactory standards of work, a significant minority of them are not extending sufficiently their skills beyond their existing knowledge and experience.

While the achievement rates for those apprentices who complete their training are good, the retention rates are satisfactory and require improvement. Too few apprentices progress to level 3 programmes after completion of their level 2 training.

Overall performance level	Inadequate
Contributory levels:	
Achievements and standards	Satisfactory
Provision for learning	Satisfactory
Leadership and management	Inadequate
Areas of learning performance levels	
Business and administration	Satisfactory
Essential skills	Satisfactory
Food and drink manufacturing	Satisfactory
Hospitality and catering	Inadequate
Retail and customer service	Inadequate
Warehousing and storage	Satisfactory

2.3 What does A4e need to do to improve further?

A4e needs to revise its annual development plan to take account of the following key priorities for development:

- more effective strategic leadership and management of the ApprenticeshipsNI provision;
- more effective processes for self-evaluation and quality improvement planning, which are underpinned by the collation, analysis and interpretation of up to date, reliable and accurate data;
- better curricular leadership, including more effective integration of the apprentices' essential skills development within their vocational learning;
- to review the rigour and appropriateness of the pre-entry guidance for apprentices and the purpose and effectiveness of the apprentices' personal training plans;
- to enhance the quality and consistency of the teaching, training and learning, with a particular focus on extending and enhancing the apprentices' technical knowledge and occupational skills; and
- to address urgently the inadequate quality of the provision in the professional and technical areas of retail and customer service, and hospitality and catering.

3. Achievements and standards

3.1 The achievements and standards are satisfactory.

3.2 The achievements and standards are good in the professional and technical area of business and administration. They are satisfactory in food and drink manufacturing, hospitality and catering, the essential skills and warehousing and storage. Achievements and standards are inadequate in retail and customer service.

3.3 In the professional and technical areas of business and administration, food and drink manufacturing, hospitality and catering, and warehousing and storage, the standards of work achieved by the apprentices vary from good to satisfactory. The majority are well-motivated, develop their occupational skills and knowledge to a level commensurate with industry standards or commercial practice, and are making good progress towards their targeted qualification. For example, in business and administration, the apprentices are proficient in a range of office procedures; in food and drink manufacturing, they are able to work competently and efficiently in production plants; and in warehousing and storage, they develop effective communication skills. However, a significant minority of the apprentices achieve only satisfactory standards of work. They are already experienced and proficient in their work roles, have well-developed occupational skills and knowledge, and as a result show only limited enhancement of their occupational skills and knowledge. In addition, for these apprentices, the pace of work and progression in their learning are inadequate.

3.4 In the professional and technical area of retail and customer service, while a majority of the apprentices make satisfactory progress towards achieving their targeted qualification, the standards achieved by the remaining apprentices, range from inadequate to unsatisfactory. Their understanding of the qualification structure is poor, they make inadequate progress towards achieving their targeted qualification, and there is too little development of their already established occupational skills and knowledge.

3.5 In the essential skills, the standard of most of the apprentices' work is satisfactory. The majority are enthusiastic and appreciate the opportunity to achieve recognised qualifications in literacy and numeracy. In literacy, the standards of the apprentices' speaking and listening are mostly good. While there is a narrow range of formative written work available, beyond that required for assessment, the standards of the work in the apprentices' folders vary from very good to satisfactory, but are mostly satisfactory. A minority, however, achieve their essential skills at too slow a pace; this is due to a lack of adequate planning and coherence in the provision of their training. Based on the organisation's data at the time of the inspection, all of the apprentices who successfully complete their professional and technical training also achieve the essential skills in literacy and numeracy in line with their appropriate apprenticeship framework. It is noteworthy that a minority of the apprentices achieve a qualification in literacy and numeracy at a higher level than that required by their framework.

3.6 While the achievement rates for those apprentices who complete their training are good, the retention rates are satisfactory and require improvement. Too few apprentices (33%) progress to level 3 programmes after completion of their level 2 training.

Table of Achievements over the last four years.

Programme/Strand	Numbers registered who completed 4 weeks training	Retention rate %	Achievement rate %	Progression rate %
ApprenticeshipsNI level 2	2600	67	89	33
ApprenticeshipsNI level 3	321	63	85	NA

4. Provision for learning

4.1 The quality of the provision for learning is satisfactory.

4.2 The quality of the provision for learning is good in the professional and technical area of warehousing and storage. It is satisfactory in business and administration, food and drink, retail and customer service and the essential skills. The quality of the provision for learning is inadequate in hospitality and catering.

4.3 Overall, the curriculum planning across the provision lacks sufficient cohesion and rigour, with only limited linkages across the various aspects of the apprentices' learning programme. The weaknesses in the curriculum planning include: an insufficient use of the wide range of learning opportunities existing within the apprentices' workplace to extend their learning; the underdeveloped role of the workplace mentor to enhance the apprentices' learning experiences; the inadequate integration of the apprentices' essential skills within their professional and technical training; the overly narrow range of training and learning approaches deployed by the learning assessors; and the limited role of care, support and guidance to improve the apprentices' commitment to their programme, and their progression to further training or learning. This is evidenced by the infrequency of the directed training for a significant minority of the apprentices, the lack of ILT to support and enhance their learning, and the overly discrete delivery of the essential skills, often provided after the apprentices have completed their professional and technical training.

4.4 The quality of the apprentices' training and learning experiences varies significantly across the provision. The quality of the teaching, training and learning was good or better in the majority (60%) of the directed training sessions observed; a minority (16%) of these were very good. It is a concern that the remaining 40% were satisfactory or inadequate. In the good or better sessions, the learning assessors set a positive tone for learning, are flexible and respond well to the apprentices' needs, work hard to engage the employers in the training process and they develop the apprentices' occupational knowledge. In the satisfactory and inadequate sessions, however, the learning assessors focus excessively on the apprentices meeting the requirements of their vocational qualifications. As a result, there are too few opportunities for them to extend their learning and development to incorporate a wider range of occupational skills and knowledge. There are missed opportunities to broaden their understanding of contemporary practice and develop their transferable skills, particularly the application and consolidation of their essential skills within the context of their workplace. The range of resources and materials to support the apprentices' learning is inadequate, in particular their lack of access to good quality online learning resources.

4.5 The quality of the essential skills training provided for the apprentices is satisfactory. In the majority (65%) of the sessions, the quality of the teaching and learning is at least good. The tutors respond positively to the individual learning needs of the apprentices and work hard to address their identified weakness in literacy and numeracy. In the remaining sessions (35%), there are insufficient opportunities for active learning to develop the apprentices' independent learning skills or for them to apply and consolidate their literacy and numeracy skills within their workplace setting. The planning, tracking and monitoring of the essential skills provision is inadequate. There is insufficient collation and interrogation of data to ensure that the apprentices' essential skills training is timely and integrated appropriately within their professional and technical programmes. For a minority of the apprentices, gaps in their training are impacting negatively on the development of their literacy or numeracy skills.

4.6 The quality of the induction and initial assessment arrangements for most of the apprentices is generally satisfactory. Across the professional and technical areas, there are well-established processes to select the most appropriate range of units that is matched well to the apprentices' workplace and specific job role. A small number of the apprentices are, however, recruited to programmes that are not aligned well to their prior learning and achievements, or to possible future career progression opportunities. The initial and diagnostics assessments for the essential skills are implemented systematically, although better use needs to be made of the outcomes of this process to plan for a coherent development of the apprentices' literacy and numeracy skills over the training period.

4.7 Across the professional and technical areas, the quality of the apprentices' personal training plans vary from satisfactory to inadequate, but is inadequate overall. There is insufficient recording of the apprentices' prior achievements, work roles or specific development needs. The milestones are set at too low a level in terms of challenge and content. For example, for most of the apprentices' the first milestone consists largely of the completion of aspects of their induction programme. There is insufficient monitoring, tracking and review of the apprentices' progress in developing their occupational skills. There is a lack of regular updating of the personal training plans which includes input from the apprentices and their employers. In addition, the plans do not contain adequate information relating to the apprentices' progress and achievements in their essential skills.

4.8 The assessment activities across the areas inspected are generally well-planned, with a suitable range of evidence in the apprentices' portfolios. On a minority of occasions, however, there is an over-reliance on written questions, often with only minimal responses from the apprentices. The internal verification process is robust, which ensures improving consistency in the standards of the apprentices' portfolios of evidence. The team of internal verifiers work hard to provide feedback to apprentices and their assessors on how to improve the quality of the apprentices' work. More needs to be done, however, to use more effectively the outcomes of the internal verification process to inform the overall quality improvement planning process.

4.9 The quality of the care, guidance and support provided for the apprentices is satisfactory. The learning assessors are flexible and supportive and work hard to meet the individual learning needs of the apprentices, in particular arranging the training to suit their work patterns. In warehousing and storage, for example, training is provided at appropriate times to suit those apprentices on nightshift. However the senior managers need to ensure that all apprentices are in receipt of regular and systematic training, that they have continuity in their learning and are better informed of any necessary changes to their training programme. The careers education, information, advice and guidance provision is inadequate. While A4e has made a start to planning careers sessions for the apprentices, there is a lack of pre-entry advice, information and guidance to ensure that all of them have a clear understanding of the most appropriate training and progression pathways available, matched appropriately to their career aspirations and development opportunities.

5. Leadership and management

5.1 The quality of the leadership and management of the ApprenticeshipsNI programme is inadequate. Across all the professional and technical areas inspected, along with the essential skills, the quality of the leadership and management is consistently inadequate.

5.2 Towards the end of 2012, A4e centralised its administration and management functions to its Larne office and introduced home-based working for the learning assessors, tutors and managers. They closed their regional offices in Belfast, Newry and Limavady. While the managers and staff are working hard to adapt to these new arrangements, there is inadequate strategic investment in, and planning for, an appropriate ICT infrastructure to

support the new working practices. In addition, there is inadequate ILT to support the organisation's model of delivering training, learning and assessment to the apprentices in the workplace. These factors adversely affect the management and co-ordination of the apprenticeship programmes.

5.3 The curricular leadership of the professional and technical areas and the essential skills provision is inadequate. There is a lack of a clear strategic vision for delivering cohesive training programmes, the use of ILT, the integration of essential skills development within vocational learning, and the development of effective pedagogy. The use of specialist staff to co-ordinate and develop the provision for each professional and technical area and for the essentials skills area is underdeveloped. As a result, there is insufficient development of the links between professional and technical training, and the essential skills training.

5.4 The lines of communication within the organisation, and between the organisation and its sub-contractors, are satisfactory. Within the organisation, there is a range of monthly meetings between management and staff, with an appropriate focus on the standardisation of organisational procedures, reviewing achievement of milestones by the apprentices, reviewing learning assessors/tutor caseloads and recruitment trends. There are also similar meetings with sub-contractors to review the apprentices' progress and achievements. These meetings, however, need to focus more on improving the quality of the teaching, training and learning provided to ensure a more appropriate balance between the development of the apprentices' occupational skills and their assessment. The quality of the communication between A4e, the apprentices and their employers is variable and often inadequate. For example, information regarding interruptions to training and other important co-ordination and planning actions is often not communicated effectively to the apprentices and their employers.

5.5 The self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes are inadequate. While A4e has developed a robust system of compliance checks to monitor the extent the training and assessment provided for apprentices is meeting organisational requirements, there is an insufficient focus on the quality of the teaching, training and learning, and on the standards they achieve. The self-evaluation process by each professional and technical area and the essential skills is not supported well enough by an accurate collation, analysis and interpretation of data. Consequently, there is a poor match between the inspection findings and the organisation's self-evaluation findings and performance levels. While the quality improvement plan articulates clearly some key areas for development, which are communicated well to staff, there is a lack of progress in implementing critical actions for improving the quality of the provision. It is unacceptable, for example, that there has been a long delay in the implementation of a suitable management information system, which is having a detrimental impact on the quality of the leadership and management of the contract. The involvement of sub-contractors and employers in the self-evaluation process is underdeveloped, and as a result the good opportunities to share effective practice and plan for improvement are underexploited.

5.6 Staff turnover and absenteeism have impacted negatively on the quality of the training and support provided for a significant minority of the apprentices. While the learning assessors are well-experienced in their professional and technical areas, which is supplemented appropriately with short periods in industry to develop their contemporary skills and knowledge, their pedagogic skills are underdeveloped. The home working arrangements, limited office space and inadequate access to suitable venues for staff and managers to administer their management functions and co-ordinate their teams present unnecessary challenges and constraints for teams to reflect and plan for ongoing improvement.

5.7 There is insufficient accommodation to support the full range of management and training functions. The range and quality of learning resources, including online materials and resources to support effective independent learning, is inadequate, in particular the absence of an appropriate ILT infrastructure which includes a virtual learning environment.

5.8 Links and partnerships with employers range from good to satisfactory, but are mostly satisfactory. The business development advisers work hard to establish contact with a range of employers, from micro-business to large employers. A4e provides apprenticeship training to around 300 employers, including bespoke apprenticeship programmes for large employers in the food manufacturing sector. The role of the employer in the apprenticeship programmes varies across the professional and technical areas, but is underdeveloped overall. In the best practice, the employers have a clear understanding of the aims and purpose of the apprenticeship programme and provide good levels of mentorship support for the apprentice. For a significant minority of the employers, however, they have a limited understanding of the structure and content of the programme, and as a result do not provide sufficient opportunities for the apprentices to extend their skills and knowledge.

5.9 On the basis of the evidence available at the time of the inspection, the arrangements for safeguarding vulnerable groups comply satisfactorily with the Safeguarding Groups (NI) Order 2007.

SECTION TWO – PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL REPORTS

6. Business and administration

KEY FINDINGS

In business and administration, the quality of training provided by A4e is satisfactory.

CONTEXT

There has been a significant decline in registrations in business and administration. At the time of the inspection, there were approximately¹ 40 apprentices on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, 28 of them working at level 2 and the remainder at level 3. Most of them were aged 25 plus and it is a concern that there have been no new registrations in business and administration since October 2012.

The achievements and standards are good.

Most of the apprentices are well-motivated, achieve good standards of work and are making good progress through their qualification. They have a good understanding and knowledge of business and administration office procedures, including reception duties, setting up equipment, maintaining diaries and the effective use of ICT processes to support their job role. The portfolios of evidence are well structured, contain a good range of job-specific evidence and in the best practice include appropriate examples of the apprentices' independent writing and research skills. Over the past four years, the average rate of retention is good at 76% and the achievement rate is very good at 91%.

The quality of the provision for learning is satisfactory.

The learning assessors set a positive tone for learning; they are flexible in responding to the apprentices' needs and work hard to engage the employers in the training process. The apprentices' job roles have been evaluated, for example, to identify opportunities for learning in the workplace, and the units are tailored closely to their needs and job responsibilities. The quality of the workplace training was good in one-half of the sessions observed and satisfactory in the remainder. Where the training is good, the sessions are planned well with a clear sequence, the learning assessors challenge the apprentices through effective questioning and some opportunities are provided to enhance the apprentices' learning and occupational skills. However, the satisfactory sessions are overly focused on apprentices completing tasks for their qualification, and as a consequence they have too few opportunities to develop a wider understanding of contemporary practice and extend their occupational skills in business and administration. There is, therefore, a need to further develop the pedagogic skills of the learning assessors. The potential of ILT to promote the apprentices' learning is not sufficiently exploited. As a consequence, there are insufficient good quality online resources to promote further learning and independent study.

The quality of leadership and management is inadequate.

The provision for business and administration is not led or co-ordinated effectively, the use of data for rudimentary tracking and monitoring is weak and consequently the processes for self-evaluation and quality improvement planning are inadequate. The learning assessors have sound business experience and are provided with appropriate opportunities to gain relevant industry practices and skills. The processes for internal verification are

¹ A4e was unable to provide definitive data on the total number of current registrations in business and administration.

well-established and applied systematically to quality assure the apprentices' work. The quality of the personal training plans is satisfactory. While they contain the required background information and reflect good tracking of milestone achievements in the vocational qualification, they neither track adequately the apprentices' progress in their essential skills, nor do they contain sufficient information on their acquisition of occupational and wider skills.

Table of Achievements over the last four years.

Programme/Strand	Numbers registered who completed 4 weeks training	Retention rate %	Achievement rate %
ApprenticeshipsNI level 2	284	76	92
ApprenticeshipsNI level 3	47	74	88

7. Essential skills

KEY FINDINGS

In the essential skills, the quality of training provided by A4e is satisfactory.

CONTEXT

At the time of the inspection, 983 apprentices were registered on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme. Of these, 645 (66%) were undertaking the essential skills; 526 (82%) were undertaking both literacy and numeracy, 39 (6%) required literacy training only and 80 (12%) required numeracy only. The delivery mode for the essential skills of literacy and numeracy is mostly a one-to-one training model in the workplace. The essential skill of ICT is not offered as it is not required by the apprenticeship frameworks provided by the organisation.

The achievements and standards are satisfactory.

The majority of the apprentices appreciate the opportunity to return to study and gain a recognised qualification which results in an increase in their levels of confidence. In literacy, the standards of the apprentices' speaking and listening skills are mostly good. While there was a narrow range of formative written work available, beyond that required for assessment, the standards of the work in the essential skills folders and in the professional and technical folders ranged from very good to satisfactory, but are mostly satisfactory.

It is a concern that a minority of the apprentices achieve their essential skills at too slow a pace because of the poor planning for the essential skills provision; gaps in provision for these apprentices have impeded the coherence of their learning and progress. The organisation reports that all of the apprentices who complete their training achieve their essential skills in literacy and numeracy. A minority of the apprentices achieve an essential skills qualification in literacy and numeracy at a higher level than required by their apprenticeship framework. A4e needs to gather and analyse data more systematically on these value added achievements in order to be able to evaluate the provision more robustly and to plan for further success.

The quality of the provision for learning is satisfactory.

In almost all of the sessions, the tutors work hard to support the apprentices and to engage them in their learning. While each tutor brings a laptop to the teaching and training session to support learning, a minority of the apprentices have limited confidence and competence in the use of ICT and need the opportunity to develop these skills.

The planning for the individual training sessions is mostly good, and the apprentices have good opportunities to address specific areas of weakness as identified through the initial and diagnostic assessment processes. The strong focus, however, on addressing the identified deficits in an itemised manner results in limited planning for holistic skills development in literacy and in numeracy, and in limited transferability of these skills into their occupational work.

The tutors use a narrow range of teaching and training approaches, as they are limited by the delivery model of one-to one training in the workplace. Within the constraints of the model, 65% of the sessions observed are good or better but the remainder are satisfactory or below. Overall, there are very few opportunities for group work and too few opportunities for active learning to develop and enhance the independent learning skills of the apprentices.

There is limited contextualisation of the essential skills and, in a minority of cases, the essential skills training does not begin until after the completion of the professional and technical qualification, which is inappropriate. This limits significantly the opportunities for the apprentices to use and develop their literacy and numeracy skills in an applied context. The links between the professional and technical tutors and the essential skills tutors are not well-developed and insufficient attention is paid to developing the application of the apprentices' literacy or numeracy skills to support their job role.

The quality of the leadership and management is inadequate.

The planning, tracking and monitoring of the essential skills provision are inadequate and the data gathering and interrogation to inform these key processes are weak. The curricular leadership and management of the provision lack sufficient rigour, and as a result there is insufficient cohesion in the overall delivery of the essential skills. The planning for the delivery of literacy and numeracy is not systematic, and in a minority of instances, is not timely enough to meet the apprentices' needs. It does not support sufficiently the development of literacy and numeracy within the professional and technical programmes. The self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes for the essential skills are inadequate. These processes do not use data effectively, neither to identify clearly enough the strengths and the areas for development within the provision, nor set qualitative and quantitative targets for improvement. While there is an internal verification process in place, which contributes well to overall staff development, it is not linked adequately to other key processes, particularly the review and the quality improvement planning processes.

8. Food and drink manufacturing

KEY FINDINGS

In food and drink manufacturing, the quality of training provided by A4e is satisfactory.

CONTEXT

A4e provides the ApprenticeshipsNI programme in Food and Drink for 123 apprentices at level 2 and 12 at level 3. Currently, there are 94 apprentices training directly with A4e in the food Industry pathway; the remainder are trained by sub-contractors: Dunbia (24) and Moy Park in the meat and poultry pathway; and Scottish Association of Master Bakers (4) in baking. A4e deliver the essential skills provision for all of the apprentices. Most of the apprentices are over the age of 25.

The achievements and standards are satisfactory.

Most of the apprentices work to appropriate standards, operating efficiently in high volume production facilities. They maintain the quality of products through a range of methods appropriate to their job role. This includes, for example: visual inspection and testing of products and packaging; checking dates, prices and production volumes; and taking appropriate action to maintain process parameters. A significant minority of the apprentices were already experienced operatives prior to commencing their training, and as a result, show only limited development in their knowledge and skills as a result of the training. They do, however, value the opportunity to achieve recognised qualifications. The standard of the apprentices' written work in their portfolios is too variable, and opportunities for them to further develop and apply their literacy and numeracy skills in the workplace are missed. Over the past four years, while the retention and achievement rates are outstanding (92%) and very good (93%) respectively on the level 2 programme, the retention rate is satisfactory (64%) and the achievement rate is unsatisfactory (38%) for the level 3 programme and in need of urgent improvement. Progression rates from level 2 to level 3 are low.

The quality of the provision for learning is satisfactory.

The quality of the teaching, training and learning ranges from satisfactory to good but is mostly satisfactory. The learning assessors use a limited range of teaching, training and learning strategies and need support to develop more effective pedagogic skills. The qualifications are tailored well to the individual needs of most of the apprentices, with appropriate units selected to match their job role. Food and drink manufacturing, however, is not the most appropriate programme for a small number of the apprentices working in restaurants. The quality of the sub-contracted provision provided by Dunbia and Moy Park is good; the training is well-planned by the training managers and is enhanced by an appropriate range of additional training. The quality of the provision provided for the A4e apprentices is satisfactory; the resources to support training are not well-developed and the programme is mainly focused on the achievement of the targeted qualification. The internal verification process is well established and there is good evidence of improvement in the quality of individual portfolios, but there is limited evidence of adequate strategic planning to capture and share good practice. The quality of the personal training plans is satisfactory, they capture most of the key information but there are gaps and the reviews are not completed consistently.

The quality of the leadership and management is inadequate.

A4e has established good links with a wide range of employers and most are positive about their experiences. In particular, employers value the flexible training model that is matched well to their business needs, the effective communication, and the high levels of support provided by the A4e learning assessors for the apprentices. It is a concern, however, that the A4e learning assessor has an excessively high case load of apprentices which impacts negatively on the overall quality of the provision. The monitoring and tracking systems are inadequate and do not inform planning effectively. The self-evaluation process does not fully include the provision by the sub-contractors, and opportunities to share best practice across the provision are underdeveloped. While learning assessors are provided with good mobile ICT equipment, there is limited use of ILT to enhance learning.

Table of Achievements over the last four years.

Programme/Strand	Numbers registered who completed 4 weeks training	Retention rate %	Achievement rate %
ApprenticeshipsNI level 2	133	92	93
ApprenticeshipsNI level 3	33	64	38

9. Hospitality and catering

KEY FINDINGS

In hospitality and catering, the quality of training provided by A4e is inadequate.

CONTEXT

At the time of the inspection, there were 268 apprentices² on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, 243 of them working towards level 2 and the remainder towards level 3. Only a minority of the apprentices hold GCSE passes at grade C or above in English and mathematics, on entry to their programme.

The achievements and standards are satisfactory.

Most of the apprentices are well-motivated and enthusiastic, and demonstrate a good understanding of legislation regulations, food and safety requirements and effective customer service. A minority of the employers report that the apprentices' commitment to their jobs has increased as a result of their participation in the apprenticeship programme. The majority of the apprentices visited are making good progress in developing and applying their trade-specific skills successfully in the workplace. A significant minority of them, however, are not encouraged sufficiently by the learning assessors to be independent learners and to further develop their skills and knowledge. The standard of the apprentices' written and spoken communication is satisfactory. Over the last four years, overall outcomes are satisfactory; the average retention rate is satisfactory at 64% and the achievement rate for those who remain on the programme is very good at 91%.

The quality of the provision for learning is inadequate.

² A4e was unable to provide definitive data on the total number of current registrations in hospitality and catering

The learning assessors are hard-working and flexible and have developed positive relationships with the apprentices. Whilst the quality of around two-thirds of the training and learning sessions observed was good, significant deficiencies exist in many aspects of the provision for learning. In a significant minority (32%) of the sessions observed, there was insufficient challenge for the apprentices, an over-emphasis on apprentices completing tasks for their qualification with a limited range of training and learning strategies used. The application of ILT to enhance the apprentices' learning is underdeveloped. The quality of the personal training plans is mostly inadequate and they are not effective working documents. Although the apprentices undergo an initial assessment on entry to their programme, the outcomes of these assessments are not used well enough by the learning assessors to plan individual programmes of learning. As a result, targets for improvement are poorly defined and the needs of individual apprentices are not being adequately met. The induction programme is ineffective in ensuring that the apprentices have a good understanding of the key elements of their training programme. Opportunities to embed the development of the apprentices' literacy and numeracy skills are insufficiently planned for across the provision. The quality and range of training and specialist resources available to enhance training and learning, is inadequate.

The quality of the leadership and management is inadequate.

Due to a lack of co-ordination of the hospitality and catering provision, there is insufficient planning, at both strategic and operational levels, to ensure that all apprentices have access to a coherent and well-structured training programme. Whilst regular meetings take place between the management and staff, the management team have a poor strategic overview and understanding of the provision. There is insufficient monitoring and evaluation of the provision for learning by management, including that provided by the sub-contractors, to ensure that all apprentices acquire new skills and achieve to their full potential. As a consequence, there is considerable variation in the quality of the provision across the providers. In addition, the use of reliable data by management to review and evaluate the provision is ineffective and consequently the self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes are inadequate.

Table of Achievements over the last four years.

Programme/Strand	Numbers registered who completed 4 weeks training	Retention rate %	Achievement rate %
ApprenticeshipsNI level 2	762	65	91
ApprenticeshipsNI level 3	50	56	94

10. Retail and Customer service

KEY FINDINGS

In retail and customer service, the quality of training provided by A4e is inadequate.

CONTEXT

Significant numbers of apprentices are registered on both programmes across Northern Ireland, with 349 in customer service and 71 in retail; most (84%) of them are registered on level 2 programmes. Across all of the provision, approximately one-half of the apprentices have essential skill needs in literacy and numeracy. Sixty-five (18%) of the apprentices in customer service are undertaking their professional and technical and essential skills training with Global Horizons Skills Ltd under a sub-contracting arrangement.

The achievements and standards are inadequate.

The majority of the apprentices are developing a satisfactory or better knowledge of retail and customer service to enhance their work roles and overall career goals. They are making satisfactory progress in their professional and technical units and, where appropriate, in their essential skills. A minority of these apprentices, attain good standards of work, and can identify clearly how the programme has developed their occupational competences to improve customer service and merchandising skills in retailing. A significant minority of the apprentices, however, have had lengthy gaps in their training, as a result of poor contingency planning to cover staff illness and maternity leave. These apprentices are making poor progress in their professional and technical units. The programme has added very little to their occupational skills and they express high levels of dissatisfaction about their learning experiences to date. Their knowledge and understanding of the main elements of their training framework are poor. In addition, a minority of the level 3 apprentices do not have relevant work roles to meet sufficiently the vocational requirements of the professional and technical units. Over the last four years, average retention rates for the level 2 and level 3 programmes are satisfactory at 65% and 64% respectively. The average achievement rates over this period for the level 2 and level 3 programmes are good, at 88% and 86% respectively. It is a concern, that during the inspection, the organisation was unable to supply appropriate data to measure progression rates from level 2 to level 3 apprenticeships.

The quality of the provision for learning is satisfactory.

There are significant variations in the quality of the apprentices' learning experiences across the provision. The majority of apprentices, who are receiving regular training, benefit from satisfactory or better learning experiences to extend their knowledge and understanding of contemporary practice in retail and customer service. The remaining apprentices have inadequate opportunities to extend their skills beyond those already gained from their employer-led training programmes and from their current work roles. The quality of the directed training sessions observed varies from very good to inadequate; the majority (55%) were good or better. The key features of the best sessions included clear learning objectives and effective questioning to elicit extended responses from the apprentices. The remaining sessions, focused excessively on the requirements of the targeted qualification, with too few opportunities for skills training and development activities. Although the learning assessors have developed a range of learning resources, their use in directed training is inconsistent. Overall, the use of ILT in training and learning is underdeveloped.

The quality of the personal training plans is inadequate. They do not capture sufficiently the prior levels of educational achievement of the apprentices, nor do they identify their current work roles and development needs. Most of the apprentices and employers are not well-informed on the contents of the training plans or of the key milestones in their training frameworks.

The quality of leadership and management is inadequate.

The use of management information to track the progress of apprentices, and to identify and support those apprentices at risk of not achieving to their full potential, is inadequate. Self-evaluation arrangements are not sufficiently well-developed to make evidence-based judgements on the quality of the provision in order to identify key priorities for improvement. Internal verification arrangements are applied systematically across the provision. Although each apprentice has a designated mentor in the workplace, the roles and responsibilities of the mentors are not clear, and there is little evidence of them supporting effectively the apprentices in their learning. There are shortfalls in the levels of communication with apprentices and their employers, including undue delays in issuing qualification certificates when apprentices complete elements of their training programme.

Table of Achievements over the last four years

Programme/ Strand	Numbers registered who completed 4 weeks training	Retention rate %	Achievement rate %
ApprenticeshipsNI level 2	889	65	88
ApprenticeshipsNI level 3	80	6	86

11. Warehousing and storage

KEY FINDINGS

In warehousing and storage, the quality of training provided by A4e is satisfactory.

CONTEXT

At the time of the inspection, 92 apprentices were registered on the warehousing and storage programme; all of them were targeting the apprenticeship framework at level 2. The directed training for both the vocational qualification and the essential skills is delivered entirely in the workplace; the training for a significant minority (38%) of the apprentices is provided by Global Horizons Skills Ltd, with the remainder delivered by A4e. The majority (65%) of the apprentices are employed in two large warehousing companies, with the remainder spread across other smaller employers, located in the Greater Belfast area.

The achievements and standards are satisfactory.

Most of the apprentices report that they appreciate the opportunity to undertake a relevant work-related qualification. They make good use of opportunities in the workplace to gather appropriate evidence and the standards of their written work and the quality of presentation in their portfolios of evidence are good; their spoken communication skills and responses to questioning are very good. While the majority of the apprentices are making good progress

in completing their programme, a significant minority of them report that they have not had the opportunity to undertake training for their occupational qualifications for some time. This is inappropriate and is hindering their overall progress and achievement and is a cause of considerable frustration for the apprentices and their employers. Over the past four years, the overall retention and achievement rates are good at 79% and 88% respectively.

The quality of the provision for learning is good.

Where vocational training is taking place, the employers speak positively about the programme and the benefits it has for them and their employees. The learning assessors are well-experienced and have developed good working relationships and flexible delivery timetables, which meet well the needs of the apprentices and their employers. The quality of the training and learning in the sessions observed was good, the assessors used good quality training resources and provided good support for the apprentices, who participate well in the sessions. The training is, however, mostly targeted on the achievement of the apprentices qualification, with limited opportunities provided by the learning assessors to up-skill them. The use of ILT to support their training and learning is underexploited. The quality of the personal training plans is satisfactory; while the learning assessors record the outcomes of the training and learning sessions, neither their achievements nor their progress in acquiring occupational and essential skills are not adequately recorded or updated in the plans.

The quality of the leadership and management is inadequate.

Links have been developed with a good range of warehousing and storage companies, and the content of the qualification has been adapted appropriately to match the needs of the individual apprentices and align well with their job roles across the various employers. Although the management structure in A4e has been revised recently, senior managers have been too slow to put contingency measures in place to address gaps in training for a significant minority of the apprentices; it is unacceptable that approximately 30% of the apprentices have had no vocational training for some time. In addition, communication with these particular employers and their apprentices has been poor. As a result a small number of the employers interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the organisation of the programme. The processes for self-evaluation and quality improvement planning are weak and require further development; they are not effective working documents and have not identified and addressed key shortcomings in the provision.

Table of Achievements over the last four years.

Programme/Strand	Numbers registered who completed 4 weeks training	Retention rate %	Achievement rate %	Progression rate for those who achieved full award %
ApprenticeshipsNI level 2	96	79	88	0

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