



Education and Training
Inspectorate

Steps to Work Provision in A4e Antrim Contract Area

Report of an Inspection
in March 2012



CONTENTS

Section	Page
PART ONE: SUMMARY	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. CONTEXT	1
3. PROVISION	2
4. THE INSPECTION	3
5. MAIN FINDINGS	3
PART TWO: OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION	
6. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT	5
7. EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS	7
8. QUALITY OF TRAINING AND SERVICES	8
PART THREE: KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT	
9. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT	12
APPENDIX	

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%

In assessing the various features of the provision, Inspectors relate their evaluations to six descriptors as set out below:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

PART ONE: SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

Step Two: This is targeted at participants who require additional assistance to bring them closer to the labour market and help them find and sustain employment. The participant is offered and provided with a wider range of longer-term support; the provision will normally last for between eight and 26 weeks.

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

2. CONTEXT

2.1 Since June 2011, A4e has been contracted by the Department as Lead Contractor for the delivery of Steps to Work provision in the Antrim contract area of Northern Ireland. The short timescale between the award of the contract in June and its commencement in July resulted in a challenging period for the Lead Contractor. The Antrim contract covers a very wide geographical area, reaching from Ballycastle in the north, to Carrickfergus and Larne in the East. Participants are referred to the Lead Contractor through five Jobs and Benefits offices: Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Larne, Antrim and Ballymoney.

2.2 A4e is supported by 21 sub-contractors, which provides good geographical coverage and local access for all participants to all strands of Steps to Work. The provision is managed by the A4e Head of Operations, supported by five mentors, five employment coaches, five trainers, five customer service consultants, two administrators, two business managers, one partnership manager, one administration team leader, one quality and training manager, and a regional quality verifier.

2.3 The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures 2010 indicates that the extent of deprivation in the Moyle local government district area is ranked ninth out of the 26 district councils in Northern Ireland. Ballymena, Carrickfergus and Coleraine each contain one Super Output Area (SOA) that are ranked in the top 100 most deprived SOAs in Northern Ireland. The Labour Force Survey published by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) for the year to February 2012 shows that the Moyle local government district had the fifth highest claimant count at 6.3% out of the 26 districts in Northern Ireland. It is also notable that in the same period Carrickfergus had the highest and Ballymena had the third highest percentage increases in unadjusted claimant count levels for district council areas at 11.8% and 7.8% respectively. The data supplied by the Department shows that, in December 2011, there were 6,295 Jobseeker's Allowance claimants in the Antrim contract area, the third highest claimant count of all contract areas for this period. The number of participants eligible for mandatory participation on Steps to Work in this region has increased significantly from 875 (January 2009) to 1085 (December 2011). The same statistics show that in the quarter ending in December 2011, of the 1895 participants on Steps to Work in the Antrim contract area, 76% were male and 44% were under 25.

3. PROVISION

3.1 At the time of the second phase of the inspection, in March 2012, there were 463 participants on the Steps to Work provision across the Antrim contract area. Sixty-seven participants were registered on Step One; 50 on Core Gateway, one on Self employment, one on Go for It and 15 on Short Accredited Courses. There were 394 participants registered on Step Two; 170 (43%) on Back to Work, 16 (4%) on National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) lasting 52 weeks, 51 (13%) on Essential Skills Training, 48 (12%) on Qualifications lasting 26 weeks, 32 (8%) on Self-Employment Test Trading, 63 (16%) on Step Ahead and 14 (4%) on the Graduate Acceleration Programme. The remaining 2 participants were registered on Step Three. Around 90% of these participants were on Steps to Work for the first time, with the remaining 10% having been on Steps to Work (or New Deal) more than once.

3.2 At the time of the inspection, of the 394 participants on Step Two, 244 (61%) had no or few qualifications on entry to their provision. Forty-five (11%) of them had between one and three General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) passes at grade C or above, with a further 34 (8%) having four or more GCSE passes at grade C or above. Three of the participants had achieved English and one had achieved mathematics at GCSE grade C or above. Forty-four participants (11%) had achieved vocational qualifications up to level 3, and a further 29 (7%) held higher education qualifications.

3.3 A4e, as the Lead Contractor, was working directly with 277 participants across its five main offices. In addition, 15 of the 21 sub-contractors were actively working with participants: Antrim Enterprise Agency (3), Armstrong Learning (7), BCW Training Ltd (22), Ballymena Business Centre (6), Business in the Community (14), Carrickfergus Enterprise Agency (10), Causeway Enterprise Agency (9), CVNI (4), Elle Enterprises (28), FIT NI (8), Larne Community Enterprises (36), LEDCOM (9), Loughview Training (12), Premier Training (4), USEL (8).

3.4 Almost all of the participants on the Step Two strands were receiving some form of employability preparation, such as Jobsearch, Curriculum Vitae (CV) building, and interview skills, alongside their main strand of Back to Work placements, Essential Skills Training and self-employment opportunities. In order to raise occupational skills, 64 participants were following the NVQ or Qualifications strands.

4. THE INSPECTION

4.1 This report is based on an inspection of the Steps to Work employment programme in A4e and almost all of the sub-contractors' provision. The inspection took place in March 2012 and involved a team of six inspectors.

4.2 During the inspection, the inspectors:

- observed 42 directed training sessions in centres operated by A4e and its sub-contractors;
- visited 98 participants on work experience;
- held discussions with 129 participants, individually and in small groups;
- held discussions with the members of A4e senior management team and senior staff from almost all of the sub-contractors;
- held discussions with key training and support staff;
- examined a wide range of documentation, including samples of participants' written work and their Personal Plan Towards Employment (PPE);
- held discussions with 52 employers; and
- held discussions with Managers, Team Leaders and Advisers from the Jobs and Benefits offices.

5. MAIN FINDINGS

5.1 In the areas inspected, the quality of the Steps to Work adult employment programme provided by A4e is satisfactory; the strengths outweigh areas for improvement in the provision. The inspection has identified areas for improvement in leadership and management and employment outcomes and achievements which need to be addressed if the needs of all the participants are to be met more effectively. The Inspectorate will monitor and report on the organisation's progress in addressing the areas for improvement, over a 12-18 month period.

5.2 The main strengths are the:

- effective leadership provided by the Head of Operations who has been instrumental in establishing appropriate systems and structures to support the management of the Antrim Steps to Work contract;
- commitment of the Lead Contractor staff who have worked hard to establish good working relationships with employers, participants, sub-contractors and staff from the Jobs and Benefits offices;
- commitment to continuous improvement by the Lead Contractor staff including the action taken to address identified areas for improvement; and
- good or better quality of the directed and work-based training in most of the sessions observed.

5.3 The main areas for improvement are the:

- more robust arrangements for the effective analysis and use of data to inform planning for improvement;
- further development of strategies which promote stronger collaborative working between the Lead Contractor and sub-contractors;
- insufficient use of the Confidence and Motivation and Enhanced Support strands to address the needs of those participants who have significant barriers to employment; and
- outcomes into employment from the start of the contract (June 2011) to the time of the inspection (March 2012) which are below the current Departmental target.

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

PART TWO: OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION

6. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

6.1 The leadership and management of the Steps to Work contract for the Antrim area by the Lead Contractor, A4e, is satisfactory. Since the start of the contract in June 2011, the Head of Operations has provided effective leadership in establishing appropriate systems and structures to underpin the management of the contract. This has involved key strategic actions such as the standardisation of administrative procedures and protocols and the establishment of improved communication systems across the contract area. Importantly, and as a result of superseding the previous contract holder, the Head of Operations has systematically addressed the appointment of Lead Contractor staff who prioritise the needs of the participants, reflecting the core values of the organisation. This process has resulted in the establishment of an effective, cohesive team whose roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. The inclusive approach ensures staff feel valued and that there are open channels of communication which enable all key staff to contribute to the strategic development of the contract. Appropriately, the Lead Contractor has identified the need to make additional appointments specifically to extend key aspects of employer engagement and the provision of more work placements; these arrangements are at an advanced stage.

6.2 Good progress has been made with regard to the standardisation of systems within A4e and across the contract area. The Lead Contractor has provided a useful programme of staff development which has addressed areas such as safeguarding, the participant review process and the introduction of standardisation meetings within job roles to promote the sharing of good practice. The review of administrative systems across the contract area has been particularly valuable in addressing the processing of sub contractor claims to ensure timely payments. However, the procedures to address problematic outstanding claims are not sufficiently well developed and should be addressed promptly. Since the take-up of the contract, the priority afforded to the standardisation of systems has required the Lead Contractor's communication process with the sub-contractors to place a strong emphasis on the importance of sharing information. As a consequence, there has been an overly strong focus on ensuring the sub-contractors' compliance with systems and procedures at the expense of developing dynamic, collaborative partnerships.

6.3 Since the first phase of the inspection, extensive work has been undertaken to develop a fit-for-purpose management information system to provide reliable and appropriate data to inform the self-evaluation and development planning processes. The outcomes of this work include a manual information system which holds detailed data on the status of each participant, along with a regularly updated database and participant logs which are used well by the Lead Contractor and the Jobs and Benefits office staff to review jointly the progression of participant referrals. While this work continues to be recognised by A4e as being of the highest priority, there is an urgent need to bring these developments to a successful conclusion and to embed and consolidate its use within the Lead Contractor and with all key stakeholders. It is a concern that there are significant discrepancies in the accuracy of the data used by the Lead Contractor and that used by the Jobs and Benefits offices staff, which is exacerbated by the absence of shared protocols and procedures for the collation and analysis of data. In order to ensure accurate contract data, the District Managers have appropriately identified the need for Jobs and Benefits office and Lead Contractor staff to work together to review the status of the current caseloads. This remedial action should be further extended to establish robust common arrangements for the collation and use of data by the Lead Contractor and key staff from the Jobs and Benefits offices. It is noteworthy that the Lead Contractor has prioritised the need to resolve the continuing shortcomings and lack of effectiveness of the organisation's management information system which continues to undermine the otherwise effective arrangements for the management of the contract.

6.4 All of the Lead Contractor staff are highly committed and have worked hard to establish good working relationships with employers, participants, sub-contractors and staff from the Jobs and Benefits offices. The sub-contractors report that the A4e Partnerships Manager has played a key role in the significant improvement in the quality of their relationships with the Lead Contractor organisation. They also report an improvement in the overall leadership of the contract, including the improved systems of communication with regular, well planned meetings, the provision of appropriate staff development, the introduction of more robust arrangements for the quality management of the contract and improved relationships at all levels. However, during the second phase of the inspection, a significant minority of the sub-contractors expressed concern at the low rate of referrals from the Lead Contractor, and this needs to be reviewed by A4e in the interests of maintaining a constructive relationship with all of the sub-contractors. Indicative of the improved working relationships between key personnel of the Lead Contractor and staff at all levels within the Jobs and Benefits offices is the recent collaboration with the Office Managers and Team Leaders in the development of a database which provides important management information for the review of key performance indicators by Steps to Work strand, and by office.

6.5 The Lead Contractor has made significant investment in staffing and in the upgrading of accommodation. Four of the five A4e offices are good quality and have been relocated ensuring appropriate access for participants. There remains, however, undue variation in the provision of suitable and sufficient information and communication technology (ICT) resources, in particular for those participants on Core Gateway and for participants on the Essential Skills strand.

6.6 The Lead Contractor has demonstrated commitment to continuous improvement by the good progress made in embedding further its quality framework across the contract area. Through their quality assurance strategy, the Lead Contractor has produced clear guidance for sub-contractors with regard to their role and contribution to the continuous improvement of the provision. The strategy has been mediated well to all staff and sub-contractors through staff development sessions on self-evaluation, the quality and training cycle, including the observation of directed training sessions, and the procedures being developed to ensure involvement of the sub-contractors in the self-evaluation of their provision. There is a need to extend the quality improvement process to include the evaluation by the sub-contractors of the management of the contract by the Lead Contractor; currently their contribution to its continuous improvement is too limited. Indicative of the Lead Contractor's commitment to improvement planning is their proactive response to the findings of the first phase of the inspection. Following the inspection, the areas for improvement identified by the Inspectorate have been integrated into the organisation's quality improvement plan with regular and robust monitoring of the implementation and outcomes of the actions for improvement. This strategic approach has resulted in positive developments in a number of key areas, including the improvement in the range of qualifications on offer and the good start made to the development of key strategic links and partnerships to increase the quality and quantity of work experience placements.

6.7 The leadership and management of the Graduate Acceleration Programme is very good. Since the inception of the contract the Lead Contractor's staff have worked with Business in the Community staff to address issues of concern and streamline the paperwork required. Further work of this nature is required to strengthen partnership work and realise fully the potential of this strand to achieve employment outcomes. As a result of detailed and thorough planning, the participants on the Graduate Acceleration Programme strand experience a well-integrated and coherent programme which includes an extended period of work placement matched, for most of them, very well to their degree specialisms and career aspirations.

6.8 The provision of the Enhanced Support and Confidence and Motivation strands are under developed across the contract area. Appropriately, the Lead Contractor has identified the development of this aspect of the provision as a priority within the quality improvement plan and has produced an action plan to address shortcomings in the provision. Good progress is being made in implementation of the plan including the development of a tailored programme of support, complemented by useful support materials and well-targeted professional development for providers. While the inspection identified examples of good practice in the application of the strands to remove barriers to progression into employment, there remain too few referrals to both strands to enable participants to benefit from this expertise. This issue needs to be addressed jointly by the Jobs and Benefits offices staff and the Lead Contractor.

6.9 There are good relationships between the Lead and sub-contractors and the employers. The feedback from the employers visited highlights the highly professional and responsive support they receive from the Lead and sub-contractors.

7. EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

7.1 The most recent statistics for the entire period during which A4e has been the Lead Contractor (June 2011-March 2012) indicate that the overall progression rate from Step Two provision into employment is 21%, which is below the Department's target of 25%. The most recent data provided by the Lead Contractor, for the period January 2012 to the time of the inspection in March 2012, indicates a significant fall from 1051 to 550, since the previous quarter (September-December 2011, DEL data), in the number of participants waiting between four and 15 weeks (from 77% to 41%) for a work experience placement. However, during the same period, there has been a significant rise in those waiting in excess of 15 weeks (from 13% to 26%). The Lead Contractor recognises the urgent need to take remedial action to reduce these backlogs and bring improved stability to the referral process. A key role of the additional four employment coaches will be to reduce the inappropriate current backlog of participants waiting for a work experience placement.

7.2 The employment outcomes and achievements for the Back to Work strand are satisfactory. Based on statistical information provided by the Lead Contractor, the participant progression rate to employment over the period June 2011 to February 2012 is 21%, which is below the Department's target. However, most of the participants are improving their employability and are developing confidence in performing a suitable range of occupational tasks, which for many of them are in a different occupational area to their previous employment experience. The participants also develop further their transferable skills, including customer service skills, adhering to industry standards and practice, working as a team, problem solving and initiative taking. A minority of the participants make insufficient progress in building their self-confidence and in developing key occupational skills to improve their employability to at least a satisfactory level. Although a minority of the participants have developed a good awareness of their further training or educational needs, most are unable to identify clearly any training needs and/or alternative employment options which would enhance their employment opportunities.

7.3 During the week of the inspection, there were 16 residual participants nearing completion of their NVQs and 65 participants on the Qualifications strand. The participants inspected were working at level 2 in the professional and technical areas of business administration, child care, health and social care, information technology (systems support), hospitality and catering, retail and the music industry. While a satisfactory range of professional and technical areas is delivered across the contract area to meet the needs of most of the participants, A4e need to critically review and evaluate the provision in order to extend further the range and appropriateness of the qualifications available to the

participants. Almost all of the participants are in good work experience placements that are well matched to their training programme. For a small number of participants who undergo a block period of training in Information technology, followed by a block period of work placement, poor planning results in an undue delay between the two parts of the programme, leading to a lack of continuity and a resulting de-motivation for the participants. The into-employment outcomes for the Qualifications strand, from the start of the contract to the time of the inspection, are just below the current Departmental target of 25%. Over the same period, in relation to NVQs, 22% of participants who successfully completed their programme found sustained employment (minimum of 13 weeks), while 23% of those participants completing a qualification progressed into employment.

7.4 On the Step Ahead strand, since June 2011, of the 29 participants who left, only 17% progressed into employment, which is well below the Department's target of 25% and the Northern Ireland average of 33%. While, the participants are provided with good opportunities to achieve an accredited qualification, there is insufficient awareness by them of the range of accredited qualifications on offer, and a only limited understanding by the Lead Contractor of the courses that best meet the specific needs of the participants.

7.5 The into-employment outcomes for the Self-Employment Test Trading strand, since the inception of the contract, are just below the Department's target, at 24%

7.6 The achievement rates on the Short Accredited Courses strand of Step 1 are outstanding. Since June 2011, there have been 221 participants on this strand and all those who completed achieved the appropriate qualification. While most participants are placed on courses in a timely manner, more action is needed to reduce the waiting time for participants to access a small number of courses that have minimum numbers and are slow to fill, or are difficult to source.

7.7 In the essential skills, the participants achieve good standards in literacy. The standards in numeracy, while variable are mostly good. The outcomes in both literacy and numeracy are excellent at 100% for those who complete, and 64% of those who undertook a qualification in literacy achieved at level 2. The retention rate in the Essential Skills strand is good at 73%. The Lead Contractor is committed to the ongoing improvement of the essential skills provision and to this end is planning to introduce a retention strategy, underpinned by early intervention and support, for those participants identified as being at risk of non completion of the programme.

7.8 The participants on the Graduate Acceleration Programme strand benefit from the very good quality of the provision, which has been developed appropriately to include a journal which enables them to reflect on, and record, their application of, and development in, the transferable skills key to developing their employability. These include time management, working as a team, dealing with difficult situations and resolving conflict. Within their work experience placements, most of the participants are demonstrating good or better standards of work and their workplace mentors value their contributions highly. The staff from Business in the Community, and the workplace mentors, provide very good levels of support for the participants. Progression rates to employment are good at 50%.

8. QUALITY OF TRAINING AND SERVICES

8.1 The quality of the provision for the Back to Work strand is satisfactory. The strand is generally managed well, and through monthly meetings, staff from the Lead Contractor and sub-contractors identify and standardise good practice and agree areas for further development. Although staff are successful in securing work experience placements across a wide range of occupational areas that are matched well to participants' interests and abilities, there is only limited strategic engagement with employers to identify and increase

employment opportunities for participants. Currently, there are only a small number of tailored programmes with individual employers to match and prepare participants for specific employment opportunities. On these programmes, effective use is made of short accredited training courses to prepare participants for specific job roles.

8.2 The overall quality of the Qualifications/NVQ provision is good. The quality of the training in all of the sessions observed was very good or better, one-half of them were very good. The very good sessions were characterised by very good planning, clear learning intentions and outcomes and involved the active engagement of the participants in well planned activities, relevant to industry practices. Good levels of individual support are provided by the tutors during directed training and the working relationships between the tutors and participants are good. Almost all of the participants are enthusiastic and well-motivated, and have a positive attitude to learning and their training programme.

8.3 The quality of the provision for Core Gateway is good. The Lead Contractor delivers all of the Core Gateway provision across the contract area. All participants, including those on the modular option, benefit from a good induction programme. The quality of all of the directed training is good or better; the sessions are well planned and delivered and all of the tutors work hard to develop productive working relationships with the participants. The tutors set high standards and are skilled in providing effective support, encouragement and motivation; as a result, almost all of the participants engage well in the sessions and are able to identify their personal attributes and skills and to match these to potential employment opportunities. A4e has introduced an effective component on basic ICT skills which is valued by both the reluctant and the inexperienced ICT users in the groups, and which enhances the Jobsearch and Curriculum Vitae aspects of the programme. The organisation has reviewed its documentation for Core Gateway to good effect. The Personal Plan for Employment now includes a section for recommendations which focuses on progression planning, which can be tracked into Step 2 and audited by the Quality and Training manager, as required. Participants on the Core Gateway programme also benefit from access to a range of Short Accredited Courses to enhance their employability and tutors promote and support effectively the uptake of these courses. Appropriately, to improve the efficiency of the referral process and improve access to information technology resources, the Lead Contractor has planned to roll-out the Core Gateway provision to a sub-contractor. In order to improve further the effectiveness of the referral process, the Lead Contractor should continue to build on its relationships with the Employment Service Advisers in the Jobs and Benefits offices to ensure that all Core Gateway participants are made fully aware of the content of the Core Gateway programme prior to commencement with A4e.

8.4 The quality of the provision for the essential skills is satisfactory. The quality of the directed training sessions ranged from satisfactory to very good, and is mostly satisfactory. In the satisfactory provision in numeracy, the learning is overly structured with very limited opportunities for differentiation or discussion to improve understanding. Further opportunities for staff development and support are required in numeracy, particularly for new staff, in order to meet the diverse range of the participants' learning needs. The Lead Contractor should continue to review delivery arrangements and to monitor planned changes to staffing to ensure that the learning experiences are harmonised across all of the essential skills provision. Whilst almost all of the participants are placed in good quality work experience placements, where they can apply their vocational skills and develop further their employability skills, there are limited links between the essential skills numeracy tutors, mentors and employment coaches; this results in missed opportunities to apply or to contextualise the essential skills within the workplace. Overall, the quality of the accommodation for the essential skills participants is very good, although in one of the offices the training and learning area lacks adequate privacy.

8.5 The quality of the provision for Jobsearch is satisfactory. Jobsearch activities are provided regularly and the Quality and Training Manager, the employment coaches and the mentors have worked hard to develop a range of suitable resources, and to make the Jobsearch activities more structured. In addition, the Introduction to ICT session provided within Core Gateway enhances the participants' skills and confidence in the Jobsearch sessions, and provides an appropriate focus on building independent job searching skills and attributes. The employment coach sets appropriate occupational job goals, liaises with employers, and extends work-related job goals where possible. The mentor completes individual Jobsearch logs with the participants; however, in a number of cases, the information recorded in the logs lacks sufficiently personalised detail. In addition, staff do not compile an overall attendance log for each office, despite the fact that attendance can be variable; this diminishes the evaluation of the impact of the improvement initiatives for the provision. Furthermore, given the numbers of participants, there is insufficient access for them to computers in the Ballymena and Ballymoney offices.

8.6 The quality of the provision of the Step Ahead strand is good. At the time of inspection, there were 65 participants on the Step Ahead programme; 12 on the 26-week programme and 53 on the new Step Ahead 2012 strands. The Lead and sub-contractor have developed good relationships with employers in the voluntary and community sectors. While the participants are very well supported by the employers who provide good work opportunities, only a small number of them were in a position to offer permanent employment. These opportunities are matched well to the participants' abilities and aspirations and contribute effectively to the development of their work-readiness, transferable and personal skills. They are encouraged to use their own initiative and are provided with good opportunities to develop good team working and independent working skills. They value the support and encouragement they receive from both the Lead and sub-contractor and their employer. In all of the work-place settings visited, the employers provide a welcoming and supportive environment in which the participants can develop their confidence and self-esteem, improve their communication skills and develop their occupational skills. Most of the employers provide a structured on the job training programme which incrementally develops the participants' work-readiness and occupational skills. There is, however, an over-reliance on searching internet-based directories to find employment. There is a need to broaden the range of strategies used, for example, to strengthen links with specialist recruitment agencies to match better the participants with suitable employers.

8.7 The quality of the provision of Short Accredited Courses is good. The quality of the directed training observed is good; the sessions are well-planned and the tutors work hard to address the individual needs of the participants. There is a good range of short accredited courses on offer and these are available through a good network of training providers and sub-contractors both locally and nationally.

8.8 The quality of the Self-Employment Test Trading strand is satisfactory. Most of the participants on the strand are enthusiastic and highly motivated. The participants receive very good levels of information, advice, and mentoring support from the staff in the enterprise centres in relation to administrative, financial and promotional aspects of their small businesses. The majority of the participants also avail of the additional support available through the programme, and in a minority of the enterprise centres, have the opportunity to attend additional free events, including business clinics on the use of online marketing tools, which they find very informative. As a result, most of the participants are developing an appropriate range of enterprise skills to help them to manage their businesses. In most cases, there is a good match between the participants' test trading

projects and their experiences, skills and aspirations. There is a need however for awareness raising sessions to be undertaken with the Employment Service Advisers to ensure that potential participants with no previous knowledge of, or experience in, the principles of managing small businesses are made aware of other available initiatives prior to referral to this strand.

8.9 With the exception of Core Gateway, the quality of the Personal Plans Towards Employment across the strands is variable. The majority contain measurable training objectives specific to each participant, however, while there is regular and thorough monitoring of the participants' progress through the review process, the Personal Plans Towards Employment do not identify or address sufficiently the barriers to employment experienced by a significant minority of participants in each of the strands.

8.10 The Lead Contractor promotes effectively the safeguarding of young people and vulnerable adults. The arrangements for safeguarding vulnerable groups comply satisfactorily with the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (NI) Order 2007.

PART THREE: KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

9. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

9.1 In order to raise the quality of its provision, A4e should:

- take urgent remedial action to reduce the backlogs of participants waiting for a work experience placement and bring improved stability to the referral process;
- continue to monitor and improve the lines of communication with key stakeholders across the contract area;
- implement as a matter of urgency an effective management information system and to embed its use within the Lead Contractor organisation and with all key stakeholders;
- undertake further collaboration with Employment Service Advisers to make more effective use of the Confidence and Motivation and Enhanced Support strands; and
- increase the number of participants progressing into sustained employment.

APPENDIX

Table 2 - 13 Week Performance for the Antrim Region by Step 2 Strands					
Period		Sep 2008 - Mar 2009	Apr 2009 - Mar 2010	27 Jun 11 - 28 Mar 12	Total/Average
Back to Work	Total Leaving Steps to Work	N/A	N/A	671	671
	Entered Employment	N/A	N/A	140	140
	Entered Employment %	N/A	N/A	21%	21%
	Sust. 13 Wks%	N/A	N/A	6%	6%
Essential Skills	Total Leaving Steps to Work	N/A	N/A	85	85
	Entered Employment	N/A	N/A	18	18
	Entered Employment %	N/A	N/A	21%	21%
	Sust. 13 Wks%	N/A	N/A	4%	4%
GAP	Total Leaving Steps to Work	N/A	N/A	12	12
	Entered Employment	N/A	N/A	6	6
	Entered Employment %	N/A	N/A	50%	50%
	Sust. 13 Wks%	N/A	N/A	17%	17%
NVQ	Total Leaving Steps to Work	N/A	N/A	53	53
	Entered Employment	N/A	N/A	18	18
	Entered Employment %	N/A	N/A	34%	34%
	Sust. 13 Wks%	N/A	N/A	22%	22%
Qualifications	Total Leaving Steps to Work	N/A	N/A	64	64
	Entered Employment	N/A	N/A	15	15
	Entered Employment %	N/A	N/A	23%	23%
	Sust. 13 Wks%	N/A	N/A	0%	0%
Self-Employment	Total Leaving Steps to Work	N/A	N/A	54	54
	Entered Employment	N/A	N/A	13	13
	Entered Employment %	N/A	N/A	24%	24%
	Sust. 13 Wks%	N/A	N/A	10%	10%
Step Ahead	Total Leaving Steps to Work	N/A	N/A	29	29
	Entered Employment	N/A	N/A	5	5
	Entered Employment %	N/A	N/A	17%	17%
	Sust. 13 Wks%	N/A	N/A	0%	0%

Table 6 - Antrim Contract Area - Summary of Backlogs

Period		Jan-12	Feb-12	Mar-12	Contract Area Total/Average 2012 Q1	
Back to Work	No. Referrals	213	257	265	735	
	>4wks < 15wks	Number	125	105	98	328
		%	59%	41%	37%	45%
	> 15 wks	Number	40	37	52	129
		%	19%	14%	20%	18%
	Essential Skills	No. Referrals	62	93	106	261
>4wks < 15wks		Number	32	26	26	84
		%	52%	28%	25%	32%
> 15 wks		Number	24	42	39	105
		%	39%	45%	37%	40%
NVQ		No. Referrals	0	0	0	0
	>4wks < 15wks	Number	0	0	0	0
		%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	> 15 wks	Number	0	0	0	0
		%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Qualifications	No. Referrals	71	104	126	301
>4wks < 15wks		Number	35	30	41	98
		%	49%	29%	33%	33%
> 15 wks		Number	27	39	41	107
		%	38%	38%	33%	36%
Self-Employment		No. Referrals	14	4	4	22
	>4wks < 15wks	Number	9	1	0	10
		%	64%	25%	0%	45%
	> 15 wks	Number	5	1	1	7
		%	36%	25%	25%	32%
	GAP	No. Referrals	20	8	6	34
>4wks < 15wks		Number	16	3	3	22
		%	80%	38%	50%	65%
> 15 wks		Number	3	0	0	3
		%	15%	0%	0%	9%
Total No. of Referrals		No. Referrals	380	466	507	1,353
	>4wks < 15wks	Number	217	165	168	550
		%	57%	35%	33%	41%
	> 15 wks	Number	99	119	133	351
		%	26%	25%	26%	26%

© CROWN COPYRIGHT 2012

This report may be reproduced in whole or in part, except for commercial purposes or in connection with a prospectus or advertisement, provided that the source and date thereof are stated.

Copies of this report are available on the ETI website: www.etini.gov.uk

