



Education and Training
Inspectorate

Steps to Work Provision in North City Training North Belfast and Newtownabbey Contract Area

Report of an Inspection
in November 2010

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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%

Statistics

All performance statistics in this report have been supplied by North City Training.

Grading system

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

Performance Level	Grade	Descriptor
Outstanding	1	Outstanding characterised by excellence
Very Good	2	Consistently good; major strengths
Good	3	Important strengths in most of the provision. Areas for improvement which organisation has the capacity to address
Satisfactory	4	Overall sound/satisfactory but with areas for improvement in important areas which need to be addressed
Inadequate	5	A few strengths; significant areas for improvement which require prompt action
Unsatisfactory	6	Poor; major shortcomings which require urgent action

PART ONE: SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In September 2008, the Department for Employment and Learning (the 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 up to 13 weeks but can be up to 52 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 North City Training Limited was established in 1989. It is part of the Bryson Charitable Group, operating from eight offices in and around North Belfast, Newtownabbey and the City Centre, with its head office situated on the Antrim Road. North City Training delivers a range of training and employment programmes for the Department.

2.2 North City Training is contracted by the Department as Lead Contractor for the delivery of Steps to Work provision in the North Belfast and Newtownabbey contract area of Northern Ireland. Participants are referred to the Lead Contractor through the North Belfast JobCentre and the Newtownabbey Jobs and Benefits office. North City Training is supported by 14 sub-contractors to provide good access opportunities for participants to all strands of Steps to Work within the contract area.

2.3 Over the period March to October 2010, 530 participants took part in Step One provision; of these, 334 (63%) had few or no prior qualifications. Over the same period, 564 participants joined Step Two and 229 (53%) of them had no or few prior qualifications. Of the Step Two participants, just under 25% of them had achieved a General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) at grade C or above in mathematics, and 19% of them had achieved a GCSE grade C or above in English. Seventy-five of the Step Two participants (13%) had achieved a Level 3 or higher qualification.

2.4 Between September 2009 and July 2010, the number of eligible participants in the contract area increased by 17%, from 610 to 715. According to statistics provided by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for October 2010, the North Belfast parliamentary constituency has the third highest claimant count in Northern Ireland at 7%. The count for Newtownabbey District Council Area is 3.8% with the Northern Ireland average at 5.0%. Data supplied by the Department indicates that, by July 2010, the North Belfast and Newtownabbey contract area had the second lowest number of participants eligible for mandatory participation on Steps to Work.

2.5 The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures 2010 indicate that, of the 18 Assembly Areas in Northern Ireland, the Belfast North Area is ranked second on the deprivation index and fourth on the employment deprivation index. Out of the 26 District Council areas, Newtownabbey is the eighth most deprived council district and is the seventh most deprived in terms of the employment rate.

3. PROVISION

3.1 At the time of the inspection, there were 270 participants on the Steps to Work provision across the North Belfast and Newtownabbey contract area. Ten of them were registered on Step One; seven on Jobsearch, two on Short Accredited Courses and one on Self-Employment Basic Awareness. The remaining 260 participants were registered on Step Two; 90 (35%) on Back to Work, 62 (24%) on National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) lasting 52 weeks, 59 (22%) on Step Ahead, 18 (7%) on Self-Employment Test Trading, 16 (6%) on Essential Skills Training, 9 (4%) on Vocationally Related Qualifications lasting 26 weeks, five (2%) on the Graduate Acceleration Programme and one on In-work Support. There were no participants on Core Gateway at the time of the inspection. Of the current participants, 69% are male and 41% of them are aged between 18 and 25 years. Data provided by North City Training indicates that 45% of the starts on the Step Two strands are voluntary participants, as are most of the participants on the Self-Employment Test Trading strand.

3.2 North City Training, as the Lead Contractor, was working directly with 143 registered participants across the two offices. Eleven of the 14 sub-contractors were actively working with participants: 32 with Intercomm; 25 with Belfast Central Training; 18 with Transition Training; 17 with North City Business Centre; nine with Armstrong Learning, eight with Belfast Metropolitan College; five each with Business in the Community, Impact training and Ulster Supported Employment Limited, two with Mentor Training and one with Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland.

4. THE INSPECTION

4.1 This report is based on an inspection of North City Training and a sample of the sub-contractors' provision; the work of eleven of the sub-contractors was inspected. The inspection took place over two phases; phase one took place in March 2010 and interim findings were left with the Lead Contractor at that time. The second phase of the inspection took place over three days in November 2010 and involved a team of five inspectors.

4.2 During the inspection, the inspectors:

- visited 65 participants on work experience placements;
- observed 28 directed training sessions in centres operated by North City Training and its sub-contractors;
- held discussions with 189 participants, individually and in small groups;
- held discussions with the members of North City Training's management team and senior staff from the sub-contractors inspected;
- held discussions with key training and support staff;
- examined a wide range of documentation, including samples of participants' written work and their Personal Training Plans (PTPs);
- held discussions with 45 employers; and
- held discussions with the District Manager, Office Managers, Team Leaders and Personal Advisers from the Job Centre and Jobs and Benefits office.

5. **MAIN FINDINGS**

5.1 In the areas inspected, the quality of the Steps to Work employment programme provided by North City Training is very good. The organisation is meeting very effectively the needs of the participants; and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

Overall performance level (grade)	Very Good (2)
Contributory performance levels (grades):	
Leadership and Management	Outstanding (1)
Employment Outcomes and Achievements	Very Good (2)
Quality of Training and Services	Very Good (2)

5.2 The main strengths are the:

- outstanding management of the contract by the Lead Contractor;
- very good working relationships between the Lead Contractor and the staff of the sub-contractors and the Department, who all work effectively to provide very good support to the participants;
- outstanding compliance and quality assurance systems and processes which are leading to continual improvement and capacity building within the Lead Contractor, and across all of the sub-contractors;

- very good range of innovative programmes being developed and used by the Lead Contractor to enhance the participants' employability skills, and to support their progression to sustained employment;
- good or better quality of almost all of the directed training sessions observed, with almost one-half of them being very good or better; and
- very good quality of almost all of the work experience placements visited, particularly for those participants on the Step Into initiative.

5.3 The main area for improvement is the:

- progression rate into sustained employment for 13 weeks, at approximately 20%.

PART TWO: OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION

6. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

6.1 The strategic and operational leadership and management of the contract by North City Training is outstanding. The Executive Director is well supported by a team of five managers, who work well together to provide a high quality experience for all the participants. The management team have developed an inclusive, responsive and participant-centred ethos throughout the organisation, and among the sub-contractors. All of the staff have clearly defined roles and responsibilities and a feature of the organisation is the excellent communication at all levels, underpinned by good relationships. Significant investments have been made in premises and staff to support the programme. The planning is excellent at every level and a good range of sub-contractors is in place to meet the needs of the participants, across the contract area. The Lead Contractor has comprehensive service level agreements in place with all of the sub-contractors.

6.2 The Lead Contractor has established very good links and partnerships with all the sub-contractors, employers, voluntary and community organisations, Newtownabbey Jobs and Benefits Office and the North Belfast JobCentre. Regular, well attended meetings are held with the sub-contractors where there are good opportunities to share best practice and resolve any problems that have arisen. The sub-contractors also have sufficient opportunities to meet with the staff from the Jobs and Benefits office and the JobCentre, which enables them to promote the strands provided by their organisations. Regular case conferences are also held to provide all the relevant personnel with the chance to discuss and resolve particular issues presented by participants.

6.3 The arrangements and procedures for quality assurance are outstanding. The Lead Contractor has established a quality and compliance unit that is responsible for quality assurance. The process is very well planned and includes evaluations by the Lead Contractor of the quality of the work carried out by the sub-contractors. These arrangements are rigorous but well accepted by the sub-contractors and include tutor observations undertaken by North City Training staff. Good feedback, including any areas for improvement, is provided to the sub-contractors along with follow-up action to verify that improvement has taken place. Very good use of management information data to inform the process and all of these quality assurance arrangements are underpinned by excellent support and guidance. An example of this support is a recent event organised by the Lead Contractor for the sub-contractors to share good practice across the Jobsearch provision. The Lead Contractor reports that the quality assurance process has had the effect of building capacity and raising standards across most of the sub-contractors and improving and increasing their engagement in the overall contract-wide self-evaluation process. The self-evaluation of the provision is outstanding. The self-evaluation is based upon a very good evidence base and clearly identifies all the main strengths and areas for improvement. The development plan addresses all the identified areas for improvement with relevant, measurable and time-bound actions.

6.4 Since the first phase of the inspection, the Lead Contractor has made significant progress to increase the number of participants placed in private-sector work experience placements. In the period since the first phase of the inspection, the number of participants placed in private-sector companies has increased by almost 5%, to 53%. In addition, the number of participants placed in the public sector has increased by 2%, to 8%. Very good progress has also been made in securing enhanced support for those participants who require it. Clear procedures to identify participants who need enhanced support have been developed and agreed with staff in the JobCentre and the Jobs and Benefits Office. As a result, very good use is being made of enhanced support to meet the needs of individual participants and to develop their work-readiness and employability skills.

6.5 The Lead Contractor promotes a very good range of innovative programmes to participants to enhance their employability skills, and to support their progression to employment. In particular, a wide range of Short Accredited Courses has been provided including, for example, Pan European Basic Offshore Safety Training, including Emergency Breathing Systems and Helicopter Underwater Escape. The Lead Contractor has provided outstanding support to the community and voluntary sector to enable them to participate in the Step Ahead strand. This support includes responsibility for paying the participants wages, requiring a considerable financial commitment from the Lead Contractor. The Step Into initiative has also been used very effectively. An employment consultant has been employed, whose main role is to take forward the Step Into initiative by linking with new, larger employers. To date, excellent progress has been made, with 41 tailored initiatives delivered using 25 employers.

6.6 The Lead Contractor is pro-active in ensuring that the participants' needs are being met. At a strategic level, the Lead Contractor is working with the Employment Service Improvement Project set up by the Department. As a result of this initiative, the Newtownabbey Jobs and Benefits Office has been selected to operate a pilot based on the findings from the group.

7. EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

7.1 Over the first complete year of the contract, from April 2009 to March 2010, the overall progression rate from Step Two provision into sustained employment is 20%, which is below the Department's target of 25%. Table 1 shows the overall achievements for the Step Two strands across the contract area and Table 2 (in the Appendix) provides the progression rates to sustained employment achieved by the Lead and sub-contractors.

Table 1: Progression Rates to Sustained Employment from Step Two

Step Two leavers into employment	TABLE 1 - LEAD CONTRACTOR STATISTICS (NORTH BELFAST and NEWTOWNABBEY CONTRACT AREA)			
	(2008-2009) 01/10/08 – 31/03/09		(2009 -2010) 01/04/09 – 31/03/10	
	<i>Number of leavers</i>	<i>Leavers into sustained employment for 13 weeks or more</i>	<i>Number of leavers</i>	<i>Leavers into sustained employment for 13 weeks or more</i>
<i>Back to Work</i>	125	21 (17%)	367	55 (15%)
<i>NVQ 52 weeks</i>	37	8 (22%)	93	15 (16%)
<i>Vocationally Related Qualifications</i>	15	2 (13%)	35	9 (26%)
<i>Essential Skills Training</i>	14	2 (14%)	31	3 (10%)
<i>Self-Employment Test Trading</i>	4	3 (75%)	31	28 (90%)
Total	195	36 (18%)	557	110 (20%)

7.2 In the past year, 66% of all leavers participated in the Back to Work strand. Of those who left the programme, 15% progressed into sustained employment. The Lead Contractor has introduced a range of initiatives to improve this outcome. These initiatives include the use of more private and public sector placements, and the very good use of the innovative return to work programmes. Each sub-contractors' performance is monitored on a monthly basis and a realistic target for work placements in the private sector is agreed. Currently, 61% of the participants are placed with organisations in either the private or public sector, resulting in 24% of the leavers in the current year progressing into sustained employment.

7.3 At the time of inspection, 62 participants were registered on the Step Ahead strand. Almost all of these participants are developing a good range of personal, social and work-readiness skills and demonstrate increased self-confidence and determination to secure paid employment. Almost all of the participants demonstrate a good range and standard, of occupational skills, and a significant minority of them show good levels of initiative and high levels of improved competence in undertaking duties beyond the requirements of their current job roles.

7.4 The outcomes from Self-Employment Test Trading strand are excellent, with 90% of the leavers progressing into sustained employment last year. However, only 5% of the total number of leavers participated in this strand.

7.5 In the past year, only 6% of the leavers participated in the Vocationally Related Qualifications strand. The success rate in this strand for those participants who complete it is excellent at 95%, with 26% of them progressing into sustained employment.

7.6 The participants on the National Vocational Qualifications strand are making good progress towards the achievement of their target qualifications, in an appropriate range of professional and technical areas. The participants report that their self-confidence is greatly increased and that in addition to their professional and technical skills, they also develop wider employability skills such as customer care and team-working. Last year, the retention rate was poor at 18% and the success rate was excellent at 100% with all the participants who completed the programme achieving their qualification. However the progression into sustained employment is 16%, which is below the Department's target.

7.7 The Essential Skills Training strand accounted for just 5% of the participants over the last year. Most of the participants on this strand are well-motivated and achieve good standards of work in their essential skills, and are making good progress in their learning. Last year, the success rate in the numeracy essential skill was good with 80% of those who completed the programme achieving the qualification. In contrast, over the same period, the success rate in literacy was poor at just 33%. The number of participants progressing to sustained employment is 10%, which although low, is comparable with other Lead Contractors in Northern Ireland.

8. QUALITY OF TRAINING AND SERVICES

8.1 The arrangements for the inspection of personal support and the safeguarding of vulnerable adults includes the opportunity for the participants to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection, as well as meetings by the inspection team with groups of participants across the Lead and sub-contractors. Two hundred and eighty-five questionnaires were issued to the participants, 149 (52%) of which were returned to the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate); 36 of them contained additional written comments. The returns show that the participants' experiences in North City Training are very good. Almost all (95%) of the participants' responses and comments to the

Inspectorate's questionnaire and interviews were positive. In most of the written comments, the participants made reference to the good support they received and how they were enjoying their experiences on the programme. The Inspectorate has reported the outcomes of the questionnaires and the discussions held with the participants to the Executive Director and senior managers.

8.2 The Core Gateway provision ranges from good to very good. There are very good relationships between the tutors and participants. The participants engage well in the sessions and the tutors make good use of their past experiences to provide suitable contexts for learning. Very good use is made of appropriate speakers, both in-house and external, to provide the participants with a range of useful information to help them make informed choices about the strands available in Step Two. The well-planned sessions are supported by appropriate materials and effective practical group activities. The tutors are well-qualified to deliver the programme and are very committed to the participants. There are regular scheduled meetings to allow the tutors and other interested staff to meet and discuss the programme, exchange resources and share good practice.

8.3 The quality of the Jobsearch provision is good. A variety of approaches is used to help participants plan, prepare for, and progress to employment. Almost all of the participants benefit from: the preparation of a curriculum vitae; searching for employment vacancies using the internet; completing job application forms; and preparing for interviews. A good range of resources, which are matched well to the interests and capabilities of the participants, have been developed by the tutors. The Lead Contractor has provided appropriate opportunities for the sub-contractors to share good practice in order to raise standards and promote improvement. The participants' progress is tracked and recorded effectively through the appropriate use of the PTPs.

8.4 Almost all of the participants on the Step Ahead strand are well-motivated and enthusiastic to further develop their employability skills. The Lead Contractor has effective links with a good range of employers within the voluntary and community sectors. Almost all of the employers provide very good support for the participants, often beyond the normal requirements. A small number of the participants present with very significant personal issues and they would benefit from more formalised additional support. While the participants can benefit from undertaking Short Accredited Courses to enhance progression to sustained employment, the pace of access to these courses can be slow at times.

8.5 The quality of the work experience placements on the Back to Work strand is mostly very good. The Lead Contractor has made good progress in identifying appropriate placements in the private and public sectors, and more than 60% of the Back to Work participants are currently placed in these settings. Almost all of the participants visited are carrying out appropriate tasks, which are matched well to their aspirations and abilities; they are developing relevant employability skills, including good timekeeping and team-work. The participants speak very highly of the support they receive from the Lead Contractor, sub-contractors and employers. The increased use of enhanced support, which often includes workplace mentoring, has been effective in increasing the participants' levels of confidence and improving their job-readiness. The recent introduction of a number of innovative Step Into initiatives including retailing, hospitality and catering, warehousing and stores, security services and recycling, which were developed and implemented in collaboration with staff from the JobCentre and the Jobs and Benefits office, has been very successful in enabling participants to develop excellent occupational skills through work experience placements with large employers. The progression rate into employment from this initiative is currently very good, at 64%.

8.6 The essential skills sessions are run on a regular basis by the Lead Contractor and two of the sub-contractors. The delivery is enhanced by the very good working relationships between the Lead Contractor and the sub-contractors, which result in effective monitoring of the overall provision. The tutors work hard to encourage and support the participants, and to meet their individual learning needs. Participants on this strand are provided with an appropriate initial assessment and diagnostic assessment process, the outcomes of which are used well to plan for learning and to provide good individual support, as required. Within the current provision, however, there are only limited opportunities for group work and collaborative learning. There is evidence that the essential skills provision increases most of the participants' confidence in learning and almost all of them welcome the opportunity to enhance their literacy and numeracy skills. However, based on the outcomes of their diagnostic assessment, a small number of learners are working at a level below their ability.

8.7 The participants on the Self-Employment Test Trading strand are enthusiastic and highly motivated. They are developing the appropriate skills to enable them to build up and manage a business. The two self-employment sub-contractors provide very effective support to the participants on this strand; they have extensive links with relevant local professionals such as accountants, tax consultants and marketing firms, and refer participants appropriately for advice and guidance. In most cases, there is a good match between the participants' test trading projects and their experiences, skills and aspirations.

8.8 The National Vocational Qualifications and Vocationally Related Qualifications strands offer very good opportunities for participants to develop occupational skills in a good variety of professional and technical areas. Almost all of the participants are well-motivated, have a very positive attitude to learning and are making good progress towards achieving their qualification. Almost all of them are in work placements which are matched well to their professional and technical areas. They are engaged in a range of meaningful tasks, and are developing appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding, to industry standards. The quality of the directed training in the sessions observed was very good and the participants have access to very good training resources.

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

PART THREE

9. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

In order to raise the quality of its provision, North City Training should:

- increase the opportunities for participants to find and sustain employment by further engaging with the private and public sectors to secure new opportunities for work experience placements; and
- continue to improve the progression rates to sustained employment.

APPENDIX

Table 2: Progression Rates to Sustained Employment by Lead Contractor and Sub-contractors

Progression Rates to Sustained Employment from Step Two (1/4/2009 – 31/3/2010)			
Organisation	Number of Leavers	Number of Leavers who found sustained employment for 13 weeks or more	% into sustained employment for 13 weeks or more
North City Training	335	62	19%
Armstrong Learning	3	2	67%
Belfast Central Training	20	2	10%
Belfast Metropolitan College	15	5	33%
Conservation Volunteers NI	4	0	0%
Business in the Community	0	0	0%
Impact Training	3	0	0%
Intercomm	95	3	3%
Mentor	6	4	67%
MENCAP	0	0	0%
North City Business Centre	25	24	96%
Transition Training	42	5	12%
Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders	0	0	0%
Possibilities NI	9	4	44%
Ulster Supported Employment Ltd	1	1	100%
Total	558	112	20%

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