



Education and Training
Inspectorate

Steps to Work Provision in South West College Western Contract Area

Report of an Inspection
in October 2011

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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

This report uses the most recent statistical data published by the Department for Employment and Learning¹. Any additional data and performance statistics in this report have been supplied and verified by South West College.

Grading system

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

Performance Level
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

¹ Statistical Bulletin Steps to Work: Statistics from September 2008 to June 2011 (Department for Employment and Learning, September 2011)

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 up to 8 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 The South West College is contracted by the Department as Lead Contractor for the delivery of Steps to Work provision in the Western region of Northern Ireland. Participants are referred to the Lead Contractor through the Strabane JobCentre and the Dungannon, Enniskillen, and Omagh Jobs and Benefits offices.

2.2 South West College leads the Partnership of the Western Region (POWeR), supported by 21 sub-contractors, to provide good geographical coverage and local access for all participants to all strands of Steps to Work. The provision is managed by the college's head of training, supported by two deputy heads of department, a customer relations and information technology manager, three curriculum managers and 12 dedicated Steps to Work staff including: a programme development officer, six training support officers, and five administration staff. In addition, the Steps to Work unit receives assistance from the college support services, including careers education, information, advice and guidance, counselling, Essential Skills, finance, marketing, quality and performance.

2.3 The data supplied by the Department shows that, in June 2011, there were 6,800 Jobseeker's Allowance claimants in the Western region. The number of participants eligible for mandatory participation on Steps to Work in this region has more than doubled from 620 (January 2009) to 1,540 (June 2011). The same statistics show that of the 1,767 participants on Steps to Work in the Western Region, 81% were male, 46% were under 25, and of those, 79% were male.

2.4 The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures 2010 indicates that the extent of deprivation in the Strabane local government district is ranked second highest out of the 26 districts in Northern Ireland, and is the most deprived district on the rank of employment rate. Statistics provided by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) for September 2011 show that Strabane district council area has the second highest percentage claimant count at 7.2%, while Dungannon (4.7%), Fermanagh (4.8%) and Omagh (5%) are all below the Northern Ireland (NI) average of 6.9%. The same data shows that the claimant count has risen by 6% in Fermanagh and 3.3% in Strabane over the last year, although it has fallen in Dungannon (-1.4%) and Omagh (-3.7%).

3. PROVISION

3.1 At the time of the inspection, in October 2011, there were 649 participants on the Steps to Work provision across the Western region. Ninety one participants were registered on Step One; 82 on Core Gateway, 7 on Start a Business and 2 on Short Accredited Courses. Five hundred and fifty five participants were registered on Step Two; 207 (37%) on Back to Work, 82 (15%) on National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) lasting 52 weeks, 116 (21%) on Essential Skills Training, 44 (8%) on Vocationally Related Qualifications (VRQ) lasting 26 weeks, 48 (9%) on Self-Employment Test Trading, 54 (10%) on Step Ahead and 4 (1%) on the Graduate Acceleration Programme. The remaining three participants were registered on Step Three. Sixty-five percent of these participants were on Steps to Work for the first time, with the remainder having been on Steps to Work (or New Deal) at least twice.

3.2 At the time of the inspection, of the 555 participants on Step Two, 278 (50%) had no or few qualifications on entry to their provision. Sixty-five (12%) of them had between one and three General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) passes at grade C or above, with a further 40 (7%) having four or more GCSE passes at grade C or above. Seventy-eight (14%) of the participants had achieved English and 52 (9%) mathematics at GCSE grade C or above. One hundred and eighty participants (32%) had achieved vocational qualifications up to level 3, and a further 7 (1%) held higher education qualifications.

3.3 The South West College, as the Lead Contractor, was working directly with 225 participants across its three main campuses. In addition, 16 of the 21 sub-contractors were actively working with participants: Beat 'n' Track (11), Business in the Community (4), Coalisland Training Services (7), Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland (1), Customized Training Services (134), Dungannon District Council (1), Dungannon Enterprise Centre (10), Fermanagh Enterprises Limited (26), Fermanagh Rural Community Initiative (49), Omagh District Training Consortium (15), Omagh Enterprise Company (7), Rutledge Joblink (79), Job Direction (formerly known as Strabane and District Community Work Programme) (64), Strabane Enterprise Agency (12), Ulster Supported Employment Limited (1), and The Nerve Centre (3).

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, 126 participants were

following the NVQ or VRQ strands; the majority (67%) of these participants had joined the programme on a voluntary basis. Two-thirds of the 126 participants are working towards the achievement of an NVQ qualification, whilst the remainder are working towards the achievement of a VRQ qualification over 26 weeks.

3.5 From the commencement of the contract in the Western Region to December 2011 there have been 106 leavers from the Essential Skills Training strand, 13% of the Northern Ireland total. Most of the current participants on this strand (75%) are completing their Essential Skills Training in the Strabane area where the training is being provided by two sub-contractors.

4. THE INSPECTION

4.1 This report is based on an inspection of the Steps to Work employment programme in the South West College and almost all of the sub-contractors' provision; the work of 15 of the 16 active sub-contractors was inspected. The inspection took place over five days in October 2011 and involved a team of eight inspectors and an associate assessor.

4.2 During the inspection, the inspectors:

- observed 25 directed training sessions in centres operated by South West College and its sub-contractors;
- visited 74 participants on work experience;
- held discussions with 256 participants, individually and in small groups;
- held discussions with the members of South West College's 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 Plans Towards Employment (PPE);
- held discussions with 54 employers; and
- held discussions with managers, team leaders and Advisers from the JobCentre and the Jobs and Benefits offices.

5. MAIN FINDINGS

5.1 In the areas inspected, the quality of the Steps to Work employment programme provided by the South West College is good. The college is meeting effectively the needs of the participants; and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

5.2 The main strengths are the:

- good leadership and management of the contract area by the Lead Contractor;
- very good links and partnerships established between the Lead Contractor, sub-contractors and with employers to promote Steps to Work, and to increase the number of work placements likely to lead to sustained employment;

- very good working relationships established across the contract area through regular and effective communication between the Lead Contractor, sub-contractors, JobCentre, and Jobs and Benefits office staff which are used well to inform improvement planning;
- effective collation and analysis of performance data to identify trends across the Steps to Work strands, by region and sub-contractor, which is used effectively to inform performance management;
- good rates of progression into sustained employment for 13 weeks on the Graduate Acceleration Programme (46%), VRQ (22%), Self-Employment Test Trading (43%), and Step Ahead (52%) strands; and
- good or better quality of provision including work placements which are well-matched to the individual needs of most participants.

5.3 The main areas for improvement are the:

- low overall progression rates into sustained employment at 14%;
- undue variation in the quality of provision across the contract area, particularly in Essential Skills Training, the Personal Plans Towards Employment, and the Jobsearch provision; and
- inadequate use of the Enhanced Support, and Confidence and Motivation provision to address participants' individual barriers to employment.

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

PART TWO: OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION

6. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

6.1 The overall strategic leadership and management by South West College of the Steps to Work provision in the Western contract area is good. The Lead Contractor makes good use of a wide range of information, including local labour market intelligence, internal and external Steps to Work performance data, Lead Contractor and sub-contractor self evaluation reports, and feedback from employer engagement to inform strategic planning. The strategic planning for the Steps to Work programmes is linked well to overall college planning, leading to connected developments such as the college's successful bid to run the complementary Step-up to Sustainable Employment (SUSE) programme. While overall strategic planning is good, and includes some excellent initiatives such as the recently launched Step into Engineering programme, at times the planning is too broad and does not adequately address the specific regional issues identified by the Lead Contractor, particularly the poor into employment outcomes in Strabane and Enniskillen.

6.2 Links and partnership arrangements across the contract area are very good and this is reflected well by the Lead Contractor's recent achievement of Investors in People and ISO:9001 accreditation for the Steps to Work programme. The Lead Contractor communicates effectively with sub-contractors, employers, the Jobs and Benefits office and JobCentre staff through regular, well-attended meetings to share information, report on performance, monitor participants' progress, and develop operational plans. The Lead Contractor regularly organises a wide range of events targeted appropriately at engaging with local stakeholders and in promoting Steps to Work provision to employers. Relationships are very good across the contract area with good joint operational planning, and sharing of information. This creates a positive climate in which the Lead Contractor sensitively but robustly challenges under-performance, while still maintaining effective working relationships with the sub-contractors. The training support officers within the South West College have developed very good working relationships with the sub-contractor staff through scheduled bi-monthly meetings. However, there are too few planned opportunities for the training support officers and those providing support within the sub-contractor organisations and external agencies, to exchange information regarding participants and to identify and share good practice.

6.3 Tracking and monitoring systems are good, and used well by the Lead Contractor to analyse key performance indicators and trends across the contract area. Excellent enhancements include the recent appointment of a dedicated customer relationship and information technology manager, and the purchase of a customer relationship management (CRM) system to manage employer engagement more effectively. The Lead Contractor makes very good use of local labour market intelligence, from a range of sources, including the Workforce Development Forum and the work of the Innotech Centre to inform planning and to increase the proportion of work placements likely to lead to employment. While performance data is analysed well and shared effectively with sub-contractors at bi-monthly performance meetings, there is only limited central monitoring of participants' progress in achieving their qualifications, and the inconsistent sharing of this information with employers leads to a small number of the participants not progressing in line with their full potential.

6.4 The overall quality assurance of the Steps to Work provision is satisfactory. The Lead Contractor has good, well-established processes in place which include annual sub-contractor self-evaluation reporting, quality monitoring visits to the sub-contractors, participant surveys and focus groups, compliance audits and observations of directed training. The very good working relationships have enabled the Lead Contractor to provide appropriate professional development for sub-contractor staff, to enhance their capacity to implement and embed self-evaluation and quality improvement planning within their

respective organisations. As a result of this work, the South West College works collaboratively with sub-contractors to identify and address important areas for development, through rigorous action planning and the continuous review of the progress made towards the achievement of targets and associated actions. While the quality processes inform well the Lead Contractor's overall self-evaluation report, and leads to good action planning which does accurately identify most of the main areas for improvement, it is not clear how this plan links to the sub-contractor performance review process and the associated action plans which are produced separately. The inspection identified significant variation in the quality of key areas such as the Jobsearch provision, Essential Skills Training and the quality of the Personal Plans Towards Employment. Consequently, further action is required to identify and share best practice to improve the overall quality of provision. In addition, while the quality improvement plan does highlight the need to target more effectively Steps to Work provision such as confidence and motivation, and enhanced support, progress in implementing these actions is too slow.

6.5 The South West College has continued to increase staffing levels as the number of referrals across the contract area grows, and has a very effective and efficient recruitment process which has led to the appointment of well-qualified, enthusiastic and highly committed staff. While the staff are deployed flexibly to meet changing demands across the contract area, the training support officers are working with large numbers of participants and do not always have sufficient time to fully identify all of their needs.

6.6 Very good professional development arrangements are in place and include the Lead Contractor's appropriate focus on improving the quality of teaching, training and learning. The Lead Contractor facilitates a wide range of professional development which extends to sub-contractors and includes, for example, an at risk toolkit, better-off calculations, money advice, one-to-one support, and vulnerable adult training workshops. The training support officers, however, have only limited training in the identification of participants' barriers to employment and in the effective targeting of enhanced support, and as a result a small number of participants are not progressing as well as they could.

6.7 The leadership and management of the Essential Skills Training provision is satisfactory. While the staffing and resources for essential skills are good in nearly all of the campuses visited, there is too much variation in the time allocated to training across the three college campuses. It is inadequate that participants can only complete one essential skill during their training period in the Enniskillen campus and that literacy and numeracy are being delivered simultaneously in the same session.

6.8 The leadership and management of Enhanced Support and the Confidence and Motivation provision by the Lead Contractor is not good enough. The provision is under-developed at this late stage in the contract, with just eleven participants in total having accessed Confidence and Motivation, and just two participants currently obtaining Enhanced Support. While the inspection has identified a number of participants on Back to Work, VRQ and Essential Skills strands whose employability skills would have been improved through participation in Confidence and Motivation provision, there are currently no participants on this strand. It is timely that the Lead Contractor has developed an appropriate action plan to extend and improve this provision.

6.9 The physical resources to support the delivery of Steps to Work are mostly good, but range from outstanding in the Lead Contractor's campuses to just satisfactory in a small number of sub-contractors' premises. The Lead Contractor also supports the use of information and learning technology (ILT) to enhance the Steps to Work provision across the contract area. Recent developments include the use of the South West College's virtual learning environment (VLE) to host and share learning resources to support Core Gateway delivery, although ILT remains under-utilised in the NVQ and VRQ strands.

6.10 The management by the sub-contractors inspected, of their particular elements of the Steps to Work provision, is good. Feedback from the employers visited highlights the positive and effective working relationships that they have with most of the sub-contractors.

7. EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

7.1 During the period September 2008 to June 2011, based on data supplied by the Department and summarised in the Appendix, the overall progression rate from Step Two provision into sustained employment for 13 weeks is 14%. This is significantly below the Department's target of 25%, but needs to be set in the context that the Western region has the second largest number of Steps to Work participants of all contract areas, 14% of the Northern Ireland (NI) total, and has seen a rapid increase from 969 participants (December 2009), to 2,551 (June 2011). The 13 week progression rates vary across the contract area from satisfactory in Dungannon (21%) and Omagh (20%) to inadequate in Enniskillen (12%) and Strabane (10%). There is also significant variation across the sub-contractors, with 13 week progression rates into sustained employment ranging from 0% to 50%. The 26 week sustained employment rate is good at 81% which matches the NI average. Given the rapid increase in Steps to Work referrals the Lead Contractor manages the backlogs well, and with the exception of Omagh, backlogs have not risen significantly. Although backlogs remain just below the NI averages for participants waiting between 4 and 15 weeks, and those waiting more than 15 weeks at 44% and 29% respectively, more action is required to further reduce these backlogs.

7.2 Back to Work has the largest proportion (37%) of all Step Two participants in the Western contract area, with almost one-half (49%) of these in Strabane, and a further 33% of them in Enniskillen. This has a significant impact on the poor overall performance in these two regions and consequently on the contract area as a whole, given that the overall progression rate from this strand into sustained employment for 13 weeks is poor at 11%, and below the NI average of 15%. Of those sustaining employment for 13 weeks, 78% of the participants continued to sustain employment for 26 weeks which is just above the NI average of 77%. There is good evidence to show that the strategies adopted by the South West College to develop and extend the work placement employer base, are beginning to have a positive impact on addressing the backlog of participants on the Back to Work strand. For example, the recent introduction of the 'Step Into' initiative which targets employers in specific occupational areas to participate in providing placement and employment opportunities within the Steps to Work programme. This strategy has also resulted in a steadily improving 13 week sustained employment progression rate, rising from 7% in March 2009 to 12% in December 2010. This was achieved in spite of the number of leavers having risen five-fold over this period from 42 to 202 per quarter. While the Lead Contractor makes very good use of labour market intelligence to identify where appropriate employment opportunities exist, and has successfully reduced the percentage of work placements in the voluntary sector to around 30%, further action is required to improve into employment outcomes. Most of the Back to Work participants report that their programme has significantly enhanced their confidence and also their motivation to gain employment.

7.3 Outcomes for the Essential Skills Training strand are inadequate, with just 8% of the participants progressing into sustained employment for 13 weeks; this is well below the NI average of 13% and the Department's target of 25%. The percentage of participants continuing to sustain employment for 26 weeks from this strand is satisfactory at 78%, just above the NI average of 77%. During the period September 2010 to August 2011, the average retention rate was very good at 79% and the qualification achievement rate was outstanding at 97%. However, there is too much variation in the retention rates for participants on the Essential Skills Training strand across the contract area. The best performing sub-contractor, which also has the largest number of participants, has a very

good retention rate of 89%. In contrast, the lowest performing provider has a retention rate of 53%, which is just satisfactory. The standards of the participants' work in the Essential Skills range from satisfactory to good. Almost all of the participants are motivated well to complete their Essential Skills, and realise the importance of gaining qualifications in literacy and numeracy if they are to progress into sustained employment. Almost all of them report that their self-confidence has improved considerably since commencing their Essential Skills training.

7.4 The progression rate into sustained employment for 13 weeks from the VRQ strand is good at 22% which is above the NI average of 20%. In contrast, the outcomes for participants following the NVQ strand progressing into sustained employment for 13 weeks are just satisfactory at 18%, which is below the NI average of 22%. While retention rates on NVQ and VRQ are just satisfactory at 58%, achievement rates for completers are outstanding at 100%. Across the contract area, most of the participants are well-motivated and enthusiastic and they work hard to achieve their qualification in the time allocated.

7.5 The outcomes into sustained employment are good on the Step Ahead strand with progression rates into sustained employment for 13 weeks at 52%, well above the NI average of 32%. However, the percentage of participants continuing to sustain employment for 26 weeks is lower at 40%, well below the NI average of 75%.

7.6 The outcomes for the Self-Employment Test Trading strand are very good, with 43% of the participants progressing to sustained employment for 13 weeks, it is noteworthy that 92% of them remain in business/employment for 26 weeks or more. Most of the participants are energetic, enthusiastic and highly motivated. At the time of the inspection, this strand of Steps to Work was underutilised accounting for only 9% of the Step Two participants and of those, just over one-half of them (26) were in Enniskillen.

7.7 The employment outcomes for GAP are good, with almost one-half (46%) of the participants progressing to sustained employment.

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. Prior to the inspection, 340 questionnaires were issued to the participants, a majority (54%) of which were returned to the Inspectorate, and 35 of which contained additional written comments. The returns show that the participants' experiences in the Western contract area are very good. The Inspectorate has reported the outcomes of the questionnaires and the discussions held with the participants to the Lead Contractor.

8.2 The provision for Core Gateway is good; it is well-managed and the Lead Contractor is responsive to the needs of the staff in the Jobs and Benefits office/JobCentre with extra sessions being organised and provided when required. There are very good relationships between the Lead Contractor and the sub-contractors delivering the Core Gateway provision. Opportunities have been provided to allow the tutors from across the contract area to share good practice and materials, and good use is made of the Lead Contractor's virtual learning environment (VLE) to provide all tutors with access to a wide range of support materials. The quality of the training observed was mostly very good. The tutors are well-prepared and work hard to develop good working relationships with all of the participants. The participants engage well in the sessions and the tutors build positively and effectively on the participants' past experiences to develop their personal and social skills, and as a result improve their employability. The participants are also provided with a range

of useful information to help them make informed choices about the strands available in Step Two. The participants speak highly of the tutors, the support they receive and the content of the programme. In particular, participants value the opportunity to improve their curriculum vitae (CV), to develop their interview skills, and to have access to relevant job vacancy websites. Most of them report that they feel more confident and motivated to seek employment as a result of attending Core Gateway.

8.3 The Lead Contractor is also involved in a pilot Core Gateway project which is at an early stage of development, and appropriate processes are in place to review and evaluate this provision as it rolls out.

8.4 The overall quality of the Jobsearch provision varies from very good to inadequate, but is mostly satisfactory. The Lead Contractor has developed good standardised resources to support the delivery of Jobsearch and these are shared and used well by most of the sub-contractors. However, there is too much variation in the quality of provision across the contract area. While the Lead Contractor requires participants to attend weekly, it is clear some of the sub-contractors have different arrangements, and this combined with inadequate monitoring of attendance results in a small number of participants reporting that they do not regularly attend Jobsearch.

8.5 The quality of the Back to Work provision is good. The Lead Contractor training support officers have established very productive and in many cases long-standing relationships with a wide range of employers. Appropriately, around 70% of placements are within the public and private sectors, with a minority found within the voluntary and community sectors. All of the employers interviewed during the inspection found their contact with the Lead Contractor and the sub-contractors to be highly professional, responsive and supportive. The Lead Contractor makes very effective use of local labour market intelligence to identify those sectors which afford the best opportunity for participant progression to sustained employment. While the majority of work experience placements are well matched to the participants' needs and could lead to sustained employment, the inspection identified a minority of participants who would have benefited from Enhanced Support prior to work experience placement, to increase their confidence, work-readiness and hence employability. The training support officers communicate regularly with, and are responsive to, the requirements of their work experience placement employers. Although their roles and responsibilities were reviewed appropriately in response to the findings of the last inspection, their respective caseloads constrain the depth and effectiveness of the participant review process. There is insufficient monitoring and evaluation, by the Lead Contractor, of the quality of participants' work experience placements or of the rigour of the review process, including the extent of employer involvement in providing training for participants, and their contribution to the identification and achievement of individual participant targets.

8.6 The quality of training and services for Essential Skills Training is good. The majority (67%) of the directed training sessions observed were good or better with one-half of the sessions being very good. Where the training and learning was very good, the sessions were characterised by a good blend of teaching and training strategies being employed effectively, including group work and practical exercises that resulted in good discussions and learning taking place. In the satisfactory sessions, the learning was overly directed with too little learner participation taking place, the pace of the lessons was slow and there was only limited differentiation of learning for those working at different levels. In nearly all the sessions observed, most of the learners received good one to one support from the tutors. The initial assessment and review process, however, does not identify fully all of the participants' personal barriers to learning, and a small number of the participants interviewed would benefit from Enhanced Support to help them progress more effectively in their Essential Skills development, and into employment.

8.7 The quality of the Self-Employment Test Trading strand is very good. The strand is managed very well by both the Lead Contractor and the staff from the four local Enterprise Agencies, and the provision is characterised by strong working relationships and open channels of communication. The strand is promoted effectively through a series of appropriate awareness-raising activities and events and, as a result, numbers remain strong, with 48 participants currently on the strand. This figure represents the second highest number of participants on this strand of the Steps to Work programme across all of the contract areas. The participants receive very good levels of information, advice, and mentoring support from the staff in the Enterprise Agencies in relation to administrative, financial and promotional aspects of their businesses. The participants report that they value this support highly, and that it is of central importance in enabling them to make more informed and coherent decisions in relation to the day-to-day management of their small businesses.

8.8 The quality of provision for the NVQ and VRQ strands is good. While there is a wide range of legacy NVQ provision across the contract area to enhance participants' occupational skills, the planning for the recently introduced changes to the VRQ strand is at an early stage, and consequently only a narrow range of provision is available. The English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programme developed by the Lead Contractor to support the large local migrant community is well-planned and innovative. In order to identify the participants' barriers to learning, however, and in particular their levels of numeracy and literacy in their native language, the initial assessment for the participants needs to be strengthened and improved. The quality of the directed training on the NVQ and VRQ strands varies from good to excellent; it was very good or better in 45% of the sessions observed. The directed training sessions are well-planned and build effectively on the development of the skills required by the participants in their work placements. Access to on-line learning is, however, presently underdeveloped across the contract area. In addition, the range of resources to support training and learning is limited in a small number of the sub-contractors. The work experience placements observed are of good or better quality and match well the participants' needs and career aspirations. The tutors work hard and are supported well by the curriculum managers to tailor the training to the individual needs of the participants. Whilst reviews are completed regularly, they vary in quality from inadequate to good, but are mostly satisfactory. Overall, they do not reflect sufficiently the very good opportunities experienced by the participants in the workplace. In addition, they do not involve fully the employers in the training process.

8.9 The quality of the provision of Step Ahead is good. At the time of inspection, there were 54 participants on the Step Ahead programme. Almost all of them were with one provider in the Strabane area, and are mostly well-motivated, keen to progress in their work placement, and to contribute positively to it. Almost all of them are benefiting from enhanced employability and work-readiness outcomes and are very positive about their experiences. They value the support provided by the employers and the sub-contractor through effective encouragement, and the better-off benefits calculations. The sub-contractor has developed a satisfactory employer base within the voluntary and community sector, and the work placements on the Step Ahead programme are mostly well-matched to the skills and personal attributes of the participants. The participants value the opportunities to develop their employability skills in a range of occupational areas. Almost all of the participants involved in the programme experience a satisfactory range of job challenges and display good standards of work. The uptake on opportunities to achieve accredited qualifications in areas related to the participants' job roles is mostly through in-house training by their employers. The provision of other short accredited courses is overly limited, and the

sub-contractor needs to work more proactively in the promotion of these courses. The Lead Contractor has identified the need to share this good practice more widely across the contract area and to increase the uptake of the strand through an increase in referrals across the contract area. The Department has imposed a pause on recruitment to the Step Ahead strand across all contract areas from the 1st November 2011.

8.10 The provision for the Graduate Acceleration Programme (GAP) is very good. Graduates on placement have very good experiences; the match between the work experience placement and each graduate's skills, qualifications and aspirations is good for most participants. The sub-contractor staff and the workplace mentors provide the participants with good levels of support. It is appropriate that a workshop on entrepreneurial skills is also incorporated into the programme so that participants who may wish to take up the Self-Employment option can do so. The employment outcomes for GAP are good, with almost one-half of the participants progressing to sustained employment.

8.11 The quality of the Personal Plans Towards Employment (PPEs) vary from good to inadequate, but are mostly just satisfactory. There is too much variation in the quality of the PPEs across the contract area, they are mostly too generic in nature and do not reflect fully the career and employment objectives, hobbies and interests and barriers to employment of the participants. The use of the plans to set out and review appropriate short-term targets and to effectively record each participant's individual progress is underdeveloped. The review process lacks rigour, with only limited involvement of employers. A minority of PPEs completed by sub-contractors are good, but this good practice has not been captured and shared across the contract area.

8.12 The South West College 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

9. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

9.1 In order to raise the quality of its provision, the South West College should:

- increase the number of participants progressing into sustained employment;
- further strengthen the quality assurance of the provision across the contract area, particularly in Essential Skills Training, Personal Plans Towards Employment, and the Jobsearch provision; and
- make more effective use of all strands of Steps to Work, particularly Enhanced Support, and the Confidence and Motivation strands, to help participants in need of additional support to progress into employment.

Table 1 - Western Contract Area - 13 Week Performance Benchmarked to NI Average

All participants in the Western Contract Area who moved from Step 2 into unsubsidised or subsidised employment sustained for 13 weeks compared to NI Total (September 2008 to December 2010)

Period	Sep 2008 - Mar 2009	Apr 2009 - Mar 2010	Apr 2010 - June 2010	July 2010 - Sept 2010	Oct 2010 - Dec 2010	Total for September 2008 to December 2010	
Contract Area	Western Contract Area					Western	Northern Ireland Total/Average
Total Leaving Step 2 Lead Contractors	48	750	301	312	321	1,732	10,421
Moved to Subsidised or Unsubsidised Employment	17%	20%	19%	20%	18%	19%	24%
Sustained 13 Wks	10%	15%	13%	14%	15%	14%	18%

Table 2 - 13 Week Performance for the Western Region by Step 2 Strands

Period		Sep 2008 - Mar 2009	Apr 2009 - Mar 2010	Apr 2010 - June 2010	July 2010 - Sept 2010	Oct 2010 - Dec 2010	Total/Average
Back to Work	Total Leaving Steps to Work	42	551	197	220	202	1,212
	Sust. 13 Wks	7%	11%	8%	11%	12%	11%
Essential Skills	Total Leaving Steps to Work	3	35	20	22	26	106
	Sust. 13 Wks	33%	9%	20%	5%	0%	8%
NVQ	Total Leaving Steps to Work	0	61	47	36	38	182
	Sust. 13 Wks	0%	15%	21%	19%	18%	18%
Qualifications	Total Leaving Steps to Work	2	49	16	15	23	105
	Sust. 13 Wks	0%	29%	13%	27%	13%	22%
Self-Employment	Total Leaving Steps to Work	1	54	20	12	19	106
	Sust. 13 Wks	100%	46%	30%	42%	47%	43%
Step Ahead	Total Leaving Steps to Work	0	0	1	7	13	21
	Sust. 13 Wks	0%	0%	100%	57%	46%	52%

Table 3 - Western Contract Area 26 Week performance benchmarked to NI Average							
All participants in the Western Region who moved from Step 2 into unsubsidised or subsidised employment and sustained for 26 weeks compared to NI Total (September 2008 to September 2010)							
Period		Sep 2008 - Mar 2009	Apr 2009 - Mar 2010	Apr 2010 - June 2010	Jul 2010 - Sep 2010	Total for Sep 2008 to Sep 2010	
Contract Area		Western				Western	Northern Ireland Total/Average
Total Leaving Step 2 Lead Contractors		48	750	301	312	1,411	8,540
Sustained 13 Wks		5	113	38	45	201	1,491
Sustained 26 Weeks	Total	5	92	31	34	162	1,214
	% of Total Leaving	10%	12%	10%	11%	11%	14%
	% sustaining 13 Wks which continued to sustain 26 Wks	100%	81%	82%	76%	81%	81%

Table 4 - 26 Week Performance for the Western Contact Area by Step 2 Strands						
Period		Sep 2008 - Mar 2009	Apr 2009 - Mar 2010	Apr 2010 - June 2010	Jul 2010 - Sep 2010	Total/Average
Back to Work	Total Leaving Steps to Work	42	551	197	220	1,010
	Sustained 13 Wks	3	62	15	24	104
	% of 13 Wks which continued to sustain 26 Wks	100%	79%	80%	71%	78%
Essential Skills	Total Leaving Steps to Work	3	35	20	22	80
	Sustained 13 Wks	1	3	4	1	9
	% of 13 Wks which continued to sustain 26 Wks	100%	100%	50%	100%	78%
NVQ	Total Leaving Steps to Work	0	61	47	36	144
	Sustained 13 Wks	0	9	10	7	26
	% of 13 Wks which continued to sustain 26 Wks	0%	67%	90%	86%	81%
Qualifications	Total Leaving Steps to Work	2	49	16	15	82
	Sustained 13 Wks	0	14	2	4	20
	% of 13 Wks which continued to sustain 26 Wks	0%	79%	100%	100%	85%
Self-Employment	Total Leaving Steps to Work	1	54	20	12	87
	Sustained 13 Wks	1	25	6	5	37
	% of 13 Wks which continued to sustain 26 Wks	100%	92%	100%	80%	92%
Step Ahead	Total Leaving Steps to Work	0	0	1	7	8
	Sustained 13 Wks	0	0	1	4	5
	% of 13 Wks which continued to sustain 26 Wks	0%	0%	0%	50%	40%

Table 5 - Progression Rates to Sustained Employment from Step Two by Lead and sub-contractor*					
From Start of contract:			To date of inspection:		
Oct-08			30/09/2011		
Performance	13 weeks			26 weeks	
Organisation	Number of leavers	Number of Leavers found work for 13 weeks	% into sustained employment for 13 weeks	Number qualifying for 13 wks sustained emp. at time of inspection.	% sustaining 13 Wks which continued to sustain 26 Wks
SWC (DGN)	148	25	17%	14	64%
Dungannon Enterprise Centre	24	12	50%	6	50%
Business in the Community	24	9	38%	5	83%
Beat n Track	1	0	0%	0	0%
Coalisland Training Service	52	12	23%	8	89%
Dungannon District Council	6	1	17%	0	0%
STEP	27	5	19%	2	67%
SWC (EKN)	211	20	9%	11	58%
Fermanagh Enterprises	72	33	46%	23	77%
Fermanagh Rural Community Initiative	521	43	8%	32	78%
CVNI	24	0	0%	0	0%
Rutledge Joblink	15	3	20%	3	100%
SWC (OMA)	103	18	17%	14	93%
Omagh Enterprise Co	25	11	44%	10	100%
Omagh District Council	29	1	3%	0	0%
SWC (STR)	67	17	25%	9	60%
Customised Training	693	37	5%	16	53%
Strabane & District CWP	272	52	19%	31	67%
Nerve Centre	13	0	0%	0	0%
Rutledge Joblink	308	30	10%	17	68%
Strabane Enterprise Agency	18	6	33%	3	75%
North West Marketing	0	0	0%	0	0%
Ulster Supported Employment Ltd	1	0	0%	0	0%
Total	2654	335	13%	204	70%

*Note: The data in table 5 was supplied by the Lead Contractor

Table 6 - Western Contract Area - Summary of Steps to Work Backlogs Benchmarked to NI Data

Period	Steps to Work Backlogs - NI Benchmark Data						
	Total No. of Western Area Referrals	Northern Ireland Total Referrals	% of Northern Ireland Total	>4wks < 15wks		> 15 wks	
				Western Region %	N.I. Avg. %	Western Region %	N.I. Avg. %
Q1 2010	640	5,084	13%	44%	46%	20%	26%
Q2 2010	745	5,064	15%	43%	41%	27%	28%
Q3 2010	627	5,785	11%	33%	40%	32%	29%
Q4 2010	1,006	8,494	12%	48%	44%	37%	32%
Q1 2011	988	6,258	16%	37%	47%	30%	30%
Q2 2011	1,309	8,071	16%	52%	50%	27%	22%
Total/Average	5,315	38,756	14%	44%	45%	29%	28%

Table 7 - Western Contract Area - Summary of Backlogs per Strand

Period			Q1 2010	Q2 2010	Q3 2010	Q4 2010	Q1 2011	Q2 2011	Total/Average
Back to Work	No. Referrals		386	424	325	561	628	814	3,138
	>4wks < 15wks	Number	166	170	95	298	224	400	1,353
		%	43%	40%	29%	53%	36%	49%	43%
	> 15 wks	Number	86	102	107	213	205	213	926
		%	22%	24%	33%	38%	33%	26%	30%
Essential Skills	No. Referrals		72	114	114	181	223	298	1,002
	>4wks < 15wks	Number	25	59	38	62	72	126	382
		%	35%	52%	33%	34%	32%	42%	38%
	> 15 wks	Number	13	30	45	72	74	110	344
		%	18%	26%	39%	40%	33%	37%	34%
NVQ	No. Referrals		104	114	120	149			487
	>4wks < 15wks	Number	55	49	44	67			215
		%	53%	43%	37%	45%			44%
	> 15 wks	Number	15	31	26	55			127
		%	14%	27%	22%	37%			26%
Qualifications (7)	No. Referrals		33	33	22	41	55	110	294
	>4wks < 15wks	Number	14	12	9	15	32	104	186
		%	42%	36%	41%	37%	58%	95%	63%
	> 15 wks	Number	6	16	13	21	6	16	78
		%	18%	48%	59%	51%	11%	15%	27%
Self-Employment	No. Referrals		26	46	25	42	59	65	263
	>4wks < 15wks	Number	12	18	11	27	28	36	132
		%	46%	39%	44%	64%	47%	55%	50%
	> 15 wks	Number	5	21	6	3	8	16	59
		%	19%	46%	24%	7%	14%	25%	22%
GAP	No. Referrals		19	14	21	32	23	22	131
	>4wks < 15wks	Number	12	10	10	18	9	16	75
		%	63%	71%	48%	56%	39%	73%	57%
	> 15 wks	Number	4	0	4	6	6	3	23
		%	21%	0%	19%	19%	26%	14%	18%

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