



Education and Training
Inspectorate

Steps to Work Provision in
South West College
Western Contract Area

Report of an Inspection
in September 2010

eti

*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
Promoting Improvement*

Providing Inspection Services for

Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

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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 the South West College.

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 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 20 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 head of training, supported by two deputy heads of department, three curriculum managers and 12 dedicated Steps to Work staff including: a programme development officer, four employer liaison officers, three business engagement officers and four administration staff. In addition, the Steps to Work unit receives assistance from the college support services, including careers education information advice and guidance, counselling, quality and performance, finance and marketing.

2.3 At the time of the main inspection, 378 (75%) of the participants had no or few qualifications on entry to their provision. Thirty-eight (8%) of them had between one and three General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) passes at grade C or above, with a further 21 (4%) having four or more passes at grade C or above. Forty-five (11%) had achieved English and 37 (7%) mathematics at GCSE grade C or above. Thirty-five participants (7%) had a level 3 or higher qualification and of these, six held a Higher National Diploma or degree level qualification.

2.4 The data supplied by the Department in July 2010 indicates that there were 6,765 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 in January 2009, to the current level of 1,345.

2.5 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 Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for April 2010 show that Strabane has the third highest claimant count at 6.8%, an increase of 13.1% over the last year. The count for Dungannon (4.8%), Fermanagh (4.4%) and Omagh (4.9%) is below the Northern Ireland average of 5.1% although unemployment has increased significantly over the last year across the contract area.

3. PROVISION

3.1 At the time of the main inspection in May 2010, there were 505 participants on the Steps to Work provision across the Western region. Eighty-one of them were registered on Step One; 70 on Core Gateway and eleven on a range of Short Accredited Courses. The remaining 424 participants were registered on Step Two; 191 (45%) on Back to Work, 118 (28%) on National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) lasting 52 weeks, 52 (12%) on Essential Skills Training, 20 (5%) on Vocationally Related Qualifications lasting 26 weeks, 26 (6%) on Self-Employment Test Trading, 14 (3%) on Step Ahead and 3 (1%) on the Graduate Acceleration Programme. Of the participants on programme during the May inspection, 68% were male and 42% of them were between the ages of 18 and 25. Data provided by South West College indicates that 36% of the starts on Steps to Work provision are voluntary. The same statistics show that most participants on the Self-Employment strand are also voluntary.

3.2 As well as the South West College, who as the Lead Contractor, was actively working with participants across its three main campuses, 16 of the 20 sub-contractors were actively working with participants: Beat 'n' Track, Business in the Community, Coalisland Training Services, Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland, Customised Training Services, Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council, Dungannon Enterprise Centre, Fermanagh Enterprises Limited, Fermanagh Rural Community Initiative, Omagh District Training Consortium, Omagh Enterprise Company, Rutledge Joblink, Strabane and District Community Working Programme, Strabane Enterprise Agency, STEP Dungannon, and The Nerve Centre.

3.3 All of the participants on the Step Two strand were receiving some form of employability preparation, such as Jobsearch, curriculum vitae 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, 118 participants were working towards NVQs in a good range of professional and technical areas, including: business and administration, children's care, learning and development, construction, computing and information technology, engineering, hairdressing, health and social care, hospitality and catering, and retail.

4. THE INSPECTION

4.1 This report is based on an inspection of South West College and a sample of the sub-contractors' provision; the work of 16 of the sub-contractors was inspected. The inspection took place over three phases; phase one took place in November 2009 and interim findings were left with the college at that time. The second, and main phase of the inspection, took place over three days in May 2010 and involved a team of six inspectors. A third phase follow through inspection took place in September 2010 and focused mainly on those sub-contractors not inspected during the first two phases.

4.2 During the inspection, the inspectors:

- visited 73 participants on work experience placement with 39 employers;
- observed 29 training sessions in centres operated by South West College and its sub-contractors;
- held discussions with 126 participants, individually and in small groups;
- held discussions with the members of South West College's senior management team and senior staff from 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 Training Plans;
- held discussions with 36 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 South West College is very good. The college 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	Very good (2)
Employment outcomes and achievement	Good (3)
Quality of training and services	Very good (2)

5.2 The main strengths are the:

- effective and innovative leadership and management of the Western Contract Area by the Lead Contractor;
- excellent working relationships established across the contract area through regular and effective communication between the Lead Contractor, sub-contractors, JobCentres and the Jobs and Benefits Offices;
- collation and analysis of data to identify trends across the Steps to Work strands, by region and sub-contractor, which is used effectively to inform improvement planning and target-setting;
- rates of progression into sustained employment for 13 weeks on the Self-Employment and the Vocationally Related Qualifications strands;
- good or better quality of provision, including work placements which are well-matched to the individual needs of most participants; and
- very good support and encouragement provided for most participants by employers, and the Lead and sub-contractors.

5.3 The main areas for improvement are the:

- low overall progression rates into sustained employment at 13%; and
- further strengthening of the quality assurance process.

PART TWO

OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION

6. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

6.1 The leadership and management of the Steps to Work provision by South West College are very good. There is excellent communication between the Lead Contractor, sub-contractors, JobCentre and Jobs and Benefits offices staff. There are frequent meetings at all levels, which are well-attended and are focused on performance and decision-making. The Lead Contractor and sub-contractors have good staffing levels across the contract area. The staff are highly committed and support participants well. Most of the staff are appropriately qualified and are supported well in their continuous professional development through a range of internal and external training and courses, mostly leading to qualifications. Most participants have access to good or better physical and learning resources, including information and learning technology (ILT) and accommodation. At the time of the inspection, 80% of participants were referred to the Lead Contractor and a few of the main sub-contractors, with most participants referred to the Back to Work strand. Consequently, there is an under-use of some of the sub-contractors and Steps to Work strands, particularly Enhanced Support, the Graduate Acceleration Programme, Self-Employment and Step Ahead. A challenge for the Lead Contractor, JobCentre and Jobs and Benefits offices is to improve the quality of the initial assessments and guidance, to ensure all participants get the full support they need to achieve their potential, by making better use of all of the available Steps to Work strands. This would also contribute to the further reduction of backlogs and participant waiting times.

6.2 Links and partnership arrangements are very effective and inclusive, resulting in coherent planning across the contract area and appropriate reflection on performance. The Lead Contractor engages to good effect with key staff across the Western region, including sub-contractors, JobCentre and Jobs and Benefits staff, employers, public bodies and Sector Skills Councils. Relationships are excellent and well-managed; all partners are positive and report that issues arising are dealt with effectively and quickly. The South West College organises workshops and other events targeted at key staff across the contract area, which include opportunities for professional development, sharing of best practice, analysis of local labour market intelligence, performance monitoring, target-setting and improvement planning. This has led to the development of a number of innovative initiatives by the Lead Contractor aimed at increasing progression rates to employment, including, for example, Steps to Retail, Steps to Hospitality, employer engagement workshops, redundancy clinics and presentations to Jobs and Benefits Office staff to raise awareness of some of the under-used strands of the Steps to Work provision. The Lead Contractor needs to enhance its presence in the Strabane area, which has the largest number of participants.

6.3 The South West College has well-established quality assurance processes in place that have been extended to include the Steps to Work provision. The college processes are supplemented by external auditing through Investors in People and the International Organisation for Standardisation 9001 quality management standard. A very good database on the contract area is maintained by the South West College and used effectively to analyse key performance indicators, identify trends, and inform improvement planning and target-setting. The self-evaluation process is mainly good and includes self-evaluations from sub-contractors, internal benchmarking, and performance monitoring with a clear focus on moving participants into sustained employment. While the overall self-evaluation judgements are sound and the quality improvement plan identifies accurately most of the main areas for improvement, it needs to be more concise and the final report shared with all sub-contractors.

6.4 The college has made good progress in addressing all of the areas for improvement identified in previous inspection phases, including improvements to the quality processes and the recruitment of three business engagement officers to increase the number of work placements and a specialist tutor for Jobsearch. Positive outcomes to date include the engagement of 185 new employers and improved quality and standardisation of the Jobsearch provision. The Lead Contractor has commenced a schedule of directed training observations across the contract area, but this is at an early stage and requires further planning to ensure communication of outcomes is agreed with the sub-contractors and support mechanisms are put in place to improve the quality of training and learning where shortcomings are identified.

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

7. EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

7.1 Over the first complete year of the contract (2009-2010), the overall progression rate from Step Two provision into sustained employment is 13%, which is below the Department's target of 25%. However, this is a significant improvement from the progression rate of 7% for the first cohort who commenced the provision in October 2008, and needs to be considered within the context of a serious recession which is leading to rising unemployment across the region. Further appropriate action is required by South West College to increase the number of participants moving into sustained employment. A more detailed breakdown of the progression rates to sustained employment achieved by the Lead Contractor and subcontractors can be found in Table 2 in the Appendix.

Table 1: Progression Rates to Sustained Employment from Step Two

Step Two leavers into employment	TABLE 1 - LEAD CONTRACTOR STATISTICS (WESTERN REGION)			
	(2008-2009) 01/10/08 – 31/03/09		(2009 -2010) 01/04/09 – 31/03/10	
	Number of leavers	Leavers into sustained employment for 13 weeks or more	Number of leavers	Leavers into sustained employment for 13 weeks or more
Back to Work	197	7 (4%)	355	41 (12%)
NVQ 52 weeks	28	1 (4%)	29	1 (3%)
Vocationally Related Qualifications	16	3 (19%)	30	6 (20%)
Essential Skills Training	15	2 (13%)	25	1 (4%)
Self-Employment Test Trading	22	7 (32%)	20	9 (45%)
Total	278	20 (7%)	459	58 (13%)

7.2 In the past year, 77% of all leavers participated in the Back to Work strand. The numbers progressing into employment from this strand increased to 12%, up 8% on the previous year, mainly as a result of the Lead Contractor's successful strategy to improve progression. This included effective target-setting, increasing the number of work placements likely to lead to sustained employment, and using local labour market intelligence to help participants target more realistic job goals. Successful outcomes do vary across the contract area, from 7% in Strabane to 27% in Dungannon, and further work is required by the Lead Contractor to improve outcomes across the region, including making better use of all of the other available strands. While overall outcomes in terms of progression to sustained employment are low, most participants on Back to Work are developing good employability skills while on their placements.

7.3 Over the past year, the outcomes for the Self-Employment Test Trading strand are very good with 45% of the participants progressing to sustained employment, which exceeds the Department's target. Outcomes into employment on this strand are particularly successful in Dungannon (88%), Enniskillen (58%) and Omagh (100%). The strand, however, remains under-developed, accounting for only 4% of all leavers.

7.4 The outcomes from the Vocationally Related Qualifications are good, with 20% of participants who leave finding and sustaining work. Most of the success is in Dungannon (67%) and Enniskillen (31%), with limited or no success in the other areas. The qualifications strands are relevant to the participants' needs and aspirations and provide them with good work-readiness skills, which are recognised by employers. Given the relative success of this strand, it remains under-developed across the contract area, accounting for around 7% of all participants who leave.

7.5 The NVQ 52-week strand offers very good opportunities for participants to develop their occupational skills in a good range of professional and technical areas. Participants report that their self-confidence is greatly increased and that in addition to their professional and technical skills, they also develop their wider skills such as following instructions and team-working. Almost all of the participants were well-motivated, had a very positive attitude to learning and were making very good progress towards achieving their qualification. Participants in the workplace are engaged in meaningful tasks, are expected to work at an appropriate pace and are producing very good standards of work. A majority of the participants are still on their programme and success rates for completers are excellent at 100%. More action is required by the Lead Contractor to ensure that participants are undertaking NVQs which are well-matched to their needs and are likely to lead to employment.

7.6 A significant minority of the participants on the Essential Skills Training strand are still on programme and making good progress in line with their previous achievements. Participants and employers report improved levels of confidence and self-esteem as the participants progressed through the programme. Progression into sustained employment, however, is poor at 4% of those who leave and more action is required to improve this, including further use of enhanced support, where appropriate, to help participants on this strand to find and sustain suitable employment.

8. QUALITY OF TRAINING AND SERVICES

8.1 Most (89%) of the participants' responses and comments to the Inspectorate's confidential questionnaire and interviews were positive. In particular, they appreciated the quality of the work placements and directed training, and the high levels of support provided by almost all of the staff.

8.2 The planning for Core Gateway inspected is good; participants have good opportunities to develop their Jobsearch, personal and social skills, and as a result improve their employability opportunities. Most of the participants inspected report enhanced levels of confidence and improved motivation to seek employment. The directed training sessions are run on a regular basis by the Lead Contractor and four of the sub-contractors, and they adopt a flexible approach to the provision of the Core Gateway with additional programmes timetabled as and when required. Participants are provided with an appropriate induction and have access to a range of good quality support materials, and to appropriate on-line materials. Most participants have a very good understanding of the pathways available to them in Step Two. South West College recognises the need to facilitate more opportunities for the sub-contractors who provide Core Gateway to meet and share good practice to ensure that the provision is more consistent.

8.3 The quality of most of the Jobsearch is good or better. The Lead Contractor has provided appropriate opportunities for the sub-contractors to share good practice in order to raise standards and promote improvement. A common core programme has been developed across the contract area with an appropriate range of materials, which are available on-line. The progress of most participants is tracked and recorded effectively through a 'distance travelled record table', and an appropriate written record of the outcomes of all meetings with the participants is completed by tutors. Most participants have good access to appropriate resources including ILT, and are given good support to search and apply for jobs on-line. For both the Core Gateway and Jobsearch provision, the tutors would benefit from a shared, on-line communication tool to further share best practice and support materials. A minority of the Jobsearch provision is just satisfactory and the Lead Contractor must take action to ensure that all sub-contractors make good use of the available resources and adopt best practice.

8.4 The Lead Contractor's employment liaison officers have established good relationships with the sub-contractors and they also support the participants well. The recently appointed business engagement officers have developed extensive links with employers and have increased the employer database significantly. This has resulted in more participants obtaining placements that are better matched to their needs and more likely to lead to sustained employment. While the South West College has good links with the Sector Skills Councils in relation to other provision across the college, these links are less well developed for Steps to Work programmes. Further work is required by the Lead Contractor to increase the number of suitable work experience placements in the Strabane area that will lead to sustained employment.

8.5 Most participants report that the range and quality of support provided by the Department's Advisers, the Lead and sub-contractor employment officers, and the tutors, who provide directed training, are good. Working relationships between most tutors and the participants are very good with effective individualised support and encouragement, which enables them to make good progress in their training and learning.

8.6 The quality of the Personal Training Plans is satisfactory. While some account is taken of the outcomes of the initial assessments, more needs to be done by the Lead Contractor to ensure that the plans are more individualised in nature and focus on each participant's needs, including the key training required to enhance their employability. The plans do include some targets for progression to employment, although these need to be more specific and underpinned with a more effective monitoring and review of progress. Action by the Lead Contractor is required to improve the quality of Personal Training Plans across the contract area.

8.7 The quality of the work experience placements on the Back to Work strand are generally good and they are matched as closely as possible to the needs, interests and career aspirations of most of the participants. Most participants visited are carrying out a range of tasks and developing relevant employability skills, including good timekeeping, team-working, accepting responsibility for tasks and working independently. Participants in the workplaces visited are satisfied with the provision and the support they get from the sub-contractors and employers.

8.8 While the participants on the Essential Skills Training strand have been assessed as having poor literacy and numeracy skills, most of them welcome the opportunity to undertake appropriate qualifications and recognised the importance of improving their essential skills. During the directed training sessions observed, tutors support the participants very well; lessons are well-planned and use a range of good support materials, including on-line games and exercises. The participants respond well to the tutors, produce work to a good standard and are able to relate new knowledge and skills to the technical and professional areas they are interested in.

8.9 The majority of participants on the Self-Employment Test Trading strand are developing a good range of important enterprise skills to enable them to manage a business, and are positive about the impact of the Self-Employment Awareness and Go For It business support programmes. Most participants are well-motivated, adaptable, hard-working and enthusiastic, and report that this strand provides an excellent opportunity to trial a business idea while minimising the risk. In most cases, there is a good fit between the participants' test trading projects and their skills, background and aspirations.

8.10 The quality of the NVQ 52-week provision is very good. Participants can access a wide range of professional and technical courses across a suitable range of providers to enhance existing skills, or to re-skill in a new area. The quality of directed training in the sessions observed is very good and the participants have access to excellent or very good training resources, which provide them with excellent opportunities to gain relevant skills to industry standards. Most participants have a work experience placement well-matched to their needs and where they can achieve their NVQ. Most participants are targeting a level 2 diploma or an NVQ and a technical certificate. This facilitates progression to further level 3 training, should they gain employment through the ApprenticeshipsNI provision. Across the contract area, there is significant demand for training in children's care, learning and development. Most participants are placed in primary schools as classroom assistants and there are very good opportunities to achieve an NVQ at level 2.

8.11 A relatively small number of participants are registered on the Step Ahead strand. Almost all of them are benefiting from enhanced employability and work-readiness outcomes and are very positive about their experiences. A significant minority require enhanced support and have a range of other impediments, as they have not worked for a considerable time. All participants report improvements in their self-esteem and confidence, and a willingness to remain in employment. Support is very good or excellent through effective encouragement, 'better off' benefit calculations and access to some form of additional training or qualification, such as first aid or basic hygiene. There is good use of local labour market intelligence to source the referrals and some good opportunities for sustained employment. More work needs to be done by the Lead Contractor to facilitate the sharing of good practice more widely across the contract area and to increase the take-up of the strand through an increase in referrals.

PART THREE

9. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

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

- increase the number of participants progressing into sustained employment; and
- further strengthen quality assurance processes.

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 within 13 week qualifying period at the time of the inspection	Number (%) found work for 13 weeks
Coalisland Training Services	17	5	0%
Conservation Volunteers NI	6	4	0%
Customised Training	209	150	9 (6%)
Dungannon District Council	3	3	0%
Dungannon Enterprise Centre	12	7	3 (43%)
Fermanagh Enterprises Limited	17	10	4 (40%)
Fermanagh Rural Community Initiative	183	112	13 (12%)
Gingerbread	1	1	0%
Nerve Centre	5	0	0%
Omagh District Council	15	11	1 (9%)
Omagh Enterprise Company	6	1	1 (100%)
Rutledge Joblink	87	57	7 (12%)
South West College	81	39	5 (13%)
STEP Dungannon	2	2	2 (100%)
Strabane and District Community Workshop Programme	67	55	12 (22%)
Strabane Enterprise Agency	5	2	1 (50%)
Ulster Supported Employment Limited	1	0	0%
Total	717	459	58 (13%)

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