



*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

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of an Inspection

People First Steps to Work

Inspected: October 2009

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A number of quantitative terms are used in the report. In percentages, the terms correspond as follows:

More than 90%	-	almost/nearly all
75%-90%	-	most
50%-74%	-	a majority
30%-49%	-	a significant minority
10%-29%	-	a minority
Less than 10%	-	very few/a small minority

All the statistics in this report have been supplied by the People First

Grading System

The Education and Training Inspectorate (the 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. STEPS TO WORK

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 Jobseekers 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 them 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 those 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 longer.

Step Three: This is targeted at those who have completed Step Two but have not found employment. The participant is provided with follow-up support and advice, 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 People First is contracted by the Department as Lead Contractor for the delivery of the Steps to Work provision in the South Eastern region of Northern Ireland. This region covers a wide geographical area within the District Council areas of Lisburn, Down, Banbridge, and part of Newry and Mourne. Participants are referred to the Lead Contractor through the Lisburn, Banbridge and Kilkeel Jobs and Benefits offices, and the Ballynahinch, Downpatrick and Newcastle JobCentres.

2.2 People First has worked in the provision of work-based training and employment programmes since 1992. It is a privately owned organisation and is run by a Senior Management Team consisting of four directors. The organisation manages the Steps to Work contract from its office in Lisburn. While one of the directors has overall responsibility for the delivery of the Steps to Work contract, she is supported in the day-to-day management by a designated Steps to Work manager.

2.3 Over the last year the number of participants entering the Steps to Work programme in the South Eastern region has increased significantly. This rise is largely due to the adverse economic conditions which are now affecting many employers in Northern Ireland. In May 2009 the number of individuals registered as unemployed in this contract area was 4,700 rising by September 2009 to 5,180, with 680 of these referred as mandatory participants for Steps to Work. Staff from the Jobs and Benefits offices report that the number of redundancies has risen sharply, while at the same time recruitment to jobs has fallen. They also report that, over the past year, there were very small numbers of new job vacancies advertised in the contract area provided for by People First.

2.4 Information on the qualifications held by participants on entry to the Steps to Work programme, or on the number of times they had previously been on New Deal programmes, has only recently been collected by the Lead Contractor.

3. PROVISION

3.1 At the time of the inspection, there were 163 participants on Steps to Work provision: Twenty five were on Step One provision undertaking Core Gateway or Jobsearch activities with the remaining 138 in a range of Step Two provision. The overall numbers of participants who participated in Step One provision during 2008/09 can be seen in Appendix 1.

3.2 People First sub-contracts part of its work to 16 different providers. At the time of the inspection, People First, Lisburn was working directly with 37 participants, and eight of the sub-contractors were also actively working with participants: HJ O'Boyle (54); People First, Banbridge (15); Mentor (12); Southern Regional College (7); YMCA, Lisburn (5); Banbridge Enterprises (4); Transition Training (3); and Craigavon Industrial Development Organisation (1). The remaining sub-contractors had no participants placed with them at the time of the inspection.

3.3 Almost all of the participants involved in Step Two activities were receiving some form of employability training, such as Jobsearch, curriculum vitae (CV) preparation 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, 42 participants were engaged in national vocational qualification (NVQ) training in childcare, hairdressing, business administration, hospitality and catering, retail, light motor vehicle repair and welding.

4. THE INSPECTION

4.1 This report is based on an inspection of People First and a sample of the work of the main sub-contractors. The inspection took place over two phases; phase one took place in March 2009 and interim findings were left with People First at that time. The second phase of the inspection took place over three days in October 2009 and involved a team of six inspectors.

4.2 During the inspection, inspectors:

- visited participants on work experience with 24 employers;
- observed eleven training sessions in centres operated by People First and its sub-contractors;
- held discussions with 71 participants, individually and in small groups;

- held discussions with the members of People First's senior management team and senior staff from the main sub-contractors;
- held discussions with key training and support staff;
- observed a case conferencing meeting with JobCentre staff;
- examined a wide range of documentation including samples of participants' written work and their Personal Training Plans (PTPs);
- held discussions with 24 employers; and
- held discussions with the District Manager and the managers in the Job and Benefit offices/JobCentres.

4.3 The arrangements for the inspection of personal support and the protection of vulnerable adults included the opportunity for the participants to complete a confidential questionnaire, seeking their views on the quality of the provision. In addition, discussions were held with groups of the participants during the inspection. Eighty questionnaires were issued to the participants; 54 (68%) were returned to the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) of which eight contained additional written comments.

5. MAIN FINDINGS

5.1 In the areas inspected, the quality of training and services provided by People First is good. The organisation has important strengths in most of its provision. The inspection has identified areas for improvement which the organisation has demonstrated the capacity to address. The Inspectorate will monitor the organisation's progress on the areas for improvement.

Overall performance level (grade)	Good (3)
Contributory performance levels (grades)	
Leadership and management	Good (3)
Employment outcomes and achievements	Satisfactory (4)
Quality of training and services	Good (3)

5.2 The main strengths are the:

- commitment of the staff at all levels in People First to promote improvement in the interests of the participants;
- positive, collaborative working relationships developed within and across the contract area, with the staff in local Jobs and Benefits offices/JobCentres and sub-contractors;
- good motivation of almost all of the participants visited in their training, work experience placements or while on self-employment test trading;
- good quality support provided by the employers;

- caring ethos and good quality personal support provided for the participants by the training and support staff, across the providers inspected; and
- good or better quality of the directed training and work experience placements for the NVQ participants.

5.3 The main areas for improvement are the:

- low number of participants progressing into sustained employment;
- more effective arrangements for the monitoring and tracking of the participants' progress and outcomes across the contract area in order to inform planning and promote improvement; and
- over-reliance on mostly small, local employers.

PART TWO

OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION

6. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

6.1 The leadership and management of the Steps to Work contract by People First is good. The senior management team in People First is supported effectively in the operational management of the Steps to Work contract by a dedicated Programme Manager. People First has developed good communication channels through regular and effective meetings with sub-contractors, and through monthly case-conferencing meetings with Jobs and Benefits office and JobCentre staff, to plan for and meet the individual needs of the participants.

6.2 People First and its sub-contractors have well-established relationships with around 100 different employers across the contract area. Staff from People First and its sub-contractors work hard to maintain these relationships and they regularly visit participants on work placements. They are supportive of these participants and deal quickly and effectively with any problems that arise in the workplace.

6.3 The tutors inspected are appropriately qualified and have relevant occupational qualifications. Newly appointed staff undergo a suitable period of induction and support and are provided with an appropriately experienced mentor. On occasion the staff are over-stretched in meeting the diverse needs of the large numbers of participants for whom they have responsibility. It is imperative that management within People First actively monitor and review staffing complements to ensure staff to participant ratios are sufficient to effectively meet the needs of the increasing numbers of participants coming onto the Steps to Work programme.

6.4 Lead Contractor staff and those within the sub-contractors are kept abreast of any changes to the Steps to Work programmes through the regular briefings provided by People First and they attend a good range of appropriate, external training programmes and support meetings.

6.5 People First is in the process of implementing quality management systems to evaluate the quality of provision and services. A good start has been made to a well-planned programme of monitoring and evaluation visits to sub-contractors which will be extended to all of them over the next few months. The quality assurance process devised by People First is having a positive impact, for example, through the identification of inconsistencies in the quality of the participants' Personal Training Plans. People First has improved its capacity and associated processes to track participants' progress within its own organisation, but more needs to be done to ensure that the progress of all participants, regardless of the sub-contractor, is continually monitored and reviewed, to ensure that their employability skills are being improved.

6.6 The process for self-evaluation is well-established within People First and is mostly effective. There is good consultation with the participants and employers and the information from them is used to good effect to evaluate the provision. The inspection confirms that while the self-evaluation report recognises the need to use data more effectively, too little is being done to analyse the available performance data in sufficient detail, in order to identify emerging patterns or areas of weakness or to promote improvement. People First needs to involve all of the sub-contractors in the self-evaluation process, and to include performance indicators in the improvement plan, against which progress and effectiveness can be measured.

7. EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

7.1 The focus of the Steps to Work programme is to improve the employability skills of unemployed people and enable them to find sustained employment. During the last year, People First has successfully helped 15% of Step Two leavers to find sustained employment (Table 1). This figure falls well below the Departmental target of 25% of the participants leaving Step Two and finding employment which is sustained for 13 weeks. Across the Lead Contractor and sub-contractors there is considerable variation in their achievement of sustained employment for those on Step Two provision, ranging from 0% to 69% (Table 2). It is noteworthy that the rate of progression to sustained employment for at least 13 weeks, for those on the self-employment strand, is particularly good at 61%. It is too early in the programme for valid data to have become available on sustained employment of 26 weeks.

7.2 While these statistics have to be taken in the context of an economic recession, with rising unemployment figures and falling job vacancies, People First recognise the urgent need to increase the number of participants finding sustained employment and to identify and secure a wider range of job opportunities. The sub-contractors providing for the participants in rural areas report particular difficulties in securing employment opportunities.

Table 1: Overall Outcomes for Participants Leaving Step Two Programmes from 29 September 2008 to 31 March 2009.

Area 6: South Eastern Region			
	Number of Leavers (2008/09)	Number of Leavers (2008/09) who Found Work (13 weeks)	Percentage of Leavers who Found Work (13 weeks)
Step Two Back-to-Work	119	17	14%
Step Two National Vocational Qualification	33	3	8%
Step Two Vocationally Relevant Qualification	15	1	7%
Step Two Essential Skills Training	31	0	0%
Step Two Self-Employment	18	11	61%
Step Two Overall	216	32	15%

Table 2: Lead Contractor and Sub-contractor Outcomes

	Number of Leavers (2008/09)	Number of Leavers (2008/09) who Found Work (13 weeks)	Percentage of Leavers who Found Work (13 weeks)
People First (Lisburn)	43	9	21%
H J O'Boyle	77	5	6%
YMCA (Lisburn)	26	4	15%
Mentor	16	11	69%
People First (Banbridge)	14	0	0%
Southern Regional College	14	3	21%
Voluntary Service Lisburn	10	0	0%
Transition Training	9	0	0%
Banbridge Enterprise Organisation	3	0	0%
Lisburn Enterprise Organisation	2	0	0%
Gingerbread	2	0	0%
Overall	216	32	15%

All figures provided by People First

7.3 While 55% of the participants who have completed essential skills training through the People First contract achieved a qualification in both literacy and numeracy, none of these participants have progressed to sustained employment. The participants currently on the programme did report improvements in their confidence levels and self-esteem as their literacy and numeracy skills improve, but very few of those visited were in work placements with any prospects of full-time employment.

7.4 The range of associated employers used by the Lead Contractor has remained largely static for a number of years. As a result, they and the sub-contractors are overly reliant on mostly small, local employers largely based in the private and voluntary sectors; only a small number of their current employers are large or national organisations and this is a weakness. Of the 122 participants placed with employers at the time of the inspection, for example, only 18 were in the public sector. Consequently, there are restricted opportunities for placing participants in suitable work experience situations and subsequently in employment. This has also resulted in considerable waiting lists for many of the mandatory participants seeking work experience placements across the contract area; 46 of them, for example, await a placement in Downpatrick. This problem is compounded by participants wanting to come onto the programme on a voluntary basis; in Kilkeel, for example, 12 mandatory participants await a work placement, with a further 61 voluntary participants also seeking work experience. The local Jobs and Benefits office and JobCentre staff are working actively and collaboratively with People First to secure additional work placement opportunities within the public sector, mainly through the District Councils, the local Health and Social Care Trust, as well as with the larger, national retail outlets in the area. The workplace experience needs of the participants in this contract area, however, remain restricted to small employers who are unable to provide permanent employment opportunities.

7.5 Since the start of the Steps to Work programme in September 2008, 78 participants began an NVQ training programme, across several occupational areas. It is unsatisfactory that during the year, 36 (46%) of them left early, with 42 remaining on the programme; almost all of those remaining on the programme are on target to achieve their NVQ qualification.

8. QUALITY OF TRAINING AND SERVICES

8.1 The responses from the Inspectorate's confidential questionnaire and the comments from the participants showed that almost all who responded were content with the quality of the provision by People First and its sub-contractors. In particular, they appreciated the helpful, knowledgeable and approachable staff and the improvement in their confidence and skills. A small number of the participants raised concerns over lack of access to social areas during break and lunch times. The Inspectorate has reported to the senior management of the Lead Contractor on the areas of concern emerging from the questionnaire returns and discussions with the participants.

8.2 The arrangements for the initial assessment and induction of the participants are mostly effective, across all of the providers inspected. Their literacy and numeracy skills, along with their occupational skills and interests, are assessed thoroughly; where weaknesses are identified in the participants' essential skills, additional training and support is arranged appropriately. The initial assessment and induction programme for those on NVQ programmes needs to be strengthened to ensure that they are appropriately placed on, and committed to completing, an NVQ training programme.

8.3 Staff in the Lead Contractor develop PTPs which are of a good quality; good use is made of the outcomes from the induction and initial assessments with appropriate account being taken of the trainees' preferred learning styles and additional needs. However, across the sub-contractors there is too much variation in the quality of the PTPs, which in many instances do not reflect adequately the effort the providers put into the initial assessment process. The PTPs need to contain more specific, measurable targets, and to identify more clearly the participants' barriers to employment and the action to be taken to address them effectively. Although the monitoring and review of participants' progress in both directed training and the workplace is good, it is not yet captured effectively within the PTPs.

8.4 People First and its sub-contractors, through their training and support staff, provide the participants with very good levels of support; as a result, almost all of them make progress in improving their self-confidence and employability skills, through participation in the programme. The staff are friendly and approachable, they are attentive to detail and they deal well with almost all problems. They are gaining in confidence and experience and provide good support to those participants who require additional help to remain on the programme. A small number of participants with additional barriers need specialist assistance, and People First and its sub-contractors use to good effect the sound partnership links they have established with an appropriately broad range of specialist support agencies. This enables the participants' financial, family and health problems to be addressed and appropriate support and reassurance to be provided.

8.5 For those participants in the Step One Core Gateway provision, their employment needs and capabilities are effectively analysed. There is very wide variation in the qualifications and experiences of the participants referred to Core Gateway, ranging from those who are very hard to help to those who are highly qualified and experienced. The Core Gateway provision is mostly well planned and the participants are supported effectively by their tutors. There is, however, some variation in the quality of the delivery of the Core Gateway programmes across a minority of the sub-contractors and more needs to be done

by the Lead Contractor to disseminate the existing good practice widely across the contract area. Consideration also needs to be given to meeting the diverse needs of the participants on a more individual basis as opposed to the larger group approach being taken by the Lead Contractor and its sub-contractors.

8.6 Almost all of the participants benefit from the Jobsearch, CV preparation, interview skills and careers guidance as part of their programmes. Although most of the training sessions in these important aspects of the provision are good, the tutors need to ensure in their planning that they take due account of the diverse needs of the participants through the use of more personalised learning strategies. In the better training sessions observed, the tutors use imaginative materials which are tailored well to the participants' interests and capabilities; this improved the responsiveness and participation of the participants in these sessions. A minority of the sessions are dull, lacking in pace and do not adequately challenge the participants.

8.7 The quality of the NVQ training is good or better. It is well planned and managed, and participants are placed in work experience placements well matched to their needs and career aspirations. Appropriate targets are set for the participants' progress which are effectively monitored and updated regularly. The participants' work is assessed regularly and effectively and the participants are provided with regular and informative progress reviews.

8.8 All of the participants visited in the workplace, across the NVQ, Back-to-Work and essential skills strands are in good quality work experience placements, well matched to their individual needs and supported well by the employers. Almost all of the employers and participants visited spoke highly of the responsiveness of, and support provided, by People First and its sub-contractors. While the employers provide the participants with good work experiences, only a small number of them are able to offer the participants permanent employment. In some areas within the South Eastern region there are very few job opportunities being advertised for which the participants can apply, resulting in the demotivation of many of them in these areas. Most of the employers report that the current economic climate is the main barrier to further recruitment.

8.9 Those participants on the self-employment (test trading) strand are highly motivated and keen to start their own business. Of the 15 participants on this strand, ten were placed with one provider who effectively supports them in the business start up phase. This sub-contractor has good links with a range of local professionals such as accountants, tax consultants and marketing firms and refers participants appropriately for advice and guidance. Consequently, a higher proportion of these participants are able to sustain their self-employment for 13 weeks and more.

PART THREE

9. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

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

- increase the number of participants moving into sustained employment;
- use a range of detailed performance data to inform both self-evaluation and quality improvement work; and
- develop further a larger and more diverse pool of work experience providers and employers.

PARTICIPATION NUMBERS 2008/09**Table 3: Overall Number of Participants Participating on Step One Programmes**

Step One (and strand)	Number of mandatory participants 08/09	Number of voluntary participants 08/09	Total number of participants 08/09
Step One Core Gateway and 3 day Jobsearch	532	27	559
Step One Confidence and Motivation	6	1	7
Step One Short Accredited Courses	153	150	303
Step One Self-employment Basic Awareness	53	34	87
Start a Business Programme (Go For It)	18	11	29
Step One Support for Musicians	12	3	15
Overall Total	774	226	1,000

The data in the table was provided by the Lead Contractor, People First.

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