

A4e

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates		4–8 February 2013
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Inadequate-4
	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory-3
Outcomes for learners		Requires improvement-3
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Requires improvement-3
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Inadequate-4

Summary of key findings for learners

This provider is inadequate because:

- Leaders and managers have failed to ensure that a systematic approach routinely improves outcomes and the quality of provision in A4e learning and skills programmes. Three previous inspections noted that arrangements to ensure or improve the quality of provision were in development; revised quality systems are not having a significant impact.
- Outcomes on the apprenticeship programme that A4e has delivered for many years have had consistently inadequate outcomes. Since the previous inspection almost half of the nearly 2500 apprentices who left the scheme did so without their main qualification.
- Too much teaching, learning and assessment is uninspiring or mechanistic. Performance in subject areas has rarely risen above satisfactory or requiring improvement in 10 years of inspection.
- A4e's self-assessment and quality improvement processes are overly complex. Judgements, especially for learners' outcomes are too generous. The process for observing teaching, learning and assessment is not effective enough to drive up standards.

This provider has the following strengths:

- The relatively new employability training makes good use of A4e's resources; early results suggest programmes help unemployed people into work at a higher rate than if they had no help.
- Supportive and dedicated staff have good relationships with learners, helping them develop self-confidence and a range of employment skills.
- In an attempt to improve the provision, significant investment has been made in administrative and monitoring systems, learning technology and staff development in teaching qualifications and functional skills but the full impact of these initiatives is yet to be seen.

Full report

What does A4e need to do to improve further?

- Devise and fully implement a formal, quality improvement system which is evaluative and links to effective action-planning, paying particular attention to improving the quality of learners' experience of their programmes, raising the quality of teaching and learning, and improving learners' levels of attainment.
- Use a rigorous system of observing teaching, learning and assessment and associated staff development to drive up the quality of teaching and learning, for instance by engaging learners in classroom sessions, or ensuring that learners play a more active part in apprenticeship assessment.
- Through sharing of good practice, and staff development, improve individual, lesson and assessment planning to link those activities better with learners' experiences and backgrounds, challenging the more able learners and ensuring those who may struggle are given appropriate support.
- Equip staff with the skills to support learners taking functional skills qualifications; review the impact of this support, adjust as necessary and be more active in providing alternative arrangements for learners who cannot be supported by their normal tutor or assessor.
- Complete the plans for providing accurate and timely data on apprenticeship activity and ensure that it is evaluated fully by staff at all levels to identify underperformance and those learners who are at risk of not achieving. Use the outcome of the evaluation to target focused actions where these are needed most. Support learners to remain on their programme by ensuring regular and productive contact between assessors and learners.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Requires improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In 2011/12 employability training achieved overall success rates for accredited short courses that required improvement, but were approaching national averages. The provision directly delivered by A4e had success rates around 25 percentage points below those of its subcontractors who delivered a fifth of the provision. ▪ Much of the accredited vocational training, such as hairdressing and construction which was carried out in well-resourced centres, has good to very good outcomes, but the results from English, mathematics and functional skills courses are poor. ▪ A workplace-learning programme that was run in 2011/12 for over a thousand learners had very good success rates and the very large majority of learners completed their course within planned timescales. ▪ Overall apprentice success rates have been inadequate for four years. In-year data indicate that overall performance is likely to improve but remain low. In the past the majority of apprentices have failed to complete their programmes within planned timescales. However, current learners, particularly in business administration, are making good progress. ▪ A4e is meticulous in ensuring that assessment activities meet the requirements of relevant qualifications, but in health and social care learners are not challenged to exceed the requirements. ▪ There are no significant and sustained gaps in the performance of differing groups of learners. In apprenticeships, where there were some differences in 2010/11, the gaps have nearly all been narrowed, or even reversed. A4e carries out appropriate analysis of performance between different groups of learners. 	

- Learners on all courses improve their skills and self-confidence and most enjoy their programmes. This is particularly noticeable in A4e's employability training where motivated learners respond well to individual support from tutors and enhance their employability prospects, often working productively with others on their course. Apprentices who remain on programme are similarly enthusiastic and improve their workplace skills.
- Progression to employment from employability courses requires improvement, but data suggest that learners who attend this training are more likely to find a job than unemployed young people who do not improve their skills in this way. The training also encourages a satisfactory proportion of learners to enter further education, or to start an apprenticeship as part of their new employment.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Teaching, learning and assessment require improvement to ensure that learners, and particularly apprentices, have courses that challenge them and provide enough interest so that they stay on programme. The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is reflected in the need to improve outcomes.
- Supportive tutors and assessors motivate learners on an individual basis and provide appropriate guidance to enable them to complete their qualification, but the more able learners are not sufficiently challenged.
- The range of activities in taught sessions and supervised individual work for unemployed learners is too narrow to involve learners fully. However, the unemployed learners independently help each other to improve their skills with guidance from tutors.
- Assessment is rigorous, and fully meets the requirements of the qualifications, but the approach, particularly in health and social care, can be too mechanistic, with limited opportunity to explore aspects beyond compliance.
- Staff generally have good, relevant experience, and A4e ensures that they have appropriate teaching and training qualifications.
- A4e staff have been creative in providing learning opportunities for unemployed people. Seven well-appointed learning centres ('Vox' centres) offer a useful range of vocational courses. These Vox centres and many community venues are used effectively to provide personal development training.
- Initial assessment is carried out to assess a learner's starting points, but this information is not always used effectively to plan individual learning.
- Feedback to aid improvement is of a variable quality. In courses for unemployed people, verbal feedback is motivating but written feedback is insufficient. Targets set for improvement are often too imprecise to be helpful.
- A4e has introduced an effective strategy to improve the ability of staff to support learners taking functional skills and this is now having a beneficial impact. However, on the apprenticeship programmes this was introduced late and a very small number of staff are not yet competent to develop their learners' skills and understanding.
- Integration of functional skills into routine work on the unemployed provision is ineffective, and the stand-alone delivery is not yet effective enough.
- Information guidance and advice for learners is generally good, though not always used effectively to guide learners to higher level provision.
- Learning activities engage learners and take their backgrounds into account particularly in the unemployed provision. Staff do not maximise opportunities to promote specific aspects of equality and diversity.

Health and social care, child development and wellbeing Apprenticeships

Requires improvement

- Teaching, learning and assessment require improvement, as reflected in the outcomes for health and social care and child development and wellbeing apprenticeship programmes. The proportion of apprentices completing successfully, and within their planned timescales, is improving, but results are not consistent across the provision.
- Most learners develop good levels of personal and social skills, including high levels of self-motivation and communication. Learners develop a strong work ethic, which supports progression into higher-level qualifications, training or job promotion. For example, one health and social care learner did not have the required level of English to join the level 3 course. A4e assisted her to improve her skills and, as a result, she has now started the advanced apprenticeship which could enhance her promotion prospects.
- Assessors do not always plan effectively to provide a range of learning and assessment opportunities that extend all learners' knowledge and understanding. Training resources, specifically the use of technology, are underutilised and do not encourage independent learning, particularly on the advanced apprenticeship and level 3 diploma programmes.
- Almost all assessors demonstrate good levels of subject knowledge and experience and use their skills and expertise effectively to provide good levels of care, support and guidance to all learners.
- Initial assessment processes are not always effective. Specialist learning support is available but is not used enough. Learners who do not complete by their target date too often have not had regular assessment visits.
- Although learners develop good workplace skills, the evidence and assessment methods used are narrow and do not always allow learners to develop a wider range of work and evidence to contribute to their qualifications or test their deeper knowledge and understanding. A4E's arrangements to quality assure the training provided by other organisations to help learners progress and develop skills, are insufficient to ensure that it contributes effectively to learners' progress and skills development.
- Recruitment, induction advice and guidance do not effectively support learners to understand the structure of the apprenticeship programme. The integration of English and mathematics with vocational learning is insufficiently embedded in workplace sessions. Learners' knowledge and understanding of mathematics is often poor and insufficient use is made of the specialist teaching support available. In this area assessors' feedback and assessment methods do not help the development of skills or extend learners' knowledge and application of functional skills to their work.
- Arrangements for care, advice and guidance are strong with assessors providing individual support on a frequent basis. Induction is not always effective. For example, it does not provide clear guidance on aspects of equality and diversity. Learners' knowledge and understanding of equality and diversity and safeguarding meet requirements, but are not extended by work with assessors.

Employability Training Employability

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment in employability training requires improvement and this is reflected in learners' outcomes.
- In the better sessions, learners are fully engaged in learning because tutors provide a range of interesting individual and group tasks which motivate and inspire them. As a result learners

make good progress. Frequent checks are made on learning and, when needed, additional support is given. Learners display mature attitudes to their learning and individually respond well to the personal attention and support given by tutors.

- Many formal sessions fail to stimulate and engage learners sufficiently. The weaker sessions are too tutor led. Learning is not fully matched to learners' previously identified needs and abilities. More-able learners are not sufficiently stretched and challenged and as a result their progress is slowed.
- In classroom-based sessions, resources are limited. Teaching materials lack originality and variety. Learners spend too much time reading and completing handouts and workbooks and spend too little time working on practical or interesting activities. Insufficient use is made of information and learning technology to enliven learning and to stimulate learners.
- A good range of vocational options, such as hairdressing and motor-vehicle maintenance, is available, particularly in the Vox centres. Learners also have good opportunities to obtain very useful industry-related awards for example in catering and hospitality and hairdressing. Tutors have good vocational experience and qualifications, which they use well to link theory to practice when working with learners.
- Initial assessment is thorough. All learners are interviewed as part of the enrolment process and their standards of English and mathematics are carefully evaluated through initial or diagnostic assessments. Learners' barriers to progression are also identified, and although good use is made of the information when allocating learners to specific courses, the extent to which it is used for planning learning and setting and recording targets, is variable. Targets are not sufficiently specific with too many generic actions and little focus on what personal skills the learner needs to develop in order to enter sustainable employment.
- Learners receive frequent oral feedback which motivates, encourages and raises their aspirations. However, written feedback on learners' work is insufficiently detailed. In too many cases comments and marks are not recorded and, as a result, learners do not know what they have to do to improve. Grammatical and spelling errors are not routinely corrected or then used to guide remedial learning.
- The teaching of functional skills qualifications is underdeveloped. Literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) are not sufficiently embedded in employability courses and opportunities for improving learners' competencies are missed. Too few trainers have qualifications in English, mathematics and ICT at a sufficiently high level to equip them with the knowledge and confidence needed to teach functional skills competently.
- Information, advice and guidance are good. Learners receive detailed information, advice and guidance before enrolling on a course and at various times during the course. Learners understand their rights and responsibilities and the demands of the programme are clearly identified.
- Satisfactory promotion of equality and diversity during the induction process helps learners to understand the importance of mutual respect. Tutors have a good knowledge of their learners and treat them with dignity and respect. However, in classroom-based sessions the promotion of equality and diversity is insufficient.

Administration, business management Apprenticeships

Requires improvement

- Teaching, learning and assessment in administration and business management, require improvement. Outcomes for learners also require improvement and have been variable and consistently below national rates over the past three years. Assessors are appropriately qualified. They have a good understanding of the organisations in which learners are employed which helps when planning assessment activities and developing learners' skills. Learners are clear about what is expected of them and this motivates them to make good progress. The

majority are on target to achieve within agreed timescales with some examples of early achievement.

- Learners enjoy their training and learning and are motivated and enthusiastic. They develop good levels of self-confidence and improve their workplace skills in a wide range of administrative tasks.
- Assessments are well planned and flexible. Assessors generally provide clear written and oral feedback which helps learners develop their skills and knowledge and progress towards completion of their framework. However, some feedback lacks sufficient detail for learners to improve their performance. Learners submit evidence between visits for assessment which ensures that learning is continuing to take place, but assessors do not question learners in sufficient depth about this, or other work, to determine the level of knowledge and understanding the learner has gained.
- Targets, set on learners' individual plans and updated at assessments and reviews, are useful in giving a clear picture of progress and what learners have to do to achieve their qualification. However, too many targets are vague and do not sufficiently help learners to learn or achieve more rapidly.
- Initial and diagnostic assessment provides sufficient detail to identify learners' specific areas of need and to inform planning and support for their work on functional skills. Alongside online and assessor help, support is available from specialist staff and workshops, although not enough learners take up this support. Functional skills are not fully embedded in the vocational context.
- Assessors carry out frequent and very effective assessment visits, at least monthly and at times that are convenient to learners' and employers' work commitments. Learners are assessed using a range of appropriate methods. Additional virtual visits take place, using an online system, to support learner progression. Assessors are well equipped with the appropriate technology to enable them to fully support the assessment process but the online resource is not yet fully used by learners and assessors.
- Employers are kept informed of learners' progress and ensure that there are opportunities for work-related opportunities for further skills development. The support given to learners by assessors is valued by employers as this enables their staff to gain their qualifications and develop their knowledge, understanding and skills.
- Learners receive good information and guidance at induction and during progress reviews to enable them to make informed choices about further study and career progression. Learners value the support provided which motivates them to achieve and progress.
- Most learners have a good understanding of equality, diversity and safeguarding. This is extended by use of a workbook at induction and further reinforced by questions at assessments and reviews. However, this is not effectively promoted or checked adequately during reviews by all assessors. Learners understand clearly who to approach if they need to discuss safeguarding concerns.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Inadequate

- Compliance with funding body requirements and accurate recording of learner activity has improved over the past two years. This has been an understandably strong focus of A4e's directors and managers in this period. However, there is no systematic process in place to evaluate and continuously improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, or the extent and depth of learners' attainment.
- Rationalisation of A4e's provision has had a negative impact on learners, especially in the short-term. A significant restructuring of A4e's operations started in 2011, partly in an attempt to deal with inadequate outcomes. The very high turnover in full-time staff in this period stretched the ability of the organisation to meet apprentices' expectations of frequent contact and support. Apparently high-performing subcontractors, working with programmes for unemployed people, will not be working with A4e in the near future.

- Substantial investment in technology to support online learning, improve the timely recording of learner activity and provide effective online communication between assessors and learners is not yet fully effective; many learners are reluctant to use the technology.
- Since 2011, A4e has sensibly built on its wider experience and introduced programmes to support long-term unemployed people. The programmes attract a substantial and increasing number of learners, now well in excess of the number of apprentices, and make good use of A4e's resources and expertise.
- A4e has appropriate management information available on programmes for unemployed people, particularly on the qualifications gained. However, it has only recently generated data to identify how well the provision has helped people into work, entry to training or further learning and thus allow full evaluation of the effectiveness of the provision. Existing data are not being used well enough to examine apprentices' in-year achievement rates and progress, some of which are low.
- A4e's strategic approach to improving the quality of its new prison learning and training is good, but it is too early to see the impact of this on improving learners' experiences. Useful management information is shared with its new prisons, but not all staff understand how to interpret and interrogate the data effectively. A4e has a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of its prisons and makes good use of internal inspections to benchmark and develop action plans. The system for observing and evaluating the quality of teaching and learning in prisons requires improvement. While some good practice exists, observation records do not always support the grade, identify any development points, or result in action plans to help tutors improve.
- Teaching and training staff are appropriately experienced. A high proportion has achieved, or is working towards, higher-level teaching qualifications. A very small minority of staff are not occupationally qualified. A4e staff have good access to well-planned mandatory programmes of training in equality and diversity, safeguarding, data protection, conflict management and anti-fraud measures. However, at the time of inspection around a quarter of staff were still to complete planned training.
- A4e's overall arrangements for quality improvement are inadequate in its provision for apprentices and courses for unemployed people. Staff are well informed about A4e's activities and have many opportunities to share their views on improving practice. Management and team meetings are used well to monitor and review business performance. However, the overall approach to quality improvement is not comprehensive, systematic or part of a routine improvement cycle. A recently appointed A4e director is developing a comprehensive quality improvement system, but this is at an early stage of implementation.
- The system for observing and evaluating the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is inadequate. The practice of observation is extensive and well established but observations do not focus on teaching, learning or attainment. A4e's observers identify very few areas for improvement and records of teaching and learning observations indicate that grades awarded are over generous.
- Self-assessment is ineffective. Two self-assessment reports have been produced covering all areas of provision. Each report is overly long and neither is sufficiently self-critical. Underperformance is not always identified clearly and, as a result, actions plans are insufficiently targeted on those areas where improvements are most needed. Learners' views are sought and improvements are made as a result but neither learners' or employers' views are used effectively to inform self-assessment.
- The curriculum offered is based on a good analysis of local and regional labour market information and employers' requirements. Courses are provided in a wide range of convenient venues. The duration of the majority of courses is sufficient to allow for adequate learning and reflection.
- The arrangements for promoting equality and diversity are good. A good range of useful equality and diversity-related resources exist. The resources and prompts available for use by assessors and learners during reviews are particularly useful but not always well used. Aspects

of equality and diversity are covered thoroughly at staff and learner inductions. A4e data on learners' achievement rates indicate some fluctuations between different groups but no significant or consistent disparity.

- A4e meets its statutory requirements for safeguarding of learners. Safeguarding is accorded a high priority. Safeguarding arrangements are comprehensive, well-structured and frequently reviewed. Clear policies and procedures are promoted well to staff and learners.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

A4e			
Inspection grades are based on a provider's performance: 1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate	Overall	Apprenticeships	Employability
Overall effectiveness	4	4	4
Outcomes for learners	3	4	3
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	3	3	3
The effectiveness of leadership and management	4	4	4

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
Health and social care	3
Early years and playwork	3
Employability training	3
Administration	3
Business management	3

Provider details

A4e	
Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	19+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	Full-time: N/A
	Part-time: 5,680
Principal/CEO	Andrew Dutton
Date of previous inspection	August 2010
Website address	http://www.a4elearningandskills.co.uk/index.html and http://mya4e.com/our-services/finding-work/

Provider information at the time of the inspection								
Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 and above	
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)								
Full-time	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Part-time	0	913	0	415	0	0	0	0
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	48	466	15	528	N/A	N/A		
Number of learners aged 14-16	N/A							
Number of community learners	N/A							
Number of employability learners	1,328							
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Optimas ■ Astral Training Ltd ■ CCL ■ Street Vibes 							

Additional socio-economic information

A4e was providing apprenticeship programmes across a large part of England at the previous inspection; this is now mainly delivered in the North West, North East and Yorkshire and Humberside regions. The new employability training is offered in many community venues across England, and in A4E's seven 'Vox' centres in Stockton, Darlington, Grimsby, Sheffield, Nottingham, West Bromwich and Brixton. With the exception of Nottingham, the centres are situated in areas of high deprivation and unemployment. Learners on employability training programmes are nearly all long-term unemployed, with generally low skill levels and few formal qualifications. The prison provision has recently been extended to London and more prisons in the East of England.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Andy Harris HMI

Three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and seven additional inspectors, assisted by A4e's Director of UK Skills and Education as nominee, carried out the inspection with short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection reports. Inspectors also used data on learners' achievements to help them make judgements. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected throughout the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all of the provision at the provider including the management of the Offender and Learning Skills Service provision, although the delivery of this was not inspected directly. Inspectors looked at the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across all of the provision and graded the sector subject areas listed in the report above.

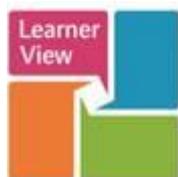
What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement
Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Requires improvement
Grade 4	Inadequate

Detailed grade characteristics can be viewed in the *Handbook for the inspection of further education and skills 2012*, Part 2:

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/handbook-for-inspection-of-further-education-and-skills-september-2012>

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