

# A4e Ltd

## Independent learning provider

<b>Inspection dates</b>		18–22 May 2015
<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>This inspection:</b>	<b>Good-2</b>
	Previous inspection:	Requires improvement-3
Outcomes for learners		Good-2
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Good-2
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Good-2

### Summary of key findings for learners

#### This provider is good because:

- the majority of learners receive good support to overcome multiple barriers to achieve their qualifications
- learners develop good personal, social and employability skills that prepare them well for work
- effective initiatives with major employers help learners find employment
- senior managers work effectively with Local Enterprise Partnerships to redesign the curriculum to meet regional skills' shortages
- English and mathematical skills are successfully developed through their practical application in realistic vocational settings
- pre-course information, advice and guidance are good and, coupled with thorough initial assessment, ensure that learners are placed and retained on the right courses
- equality of opportunity is skilfully promoted, and through carefully planned activities, learners develop a good understanding of life in a diverse society
- board members and senior managers have worked successfully and quickly to address the majority of the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection
- performance management of staff and the use of management information are effective and enable managers to drive improvements in all areas of delivery.

#### This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- not enough apprentices achieve their qualifications on time
- written feedback is not sufficiently detailed, and targets are not always specific enough to inform learners what they need to do to progress
- trainers and assessors do not provide learners with the strategies to improve their written English
- reports from the executive director to the Board are not sufficiently detailed to enable Board members to provide effective scrutiny and challenge of the organisation's performance.

## Full report

### What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Set realistic individual end dates, and monitor progress more regularly and rigorously, so that apprentices achieve their qualifications within planned timescales.
- Make written feedback detailed enough to enable apprentices and learners to understand how they can improve.
- Individual learning targets need to be specific and timed so that apprentices and learners can progress through their qualifications at an appropriate pace.
- Ensure that reports to the Executive Board are sufficiently detailed so they invite rigorous scrutiny and challenge from Board members.

### Inspection judgements

<b>Outcomes for learners</b>	Good
------------------------------	------

- The great majority of A4e's provision is class-based learning for adults, with most learners on short courses at entry and levels 1 and 2. There are a small number of apprenticeship programmes, at both intermediate and advanced levels, predominantly for adults. A number of subcontractors deliver nearly a third of the total provision, but this volume is being reduced as part of A4e's strategy to concentrate its operations in fewer regions of the country and in fewer sector subject areas.
- As a major provider of employability programmes to adults on the Work Programme and for clients of Jobcentre Plus, A4e works effectively with some of the most disadvantaged learners in the country. Many face multiple barriers in their lives and have low starting points when they first come onto programmes. Half of learners have been unemployed for more than two years, a third have literacy levels below level 1, and just over a third have some form of learning difficulty and/or disability.
- The majority of learners achieve their qualifications and make good progress from low starting points. Effective changes made to the way learners are recruited, inducted and supported on courses have improved retention, so more learners now stay and complete their qualifications.
- Success rates for the single largest sector subject area, preparation for life and work, are now above the national average. There are, however, some variations in success rates between subject areas, with health and social care declining since the last inspection. Learners in some regions of the country achieve better than those in other regions, but these gaps are closing.
- Staff at A4e develop the personal, social and employability skills of their learners particularly effectively. Learners with low levels of self-confidence due to long periods away from the workplace are highly motivated to improve their communication, team-working, time-management and personal presentation skills. The development of these skills takes place in the context of realistic vocational pathways to employment, such as in the security, catering and hospitality industries.
- The effective combination of vocational and personal skills development results in a sizeable minority of learners securing sustainable employment. Managers design employability programmes successfully to meet the specific requirements of major national employers, such as customer-service skills for a call centre within a utility company, where half of the learners on the course secure jobs.
- Learners successfully develop their English and mathematics skills through practising them in realistic contexts. For example, long-term unemployed learners, keen to try self-employment as

a route out of joblessness, use their mathematical skills to prepare profit and loss accounts and predict cash-flow forecasts.

- Since the last inspection, improvements in the delivery of English and mathematics have led to a marked increase in the proportion of learners achieving their qualifications. The recruitment of more specialist staff, well-targeted professional development and the reduction in the number of different qualifications has resulted in more learners progressing between levels.
- A high proportion of apprentices achieve their overall qualifications, particularly those at the intermediate level. Apprentices who complete customer-service qualifications are now confident and valued members of staff employed by major national companies.
- The timely completion of apprenticeships requires improvement. Although small in number, in health and social care only a minority of apprentices are finishing within the predicted timescales. Even in the better performing subject areas, such as information and communication technology (ICT), apprentices are well behind the timely completion rates of their counterparts elsewhere.

### The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good, reflecting the improvement in outcomes for learners since the last inspection. The subject areas graded cover most of A4e's provision.
- Trainers and assessors have high expectations of what learners can achieve with their support. Learners develop good workplace skills, grow in confidence, self-esteem and improve their communication skills. Learners within health and social care have the opportunity to complete additional courses which broaden their skills. Within business programmes learners gain relevant knowledge about using social media to promote products and services, and on warehousing programmes they gain good practical experience in locating, picking and packing stock safely and securely for despatch.
- Assessors work vigilantly alongside learners and this allows for effective intervention if a learner needs more frequent support. For example, when a learner was struggling with a problem in a mathematics lesson a different method of multiplication and division was demonstrated to work out the solution. Assessors are patient, and help to motivate and encourage learners. They use their industrial knowledge and experience effectively to contextualise learning.
- Improved arrangements to evaluate and improve the professional practice of staff are now having an impact and show benefits for learners in their sessions. Staff are committed to improving their own professional practice through attendance at staff development activities and by sharing of good practice, particularly in coaching skills, embedding English and mathematics within sessions, and the better promotion of equality and diversity.
- There is a thorough and effective initial selection process for learners, involving assessments and interviews. Assessors gain a detailed picture of learners' initial abilities in English, mathematics and their existing work skills which enables them to provide appropriate support. However, this information is not always used effectively by all assessors to plan lessons, with the result that some of the more able learners are not stretched and some of the less able struggle to complete activities.
- Learners receive very good care and support which minimise any barriers to learning. During induction they are provided with detailed information, advice and guidance regarding the course requirements and expectations. Apprentices and learners on employability programmes appreciate the highly relevant support that trainers give them throughout their courses, particularly when it comes to progressing to higher levels and applying for jobs.
- Assessment is regular and on apprenticeship programmes apprentices can now check progress through their e-portfolio. However, in classroom-based learning too often trainers give oral feedback that is not recorded in sufficient detail, and targets are not always clear. Learners, therefore, do not have enough information about what they have to do to improve.

- Learners make good progress in developing their English and mathematical skills. Assessors make good links between English and mathematics skills and workplace practices. For example, within health and social care apprentices explained how important mathematics is in their roles with service users when shopping or administering medication. However, insufficient emphasis is placed by a minority of assessors on providing learners with the strategies they can use independently to improve their written English.
- The quality of resources is variable. There is a good range of interactive learning technology, including the use of tablets for ease of research, but some training rooms lack access to these resources to provide a wider variety of stimulating learning opportunities. Some of the accommodation for learners on employability programmes look down-at-heel and are insufficiently inspirational.
- Where individual learners are identified as needing additional support, this is highly effective in enabling them to progress. Support often takes the form of more frequent meetings with assessors but other examples include providing extra time for tasks or adapting materials for learners with dyslexia.
- All staff work very effectively to provide inclusive and safe learning environments. Learners treat each other and staff with courtesy and respect. Trainers and assessors are confident to lead discussions on controversial topics such as anti-radicalisation, and integrate themes of equality and diversity effectively into the vocational contexts of their apprentices and learners.

## Foundation English and mathematics

Good

### 19+ learning programmes

Teaching, learning and assessment in foundation English and mathematics are good because:

- over the past three years the proportion of learners who complete their courses and achieve their qualifications has risen; the numbers who progress to the next level are high
- in classes with small learner numbers, trainers effectively manage learning through individualised tasks and activities which develop good skills and knowledge
- in larger classes, learners benefit from a variety of teaching and learning approaches and tasks which result in learners working effectively together, such as discussions, team working and mutual support
- in the majority of sessions, most learners make progress and can use skills and concepts to complete tasks correctly. For example, in mathematics lessons, learners were using formulae and mental arithmetic to calculate the perimeter and area of various straight-sided shapes
- initial and diagnostic assessment is comprehensive and accurately assesses learners' starting points. An effective measure for recording progress has been recently introduced to assess learners' confidence and motivation to learn. Learners feel that their needs are understood well and it is a safe environment in which to learn
- the majority of oral feedback is specific and gives clear direction of what the learner needs to do to improve. For example, one learner as a result of clear directed oral feedback was able to correct his errors himself and use the right formula to calculate the area accurately in the next task
- the demographic mix of local communities is used very effectively by trainers to promote equality and diversity. Activities are planned which promote tolerance between cultures and faiths. For example, the exploration of Pentecost by a group of learners resulted in a good discussion about how different faiths celebrate similar festivals.

Teaching, learning and assessment in foundation English and mathematics are not yet outstanding because:

- trainers do not always take sufficient account of the needs of all learners in mixed-ability groups so that they make progress; there is insufficient challenge for the small minority of more able learners
- insufficient constructive written feedback is provided by trainers to enable learners to understand how they have gone wrong and what they need to do to improve. As a result, a minority of learners repeat the same errors and their progress is limited.

## Employability

### 19+ learning programmes

Good

Teaching, learning and assessment in employability training are good because:

- the large majority of learners successfully complete their qualifications and progress to employment or further education and training; they develop a range of useful skills, such as how to search for jobs on the internet, and the ability to speak confidently in job interviews and in social situations
- the majority of trainers demonstrate realistic expectations of learners and use engaging teaching and learning activities to enable the majority of learners to improve their employability skills; in a session for learners intending to gain employment as door supervisors, the trainer made good use of role play to enable learners to practise and improve the skills needed for calming down conflict situations
- the majority of trainers make effective use of activities to assess learners' progress and performance; for example, learners intending to work in the security industry researched and presented information to their peers about the classification, use and effects of drugs, providing the trainer with a good opportunity to assess their understanding
- the development of learners' English and ICT skills during sessions is good; most trainers routinely encourage learners to use dictionaries to check the accuracy of their spellings and the internet to search for information
- the majority of trainers develop learners' mathematics skills well during sessions; for example, learners seeking employment calculated the total time and cost of a journey to assess the viability of applying for and taking up potential job opportunities
- learners benefit from good initial information, advice and guidance; staff direct learners to courses that match their abilities and, where appropriate, to further learning opportunities to enable them to improve their English, mathematics and ICT skills
- the promotion of equality and diversity by trainers is good; learners demonstrate respect for people's different beliefs and characteristics, and have a good understanding of why prejudice and discrimination are unacceptable in the workplace and in everyday life.

Teaching, learning and assessment in employability training are not yet outstanding because:

- trainers do not always take sufficient account of learners' individual needs when planning for learning; consequently, in a few sessions learning and assessment activities are too challenging for a minority of learners
- target-setting is not specific enough; this means that a minority of learners do not have sufficient awareness of the particular tasks that they still need to complete
- trainers do not routinely provide written feedback that identifies errors and areas for improvement in learners' work; the majority of learners are therefore not sufficiently aware of how to make corrections and improve the quality of their written work.

## Administration and Business management

### Apprenticeships 19+ learning programmes

Good

Teaching, learning and assessment in administration and business management are good because:

- an increasing proportion of both classroom-based learners and apprentices achieve their overall qualifications, and apprentices make better timely progress than in previous years
- learners benefit from a high level of engagement and support from their trainers to help them achieve their learning goals; learners and employers are positive about the teaching, learning and assessment experiences and the levels of service and support offered by staff
- assessors and trainers promote equality of opportunity within an inclusive learning environment that fosters good relations and supports learners to engage with and contribute to learning activities; for example, learners can discuss confidently about how preconceptions can prejudice the way they approach clients at work
- the majority of learners benefit from engagement in meaningful analysis and discussion of current issues in the workplace that further develops their wider employment skills and knowledge; for example how their decisions with clients impact on colleagues' workloads
- apprentices benefit from good initial pre-course and on-course advice and guidance; for example, learner satisfaction is high in that unit aims are closely matched to their employment role and offer them the best chance to develop their skills at work
- assessors use their practical knowledge of the work environment to develop successfully learners' independent learning skills; learners link well management theories to operational practice, for example nursery managers suggested changes to performance management objectives to support the development of -staff within their own teams
- assessors review and update targets regularly, with the result that most apprentices and learners make good progress; for example most learners are encouraged to monitor their graphs and completion charts on the e-track system to ensure they complete within planned timescales
- the development of mathematics skills is supported very effectively by embedding them within practical tasks in the workplace; managers and administrators, for example, were able to calculate accurately the baby- food supplies to be ordered for a nursery.

Teaching, learning and assessment in administration and business management are not yet outstanding because:

- the results from the initial assessment of a minority of apprentices are not used effectively enough to plan their learning so they make good progress towards the achievement of their qualifications
- trainers and assessors do not ask questions frequently and skilfully enough to challenge learners and apprentices to develop their problem-solving skills.

## The effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The effectiveness of leadership and management of A4e has improved since the last inspection and is now good.
- Managers and staff are highly committed to improving the quality of training for the benefit of learners, particularly for those who have low prior attainment or have suffered from long-term unemployment. The large number of strategies devised to address a wide range of issues and developments, including those identified as needing improvement at the last inspection, have been effective in improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

- Directors have managed the recent sale of the company very effectively, minimising the possible disruption for both learners and staff. The detailed business growth strategy clearly articulates how it will improve the quality of the learning experience and develop further the range and type of training opportunities for learners. Managers have improved communication systems and all staff and learners have a good understanding of the company's aims and ambitions.
- The directors' scrutiny of the work of senior managers through the measurement of key performance measures is good. However, the executive director submits less detailed reports to group board members with regard to the funded provision, limiting their ability to challenge more effectively.
- Managers have a good understanding of their programme-area strengths and weaknesses. Performance management of staff and the use of management information are good and enable each centre to bring about improvements in all areas of delivery. The management of subcontractors' performance is effective, with the volume of subcontracted provision being reduced to align with strategic priorities.
- Managers invest effectively in staff training and development to support improvements in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Since the last inspection, A4E has delivered a range of training activities to address the inspection recommendations. They monitor attendance at these rigorously and managers follow up non-attendance quickly.
- A4e has a detailed and ambitious quality improvement strategy. Managers have improved the observation system to evaluate the quality of training and assessment. Observers provide each trainer with a relevant post-observation development plan and team leaders monitor progress in their meetings with the trainers. The self-assessment process is fully inclusive of stakeholders, including learners and employers. Judgements in the self-assessment report agree with those found during inspection.
- Senior managers' approach to meeting local and regional priorities and skills needs is good. They regularly review and rationalise the curriculum and have reduced the number of awarding organisations used. They are very successful at meeting their primary objective of supporting learners who have been unemployed for a significant time.
- A4e works very effectively with the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) in the regions where it delivers provision. For example, it has already secured additional funding for training programmes from the Birmingham LEP and is engaging with three other LEPs in the Midlands and the north east.
- The promotion of equality and diversity at A4e is good. Managers prioritise the development of staff skills in embedding equality and diversity within their teaching and assessment practices. Equality and diversity champions in each centre provide a point of reference and support for staff. Managers have developed and introduced a new training module to develop learners' understanding of 'British Values'.
- Systems and processes to safeguard learners and staff are good. A4e continues to meet all of its statutory requirements to safeguard learners and vulnerable adults. All staff are required to take initial and then ongoing training in safeguarding. A4e securely maintains an appropriate single central record online. More recently, managers have introduced training to focus on developing knowledge and understanding of both the 'Prevent' agenda and anti-radicalisation.
- Managers ensure that online safety is a priority and staff and tutors manage this process effectively. Nominated staff have good relations and regular contact with a number of local authority designated officers. A4E implements rigorous safe recruitment practices.

## Record of Main Findings (RMF)

### Provider name

Inspection grades are based on a provider's performance:  1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate	Overall	14-16 part-time provision	14-16 full-time provision	16-19 study programmes	Traineeships	19+ learning programmes	Apprenticeships	Employability	Community learning
Overall effectiveness	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	N/A
Outcomes for learners	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	3	2	N/A
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	N/A
The effectiveness of leadership and management	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2	2	2	N/A

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
<b>Foundation English and mathematics</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Employability training</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Administration</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Business management</b>	<b>2</b>



## Provider details

<b>Type of provider</b>	Independent learning provider							
<b>Age range of learners</b>	16+							
<b>Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year</b>	15,593							
<b>Principal/CEO</b>	Mr Rod Jackson							
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	February 2014							
<b>Website address</b>	www.a4e.com							
<b>Provider information at the time of the inspection</b>								
<b>Main course or learning programme level</b>	<b>Level 1 or below</b>		<b>Level 2</b>		<b>Level 3</b>		<b>Level 4 and above</b>	
<b>Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)</b>	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
	0	966	0	1810	0	0	0	1
<b>Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age</b>	<b>Intermediate</b>		<b>Advanced</b>		<b>Higher</b>			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	30	388	7	266	0	7		
<b>Number of traineeships</b>	16-19		19+		Total			
	0		0		0			
<b>Number of learners aged 14-16</b>								
<b>Full-time</b>	N/A							
<b>Part-time</b>	N/A							
<b>Number of community learners</b>	N/A							
<b>Number of employability learners</b>	2,771							
<b>Funding received from</b>	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)							
<b>At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Acorn Training</li> <li>■ Shaw Trust</li> <li>■ Smart Development</li> <li>■ SLIC Training</li> </ul>							

## Contextual information

A4e's Training, Education and Advice Division is part of its wider public-service provision, delivering a wide range of programmes, including the Work Programme, money and legal advice, prison education, and independent living services. It delivers its training and skills provision through a network of learning centres in the north-west, the north-east, the Midlands, London, and Yorkshire and Humberside. It currently has over a 130 staff to manage and deliver its training courses.

In the month before the inspection, it was announced that A4e was to be purchased by Staffline, a major recruitment and training agency.

## Information about this inspection

**Lead inspector**

Charles Searle HMI

Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and five additional inspectors, assisted by the Head of Quality and Curriculum 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 report. Inspectors also used data on learners' achievements over the last three years 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 relevant provision at the provider. 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:

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/handbook-for-the-inspection-of-further-education-and-skills-from-september-2012](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/handbook-for-the-inspection-of-further-education-and-skills-from-september-2012)

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Raising concerns and making complaints about Ofsted', which is available from Ofsted's website: [www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted). If you would like Ofsted to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 4234, or email [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).



Learner View is a website where learners can tell Ofsted what they think about their college or provider. They can also see what other learners think about them too.

To find out more go to [www.learnerview.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.learnerview.ofsted.gov.uk)



Employer View is a new website where employers can tell Ofsted what they think about their employees' college or provider. They can also see what other employers think about them too.

To find out more go to [www.employerview.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.employerview.ofsted.gov.uk)

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 4234, or email [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).

You may copy all or parts of this document for non-commercial educational purposes, as long as you give details of the source and date of publication and do not alter the information in any way.

To receive regular email alerts about new publications, including survey reports and provider inspection reports, please visit <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/user>.

[Piccadilly Gate](#)  
[Store Street](#)  
[Manchester](#)  
[M1 2WD](#)

T: 0300 123 4234

Textphone: 0161 618 8524

E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)

W: [www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted)

© Crown copyright 2015

