

Essex County Council

Community learning and skills

Inspection dates

20–23 February 2018

Overall effectiveness		Good	
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good	Adult learning programmes	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good	Apprenticeships	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good		
Outcomes for learners	Good		
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection		Inadequate	

Summary of key findings

This is a good provider

- Learners and apprentices benefit from a culture that is welcoming, enabling, supportive and inclusive. Leaders, managers and staff are impressive and successful role models in this regard.
- Leaders, managers and staff have worked tirelessly to secure a wide range of improvements to the provision. They have rectified most areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.
- Leaders, managers and governors know the provision well and have put in place robust and effective improvement plans.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment has improved markedly since the previous inspection. As a result, the large majority of learners and apprentices rapidly develop their skills and knowledge.
- Staff successfully promote safeguarding, teach learners about the 'Prevent' agenda and support the development of British values. As a result, learners are confident, knowledgeable, secure and respectful.
- Leaders and managers ensure that a greater proportion of apprentices achieve within planned timescales than previously.
- Tutors and well-directed learning support assistants provide highly effective support for learners.
- Learners studying creative courses and apprentices develop particularly high-quality practical skills.
- Very strong partnership working and engagement with employers bring real benefits to learners from all communities.
- Too few learners benefit from precise, detailed and useful targets to help them build skills and understand their own progress.
- Too often, written feedback does not adequately explain to learners how they can improve their work.
- Not enough learners progress from unaccredited courses to courses that lead to qualifications.
- Too few learners on functional skills mathematics courses develop the skills they need to achieve their qualifications.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Essex County Council commissions Adult Community Learning Essex (ACL Essex) to provide learning across the county, excluding the unitary authorities of Thurrock and Southend. Essex is a large county with a rapidly growing and ageing population of around 1.4 million. It has a wide range of communities spanning rural, urban and coastal areas with widely varying qualification levels and areas of significant social deprivation. ACL Essex is principally a direct delivery service and has adult community learning centres in most of the major towns in Essex. In addition to the 10 major community learning centres, courses take place at 190 community venues.
- ACL Essex provides accredited and non-accredited adult learning in 13 subject areas and apprenticeships in three. Just under a third of courses are accredited. Leaders have recently ended contracting arrangements with a number of poorly performing subcontractors providing traineeships; they now contract with Essex County Council's youth service for this provision. At the time of the inspection there were 49 trainees in learning, most of whom were very close to the end of their courses.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Leaders and managers should help tutors, assessors and employers to set clear, measureable, skills-based targets for learners and apprentices so that they can gauge and monitor their own progress more effectively.
- Leaders and managers should work to improve the proportion of learners who progress from non-accredited to accredited learning.
- Tutors and assessors should be supported to provide clearer and more detailed feedback to learners about how they can improve their work.
- Leaders and managers should ensure that a greater proportion of learners on accredited courses in functional skills mathematics develop a good range of skills that allow them to achieve their qualifications.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Leaders, managers and staff have worked exceptionally hard, and successfully, to improve the provision since the previous inspection. They have dealt with most weaknesses identified then and maintained the strengths. Notable indicators of leaders' and managers' thoughtful and constructive improvement strategies are the high levels of staff morale and the strongly shared culture of high expectations across all areas of provision.
- Particularly effective plans have brought about an exceptionally rapid rise in the proportion of apprentices who achieve within the expected time. Improved self-assessment review and reporting, tutors' increased skills and the creation of challenging governance arrangements have all led to significantly improved progress and skills development for learners and apprentices. Where weaknesses still exist, for example in the limited number of learners who progress from non-accredited to accredited courses, leaders and managers have identified clear actions for improvement. A number of these actions are still at an early stage of implementation and it is too early to assess their full impact.
- Leaders, managers and members of the 'ACL forum' provide a well-considered and effective curriculum. Managers work well with local charities, community groups and others to identify need. Courses are clearly targeted to support those communities in greatest need, or groups for whom other forms of provision may not be suitable. Classes take place at times and in locations to suit learners' needs, domestic commitments and capacity to travel.
- In family learning and learning disabilities provision, effective partnership working ensures that courses are relevant to local priorities and community needs. Managers of apprenticeships maintain very good links to the Essex Skills Board and with employers. Curriculum managers are required to engage with an exceptionally thorough and challenging annual internal commissioning process before they are allowed to run courses.
- Leaders have improved the quality assurance and management of subcontracted provision. Since the previous inspection, they have stopped working with poorly performing subcontractors. They now make use of a very small number of well-managed subcontractors. These provide successful courses in areas of the county where outreach or charitable organisations have an established presence and have very close links with targeted groups. After disappointing outcomes for trainees during previous years of in-house delivery, managers commissioned traineeship provision from the Essex County Council Youth Service. As a result, outcomes for trainees have improved very significantly.
- Leaders and managers have improved the quality of teaching, learning and assessment through improved performance management and developmental activities for tutors and assessors. Staff carrying out observations of lessons are now more demanding and focused on learning and learners' progress than was the case previously. Feedback to tutors after observations is generally constructive and clear, although occasionally it focuses too much on paperwork compliance. Curriculum managers support tutors very well, and the vast majority are keen to improve. As a result, the large majority of

apprentices and learners benefit from improved teaching, learning and assessment.

- Leaders and managers have improved self-assessment arrangements and reporting since the previous inspection. The self-assessment reports from curriculum areas and the service's self-assessment report are more reflective, self-critical and realistic. They make better use of data to analyse trends and identify areas of weakness or slow progress. Leaders' self-assessment findings closely mirror inspection findings.

The governance of the provider

- Since the previous inspection, governance arrangements have improved very significantly. The ACL forum is key to these improvements. This body includes elected council members, council officers at executive level, education leaders from other sectors, service leaders and learners. The ACL forum meets frequently, deals efficiently with business and benefits from good attendance.
- Forum members receive frequent briefings and reports from leaders of the service. Since the previous inspection, managers have developed a comprehensive management reporting pack. The pack offers a clear and self-critical view of performance, and takes good account of national achievement rates where relevant. Members now challenge leaders and make appropriate demands for timely improvement. Forum members frequently visit centres and also sit in on classes with curriculum managers.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders, managers and members of the ACL forum have made very clear improvements to safeguarding arrangements since the previous inspection. Nearly all learners and apprentices have a good understanding of these arrangements. Learners and apprentices know whom to contact should they have concerns for their own safety or for the safety of others. Managers deal effectively with the very few safeguarding concerns that do arise. They record actions clearly, consult with specialist agencies where appropriate and ensure that matters are quickly resolved.
- Staff training has been extensive since the previous inspection. All staff have benefited from training on safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty, and on the need for vigilance when online.
- Apprentices know how to work safely. They know about their rights and responsibilities as employees, and are confident to ask employers questions about these matters.
- Leaders work closely with other providers regionally to peer-assess safeguarding arrangements and share good practice. The designated safeguarding lead is well known across the service, and works productively with statutory and other safeguarding bodies.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Tutors demonstrate a good subject knowledge that they use well to enliven sessions for learners. Assessors are well qualified and have relevant industrial experience. Both tutors and assessors are encouraging and supportive to learners and apprentices. Youth Service

staff have a very good rapport with trainees, and give them thoughtful and effective support.

- Tutors and assessors use effective questioning to check learners' and apprentices' understanding of subjects before moving on to new topics. They wait for learners and apprentices to develop and articulate their answers, individually or collaboratively, in order to check learning fully.
- Learners are very well supported in class. Tutors across all courses make very effective use of learning support assistants (LSAs). They liaise with LSAs before classes and agree targeted support for those learners who most need help and guidance. Tutors also work effectively with personal support workers accompanying students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Such well-directed support helps learners to gain in confidence and make good progress.
- Tutors and assessors support learners in developing their independent learning and reasoning skills by offering purposeful activities for them to complete in their own time. These activities are engaging, subject-specific and help learners to develop their learning and skills independently. Trainees are given increasing levels of independence and responsibility during their courses, which helps them to develop maturity and self-awareness.
- Tutors and assessors check learners' practical skills well and give constructive oral feedback. Assessors also give apprentices clear and useful oral feedback on how to improve their written work. Adult learners develop good oral communication skills in classes. Tutors are enthusiastic and support discussions and questioning throughout lessons. Many lessons involve learners very well in practising professional and technical language. Tutors role-model good oral communication skills in all classes.
- Tutors do not use all available opportunities to promote good written English skills. For example, discussions of complex technical language were not supported by written examples of their correct spelling. Too few tutors routinely correct spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors in learners' written work.
- The vast majority of learners' work is at the required level for their course. In many cases, learners produce work well above the course requirements and their own expectations of their potential. For example, learners frequently produce very high-quality work in floristry, photography and pottery.
- Learners and apprentices can clearly articulate the progress they have made and the skills they have gained since starting their courses. Their written and practical work shows good skills development. For example, a learner enthusiastically explained that she could now help her six-year-old daughter to read after many years spent avoiding her child's books. Another learner said he could now do the family shopping as he can now write and read a shopping list. Learners in art, design and creative courses develop good, and sometimes excellent, technical and drawing skills. In some classes, tutors incorporate the development of mathematics skills well. However, this good practice is not widespread throughout the provision.
- Tutors and assessors promote diversity well. For example, in a Spanish class, learners discussed whether 'black' was an acceptable word to use in a variety of different settings. In a learning difficulties sensory session, learners listened to Indian music and discussed the country. Tutors use a diversity calendar well to highlight key festivals. For example,

learning disabilities craft learners make cards for festivals including Eid, Diwali and Valentine's Day.

- Tutors do not always give learners tasks that match their ability. For example, in an English class with learners with a wide range of abilities, all were given the same task to complete. As a result, the more able and experienced learners did not receive sufficient challenge and became disengaged.
- A very small number of lessons take place in classrooms that do not promote learning. These rooms are bare and stark, with few or no displays to stimulate learners' interest. In a few classrooms, the layout of tables hampered group work.
- Too many targets on learning plans lack specific detail about the steps learners need to take to improve. They do not focus sufficiently on skills development but often simply name the next unit for completion.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

- Managers, assessors and tutors work successfully to create particularly harmonious working and learning environments across the provision. Tutors support learners well on all courses, and assessors are highly supportive of apprentices. Trainees benefit from very good guidance and support from Youth Service staff. Staff in all types of provision are particularly successful in supporting and encouraging learners who have not been in learning for many years or who have long-standing barriers to learning. Staff are very good role models; they are polite and welcoming to visitors and learners. Learners and apprentices feel that they are listened to and enjoy lively debates where all are supported to take part.
- Lessons start on time and at a brisk and involving pace. Nearly all learners and apprentices attend punctually and have the necessary resources to undertake the session successfully. During inspection, all learners, in all centres, behaved impeccably. They are supportive of each other and of their tutors. Learners value highly the inclusive environment at all centres.
- Learners and apprentices have a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe, including online. At the start of each course, tutors use excellent videos, devised by managers, to ensure that learners have a good understanding of extremism and radicalisation. Posters around the centres and learner safeguarding cards ensure that the telephone numbers and names of safeguarding leads are easily accessible to any learner who needs help.
- Tutors and assessors have worked hard to put their training on promoting British values into practice in lessons and reviews. Tutors seamlessly integrate these values at appropriate times throughout their courses. Assessors discuss scenarios with apprentices that help them understand key concepts. For example, a tutor shaped a discussion about whether it was appropriate to lie on a curriculum vitae to include consideration of the importance of the rule of law. As a result, learners and apprentices have a good awareness of British values and clearly understand how to live cooperatively in modern Britain.
- Tutors provide a good variety of enrichment activities and additional courses to learners. Learners on access to higher education courses benefit from talks about the application

process and visit universities. Those on hairdressing courses are offered additional qualifications in hair-up, braiding, and hot stones and make-up. Many learners go on field trips to extend and enhance their learning. These include visits to magistrates' courts, to children's groups in libraries and walking history tours. All learners are offered the chance to study for English and mathematics qualifications, but the number who take this up is low. Apprentices benefit from taking an extensive range of additional courses available to them, including conflict management and the art of negotiation.

- Learners' attendance has improved since the previous inspection and is now good. Leaders have set a very challenging attendance target and are making progress towards achieving it.
- Essex ACL leaders have a good relationship with the National Careers Service; their advisers use the ACL centres to deliver one-to-one sessions for learners and apprentices. Numbers attending these sessions are low and managers are working to increase learners' knowledge of this service.

Outcomes for learners

Good

- Learners on non-accredited community learning courses make good, and frequently excellent, progress from their starting points. For example, learners on art and design, silversmithing, woodwork, sugar craft and upholstery courses produce a very high standard of finished work. In workshops, learners are supported with good resources and in woodwork and silversmithing, new workshops provide learners with the opportunity to develop their craft skills in an industry-standard setting.
- Too many learners on a small minority of courses leading to qualifications still do not achieve, particularly on English and mathematics functional skills courses. In 2014/15 and 2015/16, the proportion of adult learners on accredited courses who achieved their qualifications was low. Leaders' data for 2016/17 indicates that the proportion of adult learners who achieve their qualifications is greater than that nationally. The majority of learners achieve high-grade passes at English and mathematics GCSE. A high proportion of trainees now move on to employment, apprenticeships or further study.
- Apprentices now make good progress from their starting points. At the previous inspection, a lower proportion of apprentices achieved than the national average, and the proportion of apprentices who achieved within the expected time was extremely low. However, a far higher proportion of apprentices now achieve their qualifications than nationally. The proportion of apprentices who achieve within the expected time is increasing swiftly but is just below that of similar providers nationally.
- Learners and apprentices gain in confidence, and the large majority make clear gains in communication and social skills. Learners are proud of their achievements, know their progress and are keen to demonstrate and explain the skills developed since starting their courses.
- A greater proportion of adult learners and trainees now remain on their courses until the end. This proportion has increased for both groups since the previous inspection and is now high, and above the target set by service leaders in 2016.
- Where appropriate, learners, trainees and apprentices develop good employment skills such as timekeeping, team-building, being well prepared for work, and presentation and

communication skills. Apprentices develop strong communication and customer service skills as a result of good support from assessors.

- Assessors support apprentices well to develop their functional skills in English, mathematics and information technology. Teaching and learning in these subjects are tailored to the needs of individual apprentices. For example, some apprentices receive individual tuition, some study independently and attend drop-in sessions for additional support, and others join discrete courses. Currently, a large number of intermediate apprentices are completing functional skills in mathematics and English at a level above that required for their qualification. However, advanced apprentices who have achieved the mathematics qualification required for their apprenticeship lack support to develop their skills at level 3 or above.
- Learners' progression from non-accredited to accredited courses is still too low. The rate of progression has increased a little since the previous inspection, but remains an area for improvement, particularly in family learning. Service leaders recognise this as a key area for development and have begun to put improvement actions in place.
- Many learners are on courses that improve their well-being. Tutors successfully encourage learners with mental health difficulties to achieve qualifications and move onto the next level of challenge. Older learners enhance their powers of concentration and maintain flexibility and dexterity on craft and creative courses. Family learning tutors support learners to engage more confidently with their children's schools and teachers.
- Leaders, managers and governors analyse data carefully to identify any trends in achievement, retention or progression. Learners who have additional learning needs, or learning difficulties and/or disabilities, achieve better than their peers and generally progress well to work, volunteer positions or further learning.

Types of provision

Adult learning programmes

Good

- Currently, 3,273 learners are on community learning courses that do not lead to qualifications, and around 2,700 learners are on courses leading to qualifications. Courses are offered in 13 subject areas. Non-qualification community learning courses are mainly in art and design, craft and creative subjects, and a wide range of languages. The vast majority of qualification-based courses are at levels 1 and 2 or below, with a few higher-level courses. These include family learning, courses for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, English for speakers of other languages, functional skills courses and a small amount of vocational learning.
- Managers' effective partnership working has secured a good range of family learning courses relevant to the needs of the community. Satisfaction surveys and feedback from local schools show that more parents are confident to participate in their children's learning as a result of attendance at family learning courses. However, not enough learners progress from non-accredited family learning programmes onto accredited courses.
- Leaders and managers provide an effective range of courses for those who are seeking employment. Managers work well with partners, such as Jobcentre Plus, to ensure that

courses are available in areas where unemployment levels are highest or where deprivation is greatest. As a result, a good proportion of learners gain the skills, qualifications and confidence to gain jobs or progress to further learning.

- In general, experienced tutors help learners to make good progress. Many tutors are successful practitioners in their disciplines and help learners to understand the commercial aspect of vocational areas. Learners are supported to improve through detailed oral feedback and highly effective demonstration.
- Learners produce practical work of a high standard, sometimes of a professional standard. Learners on art and design and craft subjects complete some very ambitious projects to a very high standard. In pottery, for example, a complete beginner was working on a large Buddha head for her garden and another more experienced learner was working competently on an intricate vase. A learner on a silversmithing course had produced work of such a high standard that he had recently acquired his own hallmark accreditation. In upholstery, learners make significant progress and produce highly professional items such as large chairs, lampshades and recliners. Learners in sugar craft produce high-quality decorations. Learners critique each other's work sensitively and frequently support each other with their learning.
- In a minority of classes, all learners work on the same activity and the more able learners are not effectively challenged. For example, a tutor asked a learner, who was making more rapid progress than the rest of the group, to support another learner, instead of giving him work at a higher level.
- Learners develop their oral communication skills well through well-planned activities and well-managed peer support. For example, in a Japanese calligraphy class for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, students were skilfully using ink and brushes. The tutor carefully led a group critique where learners were encouraged to identify how the work of the other students could be improved, ensuring that every learner was involved.
- Too often, written feedback is superficial and does not explain precisely what learners need to do to improve. In the majority of classes for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, much written feedback is too positive and does not focus sufficiently clearly on what learners need to do to improve their work. By contrast, in photography and floristry classes, incisive written feedback helps learners to improve their skills quickly.
- Staff provide learners with a range of opportunities to help them progress into employment or further study. In learning difficulties courses, learners develop enterprise skills by working in cafes and market stalls. In floristry, there is a strong emphasis on market demands and trends. However, learners on accredited vocational courses have limited opportunities to develop their skills in an external working environment.
- Many tutors raise learners' understanding of other cultures, faiths and beliefs. Japanese language learners explore the etiquette and meaning behind specific actions. Learners on an ICT course downloaded information about religious and secular celebrations into folders and then explored the meaning of the word secular. In GCSE English, a short starter activity challenged learners to consider changes in gender politics over time, using as examples influential women who had adopted male names in order to succeed.
- Arrangements to recognise and record prior learning are new and still underdeveloped. Too many learner targets are broad and short-term progress cannot always be measured

effectively. However, most learners understand the progress they have made and the skills they have developed; a large majority achieve beyond their initial expectations.

- Tutors use learning activities well to reinforce key messages on British values, safeguarding, and online safety. For example, in an entry-level ICT class, a learner had produced a poster of his own design incorporating key words describing British values and the rule of law. Another entry-level student was able to demonstrate online safety by checking whether a website contained a padlock sign.

Apprenticeships

Good

- Currently the service has 280 apprentices. Of these, 226 are aged over 19. Forty-one are on standards-based apprenticeships. Of the remainder on frameworks, 43 are higher apprenticeships, 89 advanced and 107 intermediate. The largest cohorts study health and social care, business administration and leadership and management. Others are in childcare and teaching and learning support in schools. All programmes meet the requirements of apprenticeship provision.
- Managers have a detailed understanding of local employment and skills needs. Leaders and managers link productively to the Essex Employment and Skills Board and the local enterprise partnership to provide apprenticeships for targeted sectors. They are keenly aware of the need to develop employment skills in areas of deprivation. They also target provision where particular skills are in short supply. For example, they work with employers to support industrial skills needs in Basildon, and support care sector needs to care for the large population of older residents in Clacton.
- The large majority of apprentices now make good progress. Extensive reorganisation of apprenticeship staffing has taken place in the past year, resulting in significant improvement in the achievement of apprentices. Employers welcome the high expectations that are now applied to apprentices' progress and achievements. Employers across all sectors recognise keenly the benefits that apprentices bring to their workforce. Most apprentices move on to a higher level of learning or into sustained employment after completing their courses.
- Tutors and assessors provide very effective individualised support that apprentices value highly. Apprentices at all levels can easily contact staff should they need advice or help. Apprentices attend useful and relevant enrichment sessions in a wide range of subjects. These develop additional skills that are valued by employers and include team-working and negotiating skills. Apprentices gain additional qualifications that enhance their employability. For example, business administration and health and social care apprentices are completing higher-level units in subjects that help them progress in their workplaces.
- Assessors are well qualified and have relevant industry experience. They are encouraging and supportive and provide useful written and oral feedback to apprentices. Employers always attend the 12-weekly progress review meetings and are kept aware of their apprentices' progress through supervision and appraisal meetings.
- Assessors provide good support for apprentices to develop their English skills. For example, an apprentice's developing knowledge of phonics is helping her to provide better support in the classroom, and another apprentice received useful advice on the

grammar errors in her submitted assignment from her assessor.

- Too often, the targets set by assessors are restricted to an instruction to achieve assessment units before the next meeting. Assessors devising such targets do not take the opportunity to create individualised aims or to encourage apprentices to access appropriate additional study support, such as online mathematics resources.
- Where employers provide apprentices with individualised targets, these are detailed and useful. They help apprentices to understand how they can communicate more effectively and improve the accuracy of the work they complete. However, too many employers' targets remain very broad, and do not give apprentices clear direction for skills development and job-role improvement. Leaders and apprenticeship managers are currently working with employers to improve their target-setting.
- Apprentices value the ways that their qualifications improve their employability skills. For example, health and social care apprentices gain a better understanding of how care strategies have changed and, in particular, have a good grasp of a person-centred approach to care. An apprentice who works as a teaching assistant now understands the legislation behind her school's policies and can discuss how the school meets these requirements. An apprentice studying leadership and management is carrying out a research project on the effect of stress on managers, which will benefit her colleagues.
- Apprentices have a good understanding of their rights and responsibilities. They can clearly articulate and demonstrate British values. For example, they discuss knowledgeably and confidently the need for awareness and sensitivity when dealing with customers or clients from other cultures and races.

Provider details

Unique reference number	51766
Type of provider	Community learning and skills
Age range of learners	16–18/19+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	12,991
Principal/CEO	Katherine Burns (interim principal)
Telephone number	0333 0131545
Website	www.aclessex.com

Provider information at the time of the inspection

Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 or above	
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
	1	4,641	0	1,236	0	174	0	7
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	44	62	9	116	0	46		
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
	41		4		45			
Number of learners aged 14 to 16	–							
Number of learners for whom the provider receives high-needs funding	–							
At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	Community360 Interact Chelmsford, Signpost Colchester Signpost Basildon Signpost Greenstead Signpost Tendring The Rural Community Council of Essex (Abberton Rural Training)							

Information about this inspection

The interim principal, as nominee, assisted the inspection team. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision.

Inspection team

Richard Beynon, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Tracey Zimmerman	Her Majesty's Inspector
Lesley Talbot-Strettle	Ofsted Inspector
Daphne King	Ofsted Inspector
Claire Griffin	Ofsted Inspector
Alun Maddocks	Ofsted Inspector

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Manchester
M1 2WD

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