

# A4e Skills

Inspection report

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Name of lead inspector: Nigel Bragg HMI

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Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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## Information about the provider

1. A4e is a national training provider specialising in public and private sector training. The company works across four continents in 11 countries, employing 3,500 people. A4e's mission statement is 'Improving Peoples Lives' through its stated ethos of 'doing well by doing good'. There are a number of divisions within the A4e Group including, Advice and Learning, Education and Learning, Advice and Guidance, Offender Management, Welfare to Work, Flexible New Deal and International. A4e Skills sits within the Advice and Learning Division and is the focus of this inspection.
2. A4e Skills (A4e) was formed in April 2005 to deliver government funded vocational training. The provider's headquarters and main support functions, including human resources, staff training, finance, health and safety, and administration, are in Sheffield. In addition, it has five other regional offices. A4e Skills currently holds Skills Funding Agency (SFA) contracts in nine SFA regions and employs approximately 180 staff.
3. A4e Skills currently has around 3,081 learners, of whom 706 are apprentices, 780 are advanced apprentices and 1,595 are following a Train to Gain programme. Training for a further 3,212 learners, predominantly on Train to Gain programmes, is delivered through consortium arrangements with 11 partner organisations. A4e Skills and the consortium are 90% government funded. Most consortium partners do not hold a contract in their own right.
4. This inspection focused on apprenticeship and Train to Gain provision within social care, early years, construction crafts, business, administration and law, as well as Train to Gain programmes in literacy and numeracy. The Entry to Employment provision was not inspected.
5. The provider provides training on behalf of the following providers:
  - Mitie
  - Interserve
  - Lufthansa
6. The following organisation provides training on behalf of the provider:
  - CEL Training
  - Construction Careers
  - DPP - Develop U
  - Eden Training Solutions
  - Environmental Monitoring Solutions
  - Floor Train GB
  - The Leadership Academy

- Optimas
- PTP International Ltd
- Stonham Tyneside Foyer Training
- SX Group Ltd (Study Xpress)
- The Childcare Company
- TM Construction

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2009/10
Employer provision:	
Train to Gain	7,092 learners
Apprenticeships	1,703 apprentices

## Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 3
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Capacity to improve	Grade 3
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	Grade
Outcomes for learners	3
Quality of provision	3
Leadership and management	3
Safeguarding	3
Equality and diversity	3

Subject Areas	Grade
Social care	3
Early years	3
Construction crafts	2
Literacy and numeracy	3
Business, administration and law	3

## Overall effectiveness

7. In most subject areas, learners achieve good standards of work and develop a wide variety of work-related skills. Adult learners in particular enjoy their programmes. Learners feel safe and protected during their training.
8. Learners on Train to Gain programmes at level 2 achieve at a high rate and generally by the planned date. Success rates for level 3 programmes have improved and now exceed the national average, though too many learners still do not complete their programme within the agreed time. The overall apprenticeship success rates have improved slightly over the last three years but are still low. Too many learners do not complete their apprenticeship on time. Advanced apprenticeship success rates have declined. The proportion of learners finishing their programme by the planned date has improved but it is

still very low. Literacy and numeracy programmes have satisfactory success rates but timely completion rates are low.

9. A4e provides satisfactory training and assessment. Trainers are appropriately qualified and experienced. On starting their programme, all learners have an adequate assessment of their literacy and numeracy skills. However, A4e does not always ensure learners receive additional support quickly enough. The reviewing of learners' progress is often good but can sometimes have insufficient detail to be effective. A4e staff work well with employers to provide learning and training. Employers are committed to supporting learners' training. However, they do not always receive sufficient information about learners' progress. Assessors are good at arranging visits that fit learner and business needs. A4e supports learners well.
10. Arrangements to safeguard learners and promote equality of opportunity are satisfactory. The quality of provision is good in construction crafts and satisfactory in other sectors areas. A4e demonstrates a satisfactory capacity to improve the quality of its training programmes.

## Main findings

- Train to Gain level 2 programmes have improved each year and success rates are now high at 92%. The level 3 programmes exceed the national average by 5%. Learners following level 2 provision satisfactorily achieve within their agreed timescale. Skills for Life and full level 3 timely success rates remain below the national average.
- Overall, the apprenticeship success rates have improved but they remain 10% below the 2008/09 national average. Success rates within agreed timescales are consistently very low at 38%. Advanced apprenticeship success rates are declining. Success rates within agreed timescales remain low and significantly below the national average.
- Learners in the vocational areas make satisfactory progress. Many of the adult learners enjoy their programmes and return to learning. Their self-confidence and self-esteem improves and they make an improved contribution to their workplace and job role. Learners develop effective vocational skills.
- A4e focuses well on learner safety. The provider effectively uses a range of systems to check and confirm learner safety. Where programmes include safety-related content, learners demonstrate good levels of knowledge and understanding.
- Teaching, training and assessment are satisfactory. A4e generally plans assessments well and learners receive particularly useful verbal feedback. All learners have an initial assessment of their literacy and numeracy support requirements. However, A4e does not always provide timely additional help.
- Reviews of learner progress are satisfactory overall. In health and social care, reviews are particularly effective. However, for some learners in other subject

areas, the targets set are insufficiently specific to give learners a clear understanding of what they need to do to improve.

- The range of provision meets the needs and interests of users and relates well to local needs. Assessors arrange the planning of training and assessment visits to meet learners' workloads and shift patterns.
- Care, guidance and support are good and help learners reach their learning goals. A4e staff provide learners with sensitive support to overcome social and personal barriers to learning. Most tutors and workplace assessors are readily accessible and responsive to learners' needs.
- Arrangements for safeguarding are satisfactory. A4e has recently revised associated policies and procedures to more fully embed safeguarding into all aspects of the provision. Relevant staff have completed a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. Most staff have had training in safeguarding.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory as is staff and learner understanding. The provider appropriately monitors the performance of different groups of learners. However, specific strategies for targeting improvements have yet to show any impact.
- Systems to improve the quality of provision are satisfactory. A4e makes use of a variety of processes to monitor and evaluate performance in both the Skills and Consortium programmes. These include a well established and effective system of verification.
- A4e Skills self-assessment process is inclusive and effectively incorporates stakeholders' views. However, the amalgamated central report fails to sufficiently capture and reflect either regional or subject area issues and differences. The report is not sufficiently critical of performance related to the outcomes for learners.

### What does A4e Skills need to do to improve further?

- Continue to develop and implement strategies to improve the rate at which learners make progress to ensure that more learners in all subject areas, and in every region, achieve their qualification within the planned timescale.
- Ensure all staff participate in training to update their safeguarding knowledge and understanding.
- Implement systematic analysis and use of information on achievement of different learners groups to identify and reduce any achievement gaps across all sector areas.
- Develop a more consistently effective approach to target setting on individual learning plans so all learners are fully aware of what they need to do to improve further.
- Revise the format of the national self-assessment report in order to ensure that it fully captures and reports on regional and subject areas so that A4e can more effectively monitor and secure improvements.

## Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

### What learners like:

- the helpful and supportive staff
- the useful verbal and written information they receive
- learning in a comfortable and safe environment
- the way assessment visits are planned to fit work patterns
- the opportunity to build on existing skills
- being able to participate in training within the workplace
- the opportunity to gain a qualification that can improve employability.

### What learners would like to see improved:

- far fewer cancellations of sessions at short notice
- more frequent visits to carry out social care and construction assessments
- the quality and presentation of some resources used on early years programmes.

## Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

### What employers like:

- the feedback they receive on learners' progress
- the way assessors meet learners' needs
- the effective way learners' confidence is developed
- the way assessment visits reflect shift patterns
- the good relationship between assessors and learners
- the quality of construction training
- the opportunity employees have to gain a qualification.

### What employers would like to see improved:

- the high number of literacy and numeracy sessions cancelled
- how quickly social care learners receive their certificates following programme completion
- the prior notice received regarding workplace visits or assessor changes
- the provision of more time to reflect on and complete comments during review
- the introduction of an effective employer reference 'handbook'.

## Main inspection report

### Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 3

11. A4e has made satisfactory progress in improving the quality of its provision. The provider has embedded well the new arrangements for quality assurance and improvement noted at the inspection carried out in August 2007. In addition, A4e has now adequately addressed most key areas for improvement noted at the previous inspection. Staffing levels and resources are satisfactory. Managers and staff are committed to developing the provision in line with the organisation's vision and mission statement. To this end, they continue to implement a range of new initiatives to drive improvement further. However, it is too early to judge their full impact. Success rates for Train to Gain level 2 programmes have improved and are now good. However, at level 3 and for Skills for Life programmes, the rate of improvement has been much slower. In addition, apprenticeship success rates are consistently low.
12. The self-assessment and quality improvement processes are satisfactory and use an appropriate range of stakeholders' views to inform judgments that lead to improvement. As identified at the monitoring visit, the report is critical and self-evaluative but does not fully exploit data to support judgments on success rates. Most self-assessment grades match those awarded at inspection and reflect many of the judgments made by inspectors. However, as recognised by the provider, the overarching report and related quality improvement plan do not yet fully evaluate the quality of provision across all sectors or regions.

### Outcomes for learners

Grade 3

13. Overall success rates on Train to Gain level 2 programmes have improved each year and are now high at 92%. This represents approximately 66% of the Train to Gain provision. The level 3 programmes have also improved and now exceed the national average of 80% by five percentage points. The Skills for Life programmes have maintained rates close to the national average.
14. The rates at which learners achieve within their agreed timescales for the Train to Gain level 2 provision have also improved and now exceed the national average by five percentage points. The rates for Skills for Life and full level 3 have improved slightly but these remain below the national average.
15. Overall, the apprenticeship success rates have improved slightly over the last three years but are low and remain significantly below the 2008/09 national average. Timely success rates are consistently very low at 38%. Advanced apprenticeship success rates have declined each year for the last three years from 63% to 50%. Timely success rates have improved from 24% to 34% but remain very low and are significantly below the national average. Different groups achieve at a similar rate.



16. Learners in most areas demonstrate good standards of work and make good progress in developing a broad range of vocational skills. Many of the adult learners enjoy their programmes and the return to learning. Some learners progress from level 2 qualifications to level 3, whilst others report taking on increased responsibilities and gaining promotion in their workplace.
17. A4e places a good focus on learner safety. A new guide covers all aspects of safety, health, and well-being effectively. Some programmes include safety-related content; learners on these courses demonstrate good levels of knowledge and understanding.

## The quality of provision

Grade 3

18. Teaching, training and assessment are satisfactory overall. Trainers have appropriate vocational experience. The use of information technology is satisfactory. In literacy and numeracy programmes a range of useful resources are accessible on line. Assessors use internet-based portfolios effectively with construction learners. Initial assessment is satisfactory. All learners have an adequate assessment of their literacy and numeracy skills. However, A4e does not always provide timely support where initial assessment identifies a need. Programme assessment practice is good. Assessors make clear and accurate judgements; verbal feedback is particularly helpful in assisting learners to improve.
19. The reviewing of learners' progress is not consistently effective. In the better reviews, staff use short-term target setting well to plan assessment. However, some reviews lack sufficient details to be effective and do not give learners a clear understanding of what they must do to progress.
20. The provision satisfactorily meets the needs and interests of the users. The range, content and context of programmes are satisfactory. Partnership working is satisfactory. A4e staff work productively with employers to provide learning and training opportunities. The provision is relevant to local communities. Employers demonstrate a high level of commitment to supporting learners' training. However, employers do not always receive sufficient information about learners' progress. Assessors are careful to attend workplaces when it is convenient for both the learner and the employer to minimise disruption to business operations.
21. Care, guidance and support are good. Trainers and assessors give particularly good individual support to learners in the workplace. The learners build good relationships with staff. Tutors provide sensitive support to learners to overcome social and personal barriers to learning, and demonstrate interest and care in their development. The majority of workplace assessors are readily accessible and respond to learners' needs quickly. Arrangements for information, advice and guidance are satisfactory.

## Leadership and management

Grade 3

22. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Senior managers promote and implement national and local priorities well. They have a satisfactory vision of where the company needs to be improved. A4e Skills now focuses on providing opportunities for young people. It offers centres that provide 14 to 16 year-olds with an opportunity to experience a working environment. A4e has implemented an appropriate strategy to contact employers to secure vacancies for 16 to 18 year-olds, before they start their programmes. There has been a significant increase in the number of employers working with A4e.
23. A4e has satisfactory safeguarding arrangements in place. The provider keeps and monitors an adequate central record of staff CRB checks. Recently A4e has introduced a new safeguarding policy and procedures, which it devised in consultation with appropriate external specialist agencies. Most staff have completed suitable safeguarding training. Where learners have raised concerns, the provider has dealt with them in a timely and appropriate manner. Learning takes place in safe venues that are suitably risk-assessed.
24. Arrangements to promote equality of opportunity are satisfactory. The provider monitors the performance of different groups of learners but specific strategies for targeting improvements have yet to show any impact. A4e has satisfactorily embedded equality and diversity in the recruitment of learners and all aspects of teaching and learning. The provider actively encourages employers to promote equality and diversity. A4e currently has several initiatives focusing on improving staff and learner awareness of equality and diversity. However, these are relatively new and their implementation has been slow. The provider is introducing a new 'responsibility framework' that includes social, economic and environmental aspects. In addition, A4e is developing a range of learner entitlements. New resources focus on the theme of 'everyone matters' and are to be used at induction and throughout the learners' programme. Recently appointed equality champions meet monthly to discuss equality and diversity, to share good practice throughout the different centres and contribute to keeping all staff up-to-date. The provider uses a monthly newsletter to raise awareness of equality and diversity among staff. A4e takes effective measures to protect learners and staff from harassment, bullying and discrimination. Current arrangements to celebrate the achievement of learners are limited and are under review.
25. The provider engages with users to support and promote improvement satisfactorily. A4e is currently introducing a new strategy to improve learner and employer involvement in planning and provision improvement. Business development advisors now contact employers to identify their needs and complete a useful organisational needs analysis, which they effectively use to match a learner to an appropriate vacancy. However, it is too early to judge the impact of these and other newly introduced initiatives.
26. A4E makes satisfactory use of an appropriate variety of processes to monitor and evaluate performance in both the Skills and Consortium programmes.

These include a well-established and effective system of internal verification. Internal verifiers provide effective support and guidance to vocational assessors. A4e observes an adequate range of activities for quality assurance purposes and audits key activities recorded in the learner journey handbook appropriately.

27. A4e's self-assessment process is inclusive. All staff contribute satisfactorily to the development of an assessment of performance at regional level. However, the amalgamated central report fails to sufficiently capture and reflect strengths and areas for improvement within regions or subject areas. The report is not sufficiently critical of performance related to the outcomes for learners. Managers do not sufficiently analyse detailed data by region or subject area to identify variations in performance.
28. A detailed quality improvement plan is effective in addressing key areas for improvement across the provision but again does not capture individual regional or subject area issues. The plan includes clear targets for improvement, many of which specifically focus on improving both overall and timely success rates. A range of meetings provides an effective way to support and monitor progress against the plan. A4e provides satisfactory value for money.

## Subject areas

Social care

Grade 3

### Context

29. A4e provides apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships for young people. Adult learners access Train to Gain national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3. At the time of inspection, 1,928 learners were following a social care programme. Approximately two thirds of learners are on Train to Gain programmes with 43 % studying at level 2. Twenty-three percent of learners are male. A4e provides training and assessment in the workplace. All learners are in employment.

### Key findings

- Overall success rates on Train to Gain are satisfactory. At level 2, overall and timely success rates have improved over the last three years. Rates are at or above the national average, although timely success rates remain poor. Level 3 overall success rates have been consistently on or slightly above the national average but timely success rates remain low.
- Success rates on all apprenticeship programmes are low. In-year data indicate a slight improvement for 2009/10 but rates remain below the national average.
- Learners develop good work-related skills and have more confidence in their ability to deliver high quality care for clients. Employers value the skills and knowledge that learners bring to the workplace, including the improved communication skills gained from key skills or adult literacy support.
- A4e gives learner safety a high priority. Staff rigorously check all aspects of safety at progress reviews and as part of the assessment process. Learners report that they feel safe. Learners implement safe working practices and have a good understanding of their duty to create a safe environment for everyone at the workplace.
- Training and assessment are satisfactory with some good aspects. Assessors plan programmes well and learners understand what they need to do to achieve. Staff make good use of assignments to develop learner knowledge and understanding and to generate evidence required for the NVQ. Progress reviews are effective and provide clear targets for learners. Resources to support learning are satisfactory.
- Assessment practice is satisfactory. Assessors make appropriate use of a wide range of available evidence. However, workplace assessment is often slow to start for apprentices. Some learners are making slow progress. In a few instances, assessors have not followed-up learners with low motivation promptly enough.
- Programmes are satisfactory in meeting the sector's mandatory requirements and in supporting learners' aspirations. Employers are clear about the benefits that the programme brings, particularly adult literacy and numeracy support. However, Skills for Life support is often slow to start. Assessors make

satisfactory use of appropriate partners to support and develop provision. Very little English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) support is available.

- Care, guidance and support are good. Assessors reinforce learners' understanding of equality and diversity and safeguarding very well. Learners demonstrate a good understanding of these issues, which they apply effectively to both their own and their clients' lives. Information, advice and guidance are good and focus well on individual needs.
- Leadership and management are satisfactory. Managers set staff realistic and achievable performance targets focused on improving learner success. However, this has not brought about sufficient improvement on timely success rates. Communications from senior staff are regular, effective and keep staff informed of organisational priorities.
- Safeguarding has a particularly high priority. A4e and employers provide appropriate training in the protection of vulnerable adults. Assessors effectively raise and reinforce learners' understanding of safeguarding throughout their programme. In addition, they place a strong emphasis on ensuring all learners relate their knowledge of safeguarding to the workplace and take appropriate action to identify and respond to any welfare concerns.
- Promotion of equality and diversity is good. Assessors effectively reinforce equality issues during assessment and progress reviews. Learners have a very good understanding of equality and diversity issues and give good examples of how they have used this information to improve their practice.
- The self-assessment process is satisfactory. Staff teams are fully involved at a local level and have a good understanding of the priorities for action and their own role in quality improvement. The self-assessment report is broadly satisfactory in identifying the key areas for improvement though it does not comprehensively consider all aspects of programme quality. A4e does not use feedback from learners and employers to improve the quality of provision sufficiently.

What does A4e Skills need to do to improve further?

- Significantly improve the timeliness of staff intervention with learners making slow progress, to ensure that they benefit from prompt follow-up and support that improves success rates.
- Improve assessment arrangements for apprentices and advanced apprentices, making full use of workplace observations from early in the programme to improve overall and timely success rates.
- Implement an effective process to ensure appropriate timing of Skills for Life support that fully contributes to learners' ability to achieve.
- Ensure A4e effectively uses feedback from learners and employers to improve the quality of provision.

## Grade 3

## Early years

## Context

30. Currently 507 learners are working towards qualifications in children's care learning and development in the workplace. The majority of learners follow apprenticeship programmes and are mostly female with 7% from ethnic heritage and 18% declaring a disability. Approximately half of the learners are following an advanced apprenticeship programme. In addition, 172, mostly female, learners are on Train to Gain programmes at NVQ levels 2 and 3.

## Key findings

- Learners enjoy their learning and make good progress in developing self-confidence, new skills and knowledge. They effectively use this knowledge to improve their practice as a contribution to maintaining high standards of care within the workplace. Progression onto higher-level qualifications is good.
- Both overall and timely success rates on level 3 Train to Gain programmes are high. Overall success rates have improved significantly to 96% in 2009/10 with 81% of learners achieving within the expected timescale. Level 2 Train to Gain success rates have improved to a high national average of 82%. However, timely success rates are low at 42%.
- Timely success rates at 49% are in line with the national average for advanced apprenticeships but are low for apprenticeships at 45% in 2009/10. Overall success rates on apprenticeships and advanced apprenticeships have improved but they remain just below the national average.
- Learners say they feel safe in their workplaces. The majority of learners have a good understanding of health and safety and demonstrate safe working practices. A4e responds effectively where learners raise concerns about safety-related matters. Learners place great emphasis on keeping children and young people safe in their care.
- The quality of teaching and training is satisfactory. Initial assessment is satisfactory. Many learners benefit from good use of reflective practice. Training materials are usually of a good standard and effectively used to support learning. Portfolios are well organised and include a good standard of learners' work. A4e has recently implemented electronic portfolios in one region but it is too early to judge the impact of this and other improvement initiatives.
- Assessors are vocationally experienced and knowledgeable. Records of contact with learners are detailed. Learners are appropriately aware of their progress. They know what they need to do to improve. Assessment practice is satisfactory. However, there are missed opportunities to check fully the breadth of knowledge at level 3. Assessors do not always carry out assessment early enough within the learners' programme.

- The provision satisfactorily meets the needs and interests of users. A4e's partnership working with employers is good. Many learners are able to access relevant in-house training events provided by their employer. The provider ensures that all employers are actively involved in planning and monitoring individual progress. Learners are usually able to access good opportunities to progress to a higher level of study, and in some cases, promotion.
- Care, guidance and support are good. Assessors work sensitively with learners with specific needs and provide help that effectively removes barriers to learning. Learners value the support they receive which motivates them. Satisfactory information, advice and guidance assist learners to explore progression opportunities.
- Leadership and management are satisfactory. Performance management of the provision is satisfactory. A4e's internal communication effectively informs all staff of programme and organisational developments. Assessors are well qualified and vocationally experienced. They work towards an appropriate teaching qualification and achievement of functional skills is in progress. The support received by new assessors is good.
- Safeguarding arrangements are good. A4e actively safeguards learners through, for example, staff vetting, risk-assessments of every employer, checks on up-to-date employer insurance and the provision of appropriate policies and procedures in the workplace. Additional checks to ensure the provision of appropriate protective equipment or training further secures the safety of all learners. Monitoring of safeguarding arrangements is effective.
- Quality improvement and assurance practices are satisfactory. A robust internal verification process monitors the quality of provision through planned sampling of evidence, providing constructive feedback to assessors. Managers appropriately use data to monitor progress against identified targets for each region. However, quality improvement initiatives have yet to address fully the low apprenticeship and Train to Gain timely success rates.
- Assessors promote equality and diversity satisfactorily during induction and progress reviews. Learners' ability to apply their understanding of equality and diversity to professional practice is satisfactory. However, staff do not always adequately use opportunities during meetings with learners and in progress reviews to reinforce effectively this learning and its application to practical situations found in the workplace.

#### What does A4e Skills need to do to improve further?

- Continue the drive to improve the overall and timely success rates on apprenticeship and level 2 Train to Gain programmes through the effective introduction and embedding of newly planned and introduced initiatives.
- Review and further improve assessment practices through the earlier introduction of observations to support achievement.
- Develop assessment practice to better assess the attainment of learners' knowledge following level 3 programmes.

- Improve learner understanding and application of equality and diversity in the workplace by better use of learner contact meetings and progress reviews.



## Construction crafts

## Grade 2

### Context

31. Currently 247 Train to Gain and 20 apprentices are working towards qualifications in construction. All learners are employed and the majority are following level 2 qualifications. Progression routes exist to level 3. Two subcontractors provide the training and assessment in the workplace. Approximately 3% of learners are from minority ethnic backgrounds and 1% of learners are female.

### Key findings

- Most learners enjoy their learning and achieve well. They routinely use their workplace experiences to meet the assessment requirements for their qualification effectively. Learners develop good occupational skills. Their employers appreciate the benefits that learners bring to their company. Train to Gain learners build effectively on their existing competencies and develop good additional skills.
- Overall and timely success rates on Train to Gain programmes are outstanding and are well above national rates. The overall success rate in 2009/10 was very high at 98% and the timely success rate was 93%. Current Train to Gain learners are making very good progress in their qualifications.
- Construction apprentices progress slowly and too many fail to complete their qualifications in the time allocated. Achievement has declined rapidly since 2008/09. A4e has established a detailed action plan to remedy the poor success rates though it has yet to have any significant impact.
- Construction learners feel safe. They have a good level of confidence in health and safety arrangements and demonstrate good safe working practices. All learners have a sound understanding of health and safety procedures at work. Assessors and employers effectively reinforce learners' knowledge of health and safety throughout their programmes.
- The quality of training and assessment is good. Trainers are very experienced and effectively share their skills and experience with learners. They make good use of examples from current industrial and commercial practice to develop learners' skills and knowledge. Learners benefit from staffs' good use of a variety of training and assessment methods. In most cases the range and type of evidence in Train to Gain NVQ portfolios is good.
- Assessment practices are good. Assessment preparation is thorough. Trainers provide learners with useful feedback following assessment that occurs in a supportive learning environment. Trainers appropriately plan assessment visits to meet the needs of learner and employer work schedules.
- Progress reviews are satisfactory overall. Learners benefit from appropriately frequent and regular reviews of progress which trainers adequately record. However, few reviews include the setting of clear targets to guide future

learning, personal development and NVQ evidence gathering. Targets are insufficiently specific or measurable and do not lead to discernible improvements for learners.

- On Train to Gain, A4e provides a good range of NVQ qualifications, which meet learners' and employers' needs. Good partnerships have been established with a wide variety and large number of construction employers. The provider and its subcontractors work closely with employers to ensure that programmes are fit for the workplace and that qualifications meet current industry requirements.
- A4e provides effective individual support to learners, which helps them to achieve and effectively accelerates their progress. Well-qualified and highly experienced assessors provide good and timely care and support. However, too few learners are encouraged to take up the additional literacy and numeracy support that is available.
- Leadership and management are satisfactory. A4e's monitoring of subcontractors' performance is good. The company effectively uses a detailed service level agreement and partner handbook to ensure high levels of achievement and standards of work. Tracking of learner progress is good.
- Safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory. A4e has implemented appropriate vetting, monitoring and training arrangements. They have an adequate appreciation of their rights and responsibilities. Learners have a satisfactory understanding of equality and diversity. However, during progress reviews trainers make insufficient use of discussion to enable learners to develop further their understanding of equality and diversity.
- Quality assurance is satisfactory with good verification practices. Learners are fully aware of the standards required by awarding bodies. Self-assessment arrangements are ineffective. A4e has not produced a detailed self-assessment report that considers the construction provision. The provider has yet to produce and implement an appropriately detailed action plan to improve all aspects of the provision.

What does A4e Skills need to do to improve further?

- Significantly raise success rates on apprenticeship programmes by developing and implementing a comprehensive action plan for improvement.
- Carry out a comprehensive self-assessment of the sector area that identifies areas for improvement and includes the implementation and monitoring of an associated action plan.
- Introduce arrangements to secure better target setting at progress reviews to keep all learners well informed as to what they need to do to improve.
- Ensure that all learners are encouraged to take up the offer of literacy and numeracy to support their progression.

## Literacy and numeracy

## Grade 3

### Context

32. Currently 240 learners are working towards literacy qualifications. Of these, 86 are on entry level, 66 on level 1 and 88 on level 2 programmes. There are 172 learners working towards numeracy qualifications, 32 at entry level, 75 at level 1 and 65 at level 2. Of those working towards literacy qualifications, 57% are female and 24% are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Of those working towards numeracy qualifications, 70% are female, 21% are from minority ethnic backgrounds and 17% have a disability.

### Key findings

- Learners enjoy their learning and are well motivated. Attainment of personal and social development goals by most learners is good. During their programme, many learners improve in confidence and self-esteem.
- Achievement of qualifications is satisfactory. In 2008/09, 86% of learners gained a literacy or numeracy qualification. In 2009/10, achievement fell to 84% of learners on Train to Gain programmes, which is broadly at the national average. Progress on many programmes is slow. Timely success rates on Train to Gain are low at 60%, 15 percentage points below the national rate.
- Teaching, training and assessment are satisfactory. Most lessons are well-planned and most learners make satisfactory progress. However, A4e offers insufficient extension activities for those learners who work quickly or at a higher level. The use of technology is satisfactory and the creation of a resource portal has increased access to a wide range of materials. However, it is too early to assess the impact of this initiative on learner progress.
- Learners receive a satisfactory initial assessment by a business development advisor and a more detailed diagnostic assessment carried out subsequently by specialist Skills for Life tutors. This approach can slow learners' progress, as there is often significant delay between initial and diagnostic assessments.
- Verbal feedback to learners is good. It is individual, supportive and clearly identifies areas for improvement. Trainers respond very sensitively to the specific needs of learners. All staff carry out progress reviews with learners at the end of each session. However, staff do not consistently complete contact forms with a sufficient level of detail to aid effective monitoring of learners' progress.
- All staff are well qualified and have good opportunities for professional development. Staff hold appropriate specialist qualifications in literacy and numeracy, or are working towards them. There is some sharing of good practice through team meetings but managers have not yet implemented fully arrangements to observe training to assess the quality of provision.
- Learners appreciate the flexible delivery of assessment and training, which take place within the workplace at times to suit the learner, including in the evening

or at the end or beginning of shifts. Assessors consider employers' views carefully and use them to inform both programme content and delivery.

- A4e has a satisfactory range of partnership arrangements with external organisations. It appropriately uses these links to increase referrals onto its programmes and to widen the range of provision available to learners through consortium arrangements.
- Learners receive satisfactory and timely support. Staff are sensitive to the needs of learners and demonstrate good interest and care in their development. All A4e centres have information points where learners can access a wide range of advice and guidance to inform decision-making. A4e makes appropriate referral to specialist agencies.
- Leadership and management are satisfactory. Internal communication is effective. Managers actively promote training and development. An appropriate staff appraisal occurs on an annual basis. A4e satisfactorily uses data and associated targets to monitor staff and programme performance.
- Arrangements to safeguard learners are satisfactory as is the promotion of equality and diversity. A4e is committed to improving engagement and the performance of different groups of learners. However, information about the performance of different groups is not yet analysed in sufficient detail to identify achievement gaps.
- Staff contribute satisfactorily to the self-assessment process but A4e does not produce a self-assessment report that focuses in enough detail on evaluating the quality of literacy and numeracy provision. Quality improvement arrangements do not evaluate fully all aspects of the learners' journey. Resources, including accommodation facilities and technologies, are satisfactory. A4e provides satisfactory value for money.

What does A4e Skills need to do to improve further?

- Implement an effective process of initial and diagnostic assessment, delivered by Skills for Life tutors, to ensure appropriate and timely referral.
- Improve the process of self-assessment and quality improvement planning in order to focus specifically on literacy and numeracy provision.
- Improve the use of equality and diversity data to identify variability in the success of groups of learners, so A4e can take appropriate actions to close any achievement gaps.
- Fully implement arrangements to assess and improve the quality of training through direct observation.

## Business, administration and law

## Grade 3

### Context

33. There are currently 123 apprentices and 130 advanced apprentices following business-related programmes. A further 840 learners are on Train to Gain programmes, 514 working towards NVQs at level 2 and 326 working towards level 3 qualifications. Training staff visit learners in the workplace to carry out assessment and monitor progress.

### Key findings

- Learners enjoy their training. Train to Gain learners in particular are well motivated and keen to develop their understanding and knowledge. Many learners enjoy using the web-based portfolio that allows them to submit evidence of competence and receive prompt feedback from assessors between workplace visits.
- The overall success rates on Train to Gain programmes at levels 2 and 3 are good. Timely success rates show an improving trend and are now good. Overall apprenticeships success rates are around national average and satisfactory overall. Advanced apprentices' success rates are declining but satisfactory. Learners generally make good progress in attaining their goals.
- Training satisfactorily contributes to the economic well-being of learners. Many learners have improved their confidence and are effectively able to use learning to reflect on what they do, and look for opportunities to apply new skills and knowledge to work and personal situations.
- Learners feel safe at work. They have a good understanding of safe working practices and procedures. Trainers effectively reinforce learners' understanding of safety at work. A4e addresses the topic well at induction and during workplace visits. Where a concern is identified A4e staff work with the employer to ensure that appropriate remedial action is implemented and effectively monitored.
- Teaching and training are satisfactory. A4e adequately assess learners' literacy and numeracy skills early in their programme. Specialist staff provide appropriate support where they identify additional learning needs. Learners value this support, and recognise its contribution to improving their achievement. A4e uses technology effectively to promote learners' progress.
- Assessment of learners' performance is satisfactory. Portfolios contain an appropriate range of evidence accurately referenced to performance criteria. Assessors utilise a good range of relevant assessment methods and learners receive detailed written feedback on their performance. However, the feedback is often too descriptive and insufficiently evaluative to provide a basis for improvement.
- Provision satisfactorily meets the needs and interests of learners. Employers are supportive of learners. However, on Train to Gain programmes, employers are

insufficiently involved in the choice of optional units, which form part of the learner's qualification.

- Care, support and guidance for learners are good. Learners have access to good advice and support provided by qualified A4e staff. Assessors make regular and frequent visits to the learner in the workplace and provide effective help that meets individual learners' needs. Appropriate use is made of referral to external specialist support. Assessor staff accommodate learners' work patterns when arranging their visits.
- Leadership and management are satisfactory. Staff are set demanding targets when they join the organisation, which are appropriately monitored. All staff understand their roles and to whom they are responsible. A4e satisfactorily monitors learners' progress and where necessary, implements appropriate remedial actions. A4e effectively uses internal communications to keep all staff updated on organisational changes.
- Arrangements for safeguarding are satisfactory. A4e appropriately checks and trains staff. Assessors adequately monitor safeguarding and health and safety as part of their workplace visits. Learners have an adequate understanding of their rights and responsibilities. Where staff identify a concern, they appropriately discuss it with the employer and implement suitable actions to minimise any risk to the learner.
- A4e satisfactorily promotes equality and diversity. A4e adequately develops learners' awareness of equality and diversity during induction. All learners receive useful information on their entitlement to equality, well-being and enrichment. However, the provider does not sufficiently enhance learners' understanding and knowledge of equality and diversity during training and progress visits.
- The self-assessment process is inclusive and well established. However, the associated report does not address the skills areas in enough detail to support fully all required improvements. A4e appropriately uses a quality improvement plan to monitor and drive developments.

What does A4e Skills need to do to improve further?

- Ensure assessment practice is sufficiently evaluative of learners' performance to inform improvement.
- Further develop work with employers so they are sufficiently involved in the choice of option units, which form part of the learners' Train to Gain qualifications.
- Introduce effective arrangements to reinforce learners' understanding and knowledge of equality and diversity throughout their training programme.
- Further develop the self-assessment process to ensure it leads to the production of a report that fully addresses the skills areas in enough detail to support effective improvement.

## Information about the inspection

34. Three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and five additional inspectors, assisted by the provider's head of business assurance, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the SFA, the previous inspection report, reports from the inspectorate's quality monitoring inspection, and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
35. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails. They looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed on behalf of the provider. They also observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subject areas the provider offers.

**Record of Main Findings (RMF)**  
**A4e Skills**

Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; 16-18 Learner responsive: FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; 19+ responsive: FE full- and part-time courses; Employer responsive: Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	Employer responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners	6293	6293
Overall effectiveness	3	3
Capacity to improve	3	
Outcomes for learners	3	3
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	3	
How well do learners attain their learning goals? How well do learners progress?	3 3	
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2	
How safe do learners feel?	2	
Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*	n/a	
How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*	n/a	
Quality of provision	3	3
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	3	
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	3	
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	3	
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2	
Leadership and management	3	3
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	3	
How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*	3	
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	3	
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	3	
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	3	
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	3	
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	3	

\*where applicable to the type of provision



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