

Northumberland County Council

Inspection report

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Type of provider: Local authority

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Information about the provider

1. Northumberland Adult Learning Service (NALS; the service) is part of children’s services within Northumberland County Council. Northumberland County Council became a unitary authority in April 2009. NALS was formed in August 2008 by the merger of the council’s adult learning service and work-based learning provision. A significant re-organisation took place in 2008 and subsequently in 2010 in response to declining funding. NALS is funded by the Skills Funding Agency with around 94% of provision government funded. Northumberland Adult Learning Service provides a wide range of learning opportunities including access to recognised qualifications, courses to meet personal and social development interests as well as training for employment across Northumberland.
2. At the time of the inspection the preparation for life and work area was the largest provision with just over 1,000 starts in 2010/11; this area was inspected and graded. Other areas with significant numbers of learners include health, public services and care, information and communication technology and business administration and law, none of which were inspected. The other areas inspected included arts, media and publishing, languages, literature and culture and education and training. In 2010/11, 5,681 learners attended part-time courses, 100 learners attended full-time courses and 686 learners attended either Train to Gain or apprenticeship programmes.
3. Northumberland has a population of 312,000. Most of the county is classed as rural. Very few of the population are from minority ethnic groups. Almost three quarters are of working age and the majority are economically active. Of the group that are economically inactive a very small minority are retired.
4. The percentage of children achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics was around the national average at 54% in 2009/10

Type of provision	Number of learners in 2010/11
Provision for young learners: Further education (16 to 18) Foundation Learning Entry to Employment	49 full-time learners 419 part-time learners 42 full-time learners 62 part-time learners 52 learners
Provision for adult learners: Learning for qualifications	1,326 part-time learners

Learning for employment	9 full-time learners 768 part-time learners
Learning for social and personal development	3,054 part-time learners
Employer provision: Train to Gain Apprenticeships	374 learners 312 apprentices

Summary report

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

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 3
Capacity to improve	Grade 3
	Grade
Outcomes for learners	3
Quality of provision	3
Leadership and management	3
Safeguarding	2
Equality and diversity	2
Learning for qualifications in employment	Grade
Education and training	3
Learning for qualifications	Grade
Preparation for life and work	3
Learning for social and personal development	Grade
Arts, media and publishing	3
Languages, literature and culture	3

Overall effectiveness

- NALS has maintained satisfactory provision since the previous inspection and has some good aspects to its work. It has a satisfactory capacity to continue to improve. The outcomes for learners present a mixed picture with no clear trend for any group of learners, or for any type of course or programme. Performance is improving in some cases, declining in others and in larger areas remaining reasonably constant. For example, short course successes for 16 to 18 year-old learners have improved and are now good. However, advanced level course success is low and in some cases, declining each year. Learners in all classes improve their knowledge and understanding. They enjoy their lessons, make new friends and contribute well to each other's learning.

6. NALS targets hard to reach groups and makes a good impact on improving their social and economic well-being, in particular, improving employment prospects for many learners. The service also supports many worthy schemes and makes a good contribution to learners' communities.
7. The quality of teaching is satisfactory overall and some is good; NALS works well with partners to support the programmes. Its staff provide good care, guidance and advice to learners at various stages in their studies. NALS very effectively promotes safeguarding for learners and equality and diversity. The leadership and management of the programmes are satisfactory.

Main findings

- Although overall success rates are improving, long course success rates remain steady at around the 70%, which is 10 percentage points below the national average. Short course success rates are higher at 84% and are in line with the national average. The overall success rates in work-based learning provision and their completion within the planned time have improved and are satisfactory. Skills for Life, key skills and functional skills success rates are all satisfactory.
- Learners enjoy their classes and develop a wide range of skills, knowledge and techniques. Their standard of work is good and NALS makes very effective arrangements to display learners' work. Foundation learners make good positive progressions from the programme. Learners develop self-confidence and self-esteem helping them make new friends while on the programme. The use of well planned group activities and tasks supports some learners to develop good social skills.
- NALS places a strong emphasis on providing programmes aimed at benefitting learners' social and economic well-being. The service designates all classes as 'skills' classes to promote and reinforce the emphasis on developing skills. Work-based learning programmes provide good opportunities to improve employment prospects. Positive progression from these programmes is good.
- Learners feel safe in the centres and in their classes. NALS ensures that all centres clearly display support information to promote health, safety and well-being, directing learners to the available support if needed.
- Learners make a good contribution to a range of community activities including specific activities to support Age UK, a forces veterans' project and a food poverty scheme. They also contribute to local National Heritage projects related to mining and fishing industries and continue to play a full part in established national events such as Comic and Sport Relief.
- Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall. Knowledgeable tutors facilitate learning within mixed ability groups, providing activities that motivate and capture learners' interest. Better sessions provide challenge to which learners confidently respond. Tutors respond well to requests for help with homework. In less effective sessions, tutors plan learning insufficiently to provide challenge or take full account of individual need.

- The service plans the range of provision well and provides a suitable geographic spread of courses for learners. Tutors celebrate learners' success well through the annual awards ceremony and exhibitions of learners' work. Good partnership working with a wide range of local services, agencies, employers, schools, providers and the voluntary sector enhances NALS' remit to support local communities and those harder to reach learners.
- Learners value the good pastoral and academic support and guidance they receive from staff. All learners complete initial assessments and negotiate subject specific and personal aims with their tutors. However, too many long-term targets in individual learning plans lack detail. Although the targets set during learners' progress reviews are helpful in education and training and preparation for life and work programmes, they are insufficiently detailed or measurable.
- Managers and the council place a strong emphasis on strategic planning to improve the sustainability and viability of the service. The senior management team has a clear vision of how to develop the provision to meet learners' needs and the changing nature of employment in the area. They have taken robust actions to rationalise courses and staffing, whilst continuing to improve the quality and range of provision.
- Day-to-day management of the provision is satisfactory overall. Generally, tutors plan courses appropriately in response to previous provision, learners' feedback and careful progression planning. However, on occasions the introduction of new courses relies on the availability of tutors, rather than the response of learners and employers and the analysis of labour market information.
- The service uses data well to monitor the provision, although it is only just starting to improve success rates for all learners. All staff have targets to improve the service and monitor their contribution to it. However, management information is not always readily available or used effectively; some targets are not time constrained and do not provide sufficient challenge to improve success rates.
- The management of safeguarding is good. The service links very effectively with the local authority that carries out all staff recruitment and screening and maintains detailed registers. NALS manages the register of learners who work in regulated activities, organises regular staff training and provides a wide range of support materials for staff. NALS strongly promotes internet safety measures and uses internet monitoring software at all its centres.
- NALS promotes equality and diversity very effectively. Careful and rigorous oversight and analysis of equality data and subsequent effective actions are leading to good and improving outcomes for learners with additional support needs. The service very successfully engages with vulnerable learners and those who are taking their first or returning steps into learning.
- The use and application of a good range of measures is leading to improvement in aspects of the provision. The system of observing teaching and learning is much improved and beginning to have a positive affect. The self-assessment process is inclusive and makes good use of data to inform decisions. However,

curriculum-level reports overstate some strengths. Managers do not always acknowledge the significance of poor performance.

What does NALS need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that the service achieves consistently high success rates on all programmes, and in particular on long courses by improving the details about initial assessment and long-term learning aims on individual learning plans. Use these more rigorously when reviewing learners' attainment and progress.
- Set, monitor and use specific, measurable and time bound targets to inform teaching and learning, allowing tutors and learners to understand what has been achieved and what still requires development.
- Ensure that strategies to improve teaching focus on the learning experience through more challenging session content, activities and homework that meet learners' individual development needs and make more imaginative use of technology, both in class and through the provider's virtual learning environment.
- Ensure that managers at all levels within the local authority have enough information to monitor outcomes for learners and use it effectively to set and meet challenging and achievable targets.
- Take action to ensure that curriculum planning provides good progression routes for learners by using labour market information and learners' feedback at all stages of the planning process.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- being able to do their training while on-the-job
- the small groups and learner centred approach to training
- being able to attend classes at night and fit them around work
- the kind and helpful staff
- the safe and accessible centres
- the good choice of learning programmes
- the relaxed atmosphere and understanding individual needs
- how the training improves their chances of getting a job.

What learners would like to see improved:

- the internet speed so that files can be downloaded in classes quicker
- the consistency of learners' prior experience and knowledge at the start of the course
- the amount of information on follow-on and progression courses

- the drinks and snacks in centres to provide healthier options
- the quality of some of the older buildings.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- the helpful and approachable staff
- the support and assistance they get with screening and recruiting employees
- the help and assistance they receive from visiting assessors
- the flexible approach taken in developing the training around work needs.

What employers would like to see improved:

- the opportunities to meet as a group
- their involvement in offering some aspects of the training to learners.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 3

8. A trend of improvement is evident across most programmes, although variations exist between the different types of provision and occupational areas. The percentages of apprentices who are successful have increased consistently over the last three years. However, in the same period, success rates in art, media and publishing have declined. Train to Gain learners generally achieve well.
9. The senior management team has a good understanding of the challenges it faces to improve the provision. Senior managers make good use of timely and accurate data to monitor the provision. Improved management structures ensure that staff have a clear involvement in, and more responsibility for, improving the quality of provision. However, senior managers recognise that curriculum planning at a locality level does not always offer accessible progression routes for all learners. The self-assessment process is well established and inclusive, but fails to recognise the significance of a few aspects of poor performance. Quality assurance processes are improving and managers now place a strong emphasis on the use of data to ensure continuous improvement. Trends in performance are recognised and carefully analysed. Targets and staff responsibilities are not always specific.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 3

10. On provision for adult learners leading to qualifications, success rates overall are improving. However, in some areas, such as long advanced courses they are declining. On long foundation and intermediate level courses, the success rate remains steady at just below the national average. On short courses, the success rates have improved to 84% and are in line with the national average. On long courses, 16 to 18 year-old learners succeed less well than adult learners. The foundation level functional skills success rates for adult learners are excellent at 100% and for 16 to 18 year-old learners they are good. Although the success rates on health and social care programmes have improved and are now good, the performance on child development and well-being is low.
11. Overall, the success rates for apprentices have improved and are now satisfactory and in line with the national averages. Business administration apprentice success rates have improved and these are now good. Advanced apprentice success rates rose then fell again last year and are satisfactory.
12. The service places a strong emphasis on improving learners' social and economic well-being. They reinforce this by designating all programmes as 'skills' classes. Very effective support for a wide range of projects helps target hard-to-reach learners and communities who need additional support to improve their employability. These include a 'whatever it takes' scheme and initiatives to assist learners leaving a sheltered environment to become more

independent. The successful apprenticeship provision grew from an initiative to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training.

13. Learners feel safe in their classes and in the training centres. Staff ensure they place a strong focus on health and safety in their classes and reinforce safe working practices at all times. Relevant risk assessments take place for all activities.
14. NALS enables and supports learners to make a good contribution to their communities. A wide range of schemes and activities support local communities such as the campaign to source tinned food to combat food poverty, local industry schemes related to the mining and fishing industries, heritage schemes and a forces veterans village development. Many learners also contribute regularly each year to national events such Sport and Comic Relief.

The quality of provision

Grade 3

15. Knowledgeable tutors effectively plan and facilitate learning within mixed ability groups. The majority of lessons are planned effectively to include activities and tasks that motivate and capture learners' interest. However, not all tutors identify at the planning stage opportunities to promote equality and diversity and learners' safety. The better sessions include sufficiently challenging activities with learning checked through well phrased and probing questions and assessments. Learners are enthusiastic and participate well, responding confidently and positively to questions and tasks. A minority of tutors use technology well within sessions but NALS recognise that too many staff have yet to develop the confidence to use technology to its best effect. Where appropriate, homework and extension tasks provide learners with additional practice on the theoretical principles learnt within lessons. Most tutors provide good support for homework through their quick responses to learners' emails requesting help or additional clarification.
16. In less effective sessions, tutors provide insufficient challenge and planning takes little account of individual learners' needs. Tutors plan learning to take sufficient account of qualification requirements, but class activities and homework are not sufficiently personalised to take account of the development needs of individual learners or how best they learn.
17. Learning resources are adequate overall; tutors make good use of course reference books to support learning. All tutors are working towards teaching qualifications or are already qualified. NALS has invested significantly in equipping centres with reliable computer network facilities, computers and interactive boards and is currently developing a virtual learning environment supported by intensive staff training. Although learners have access to the site, course materials and learning resources are not yet available to them. Assessment practices meet awarding body requirements. Tutors' written feedback on learners' work is supportive but is not always sufficiently specific or detailed to help them improve their work.

18. The service effectively identifies learners' literacy and numeracy support needs through screening learners' applications and the completion of initial assessments. Those learners who do not have literacy and numeracy sessions as part of their programme are guided towards NALS functional skills programmes or are provided with additional learning support.
19. Since the previous inspection, NALS has made significant improvements to their arrangements for quality assuring teaching and learning. This has resulted in clear guidance for staff and a more rigorous approach to improving practice. More emphasis is placed on the learning rather than teaching. Managers expect that all tutors will achieve a good grade and provide developmental support for staff awarded satisfactory or inadequate grades before they are re-observed. Observations inform appraisal effectively and the outcomes of observations have led to the development of new learning resources and intensive staff training. The recently extended observation team are scheduling observations to include recruitment, information, advice and guidance and learners' progress reviews.
20. The range of programmes to meet learners' needs is satisfactory. NALS has extended its provision to include apprenticeships, employability and foundation programmes, while retaining the traditional personal development and accredited adult provision. Learners are able to progress to higher levels in most subjects and where programmes are not available, staff advise learners of other provision within the area. To widen opportunities for all learners, the service has developed a range of short personalised programmes called 'whatever it takes'. Learners are guided onto these intensive programmes when they need help, for example, in attaining pre-requisite skills or qualifications needed for their programme of choice or to gain confidence and overcome barriers to learning.
21. Good partnership working with a wide range of local services and agencies assists NALS to support local communities and harder to reach learners. In collaboration with Northumberland Employment and Works Service, NALS provides a range of work-skills programmes as a pre-entry provision into employment. The service's employer liaison team works effectively with large employers to plan training that matches employers' internal processes and the skills learners need to improve practice. Collaborative working with Surestart provides learners with local training whilst offering childcare facilities. NALS staff provide literacy and numeracy support for Year 10 and 11 school pupils who are at risk of poor attainment or leaving education. Very good collaborative working with social services, Connexions and Barnardos provides young people leaving care with support in developing independent living skills, financial planning, healthy eating and additional pre-employment training. NALS is very supportive of local initiatives, working with community based organisations to make funding applications for local projects.

22. Information, advice and guidance are good. Staff invite all learners who apply for substantive courses such as apprenticeships or foundation learning to pre-selection days where they receive sufficient information to make informed career choices. Well qualified admissions staff screen all applications, meeting all learners with a self-declared additional learning need to produce a support plan before starting the programme. Marketing material is suitably distributed through personal contact, career events, brochures, radio advertisements and web-based information.
23. All learners complete initial assessment and negotiate subject specific and personal aims with their tutors. However, too many long-term targets recorded in learners' individual learning plans are no more than the qualification outcome. Learners' personal development aims, although recorded, are not systematically linked to development actions or included during reviews. All learners complete learning logs that they value and use effectively to record progress. However, in education and training and preparation for life and work programmes, the targets set during learners' progress reviews, although useful, are insufficiently detailed or measurable. NALS has completed a schedule of staff training to improve practice.
24. Learners value the good support they receive from centre staff and tutors. They benefit from bursaries, hardship funds, initiatives that support travel with bus passes and long-term bicycle loans. Programmes are planned to allow learners to move between days and centres if a need arises. Tutors are flexible, responsive and spend time with those learners who have fallen behind or need some additional help.

Leadership and management

Grade 3

25. Senior managers' focus on reaching the most disadvantaged and isolated learners in the local community is pivotal to the direction of the service. They and their operational managers have a good understanding and knowledge of local communities. Senior managers have handled reductions in funding and subsequent reorganisations particularly well. They support staff well to extend their professional skills and knowledge. Staff training days provide regular and frequent training opportunities on safeguarding, equality and diversity.
26. Communication is good at a senior and middle management level; full-time staff feel fully involved in decision making and in particular planning the future direction of the service. Senior managers are working hard to ensure communications with all staff are effective through improving access to secure email and information and communication technology through the new resources distributed across the local authority.
27. Senior managers make good use of detailed data analysis to ensure programme planning meets the needs of local employers and potential learners, while complementing and enhancing the provision within the local authority. Despite this, at an operational level, some course planning is too reactive and based on tutors' availability rather than local needs. Performance management is

adequately supported by key indicators and targets. Staff appraisal systems are appropriate and generally targets within these support the development plan well. However, at an operational level, a few staff have targets that are too general. These fail to make good use of success rates relevant to their courses and the service's success in improving outcomes for all learners is variable. For example, in art, media and publishing, success rates declined over a three year period although recent robust actions have now reversed this trend.

28. The service now has clear lines of accountability within the local authority with appropriate levels of reporting and monitoring. Regular reports are provided for senior leaders, the scrutiny committee and the cabinet member for education, learning and skills. The service and the local authority have a firm commitment to the role of corporate parenting. They have been very effective in supporting children leaving local authority care and compulsory education, assisting their progression into further learning and independent living through the apprenticeship and supported living strategy.
29. Promotion of equality and diversity is central to the service and consistently evidenced through the tireless work of all staff to provide accessible learning opportunities for the most disadvantaged in the community. The use of management information to monitor equality and diversity is good and robust action is taken to resolve any variations in performance. The performance of learners who receive additional learning support is now better than that of their peers. All staff receive appropriate training in promoting equality and diversity, although this is not always reflected in lesson planning. In the better lessons, tutors carefully plan for the promotion of equality and diversity and integrate topics effectively. For example, many language lessons cover the culture and beliefs of the country as well as the language. However, apprentices' progress reviews do not always clearly record the promotion of equality and diversity sufficiently well. The observation of teaching and learning records do not always identify these variations.
30. An effective strategy ensures that feedback from learners is collected and used to bring about improvements. Learners receive clear and detailed feedback on the outcomes of surveys and learner interviews through well presented 'you said, we did', display boards in each locality. Employers' feedback is appropriately collected through surveys and telephone calls. However, in the learner review process, the service does not obtain specific feedback to inform plans to improve curriculum design and development.
31. Self-assessment is satisfactory, involves most staff and draws on an appropriate range of evidence including data and records of observations of teaching and learning. Many learners are involved directly in self-assessment through the annual self-assessment day. Other learners and employers contribute through the ongoing collection of their views. The report is largely accurate in the judgements and grades awarded. Management information systems are used particularly well to analyse the performance of all courses. However, they are used less well at an operational level to set specific targets to improve all

aspects of the provision. The observations of teaching and learning are now a more effective quality improvement tool. However, certain aspects are underdeveloped, for example, records do not always place sufficient emphasis on learning.

32. NALS provides satisfactory value for money. Financial management is strong; managers show a firm commitment to achieving the best value. The service has used funds well to improve access to information and communication technology across the local authority. Resources are sufficient to support teaching and learning. Overall outcomes for learners are satisfactory.

Learning for qualifications in employment

Other learning for qualifications in employment provision considered as part of the main findings but not separately graded: health, public services and care; business administration and law; construction.

Education and training

Grade 3

Context

33. One hundred and forty three learners are working towards qualifications in supporting teaching and learning in schools. Of these, 76 are working towards a qualification at intermediate level and 53 for a qualification at advanced level. Ten learners are on the apprenticeship programme and four are on the advanced apprenticeship programme. Almost all learners are either employed as teaching assistants or have work placements in primary or secondary schools. Ninety four per cent of learners are women, 3% are from minority ethnic backgrounds and 7% have a declared disability.

Key findings

- Overall success rates for 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11, at 71%, 83% and 77%, are below the national rate of 86%. The success rates in preparation to teach in lifelong learning (PTLLS) at advanced level and the success rate in the National Vocational Qualification at level 3 in supporting teaching and learning in schools are low. However, the success rate in PTLLS at level 4 are high. Train to Gain success rates are satisfactory.
- Learners enjoy and benefit from their learning and work experience. The development of their personal and professional competencies is good. Their confidence and self-esteem improve considerably. They become more knowledgeable about conditions such as autism, cerebral palsy and Down's syndrome and have good opportunities to learn about children's stages of development, communication, learning styles, and behaviour management.
- Learners say they feel safe in learning venues and in their workplaces. They have a satisfactory knowledge of reporting procedures and who they should refer any health and safety concerns to. Tutors treat them fairly and with respect. They are fully informed about the appropriate action to take if personal safeguarding issues arise.
- Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall. The better sessions are thoroughly planned and carefully sequenced. Learning is skilfully facilitated and learners are fully engaged in practical activities which stimulate and challenge them. In the weaker sessions, tutors place too much emphasis on teaching and provide too little practical work. The pace of learning does not stretch learners and where intermediate and advanced level learners are taught together learning activities are not adapted for each level sufficiently.

- Learners are satisfactorily inducted into their learning programmes. They receive appropriate information about the course on which they have enrolled and are acquainted with evacuation procedures, equality of opportunity and first aid. Information, advice and guidance are not always effective in fully informing learners about course requirements before they begin their training. Good personal support is provided by tutors and school teachers.
- Individual target setting is very variable. Most of the targets relate to the mandatory and optional units that learners will study to obtain their qualification. Most learners have individual learning plans but they do not contain clear short-term targets to guide their learning and against which their progress can be measured. Too many learning plans are out-of-date and incomplete.
- Too little attention is given to integrating literacy and numeracy into off-the-job occupational training and to ensuring that learners are able to develop the literacy and numeracy skills of the pupils they support. Learners' spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors are not corrected. Although most learners are initially assessed and those with lower-level literacy and numeracy skills are advised to improve their skills by enrolling on a Skills for Life course, it is unclear how many do so.
- Information and communication technology is not used effectively. Where available, smartboards are used as projection screens rather than as sophisticated teaching aids to enhance learning. Tutors place too much reliance on handouts and flip-charts. Not all tutors have had sufficient training to enable them to use data projectors and presentation software confidently and to maximum effectiveness. Some teaching accommodation is cramped and of poor quality.
- While tutors review learners' progress, they do not sufficiently extend and develop their knowledge of equality and diversity, health and safety, and safeguarding during reviews. Where learners record what they have learned at the end of off-the-job learning sessions, their comments are too vague and they do not give a clear indication of their learning.
- The provision is very successful in meeting the needs and interests of learners. Many learners work alongside experienced teachers who help them to develop their practical skills. They are included in staff meetings and staff training events. For example, four learners are scheduled to attend a residential training event where they will take part in workshops on topics such as attention deficit hyperactive disorder. Too few men are preparing to become teaching assistants.
- Partnership working with schools is good. Schools value the contributions learners make in assisting both teachers and pupils and to the school in general. Through helping children to learn and develop, learners are also making a positive contribution to the local communities in which the schools are located.
- Leadership and management are satisfactory. Communication between the curriculum manager and tutors is good. The frequency of standardisation events is satisfactory. All staff are appraised annually; monthly meetings

between the curriculum manager and each tutor provide a good opportunity for formal and informal discussion of personal and professional matters. Staff are satisfactorily qualified. The self-assessment process is inclusive. Equality and diversity updating and safeguarding training are good. Value for money is satisfactory.

What does NALS need to do to improve further?

- Improve success rates so that all learners complete their courses and obtain their qualification within the predicted completion period by the clear identification of learners' individual needs and by ensuring that learners' individual learning plans include clear short-term targets to guide their learning and measure their progress.
- Improve the standard of teaching and learning so that all learners experience provision of the highest possible quality that makes a strong contribution to their personal and professional development and high success rates.
- Skilfully integrate literacy and numeracy into teaching assistants' occupational training to help develop their literacy and numeracy competencies so they can support the pupils with whom they work in schools.
- Target publicity more effectively to attract more men into learning support courses to prepare for teaching assistant roles.

Learning for qualifications

Other learning for qualifications provision considered as part of the main findings but not separately graded: business administration and law; science and mathematics; social sciences

Preparation for life and work

Grade 3

Context

34. A total of 813 learners are on preparation for life and learning programmes. These include community-based functional skills classes aimed mainly at adults, sessions for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, a small number of employability sessions and a foundation learning programme for young learners aged 16 to 18. The foundation learning learners gain qualifications across a range of personal and vocational sectors as well as functional skills qualifications in mathematics and English. Women account for 65% of all learners, 94% of all learners are White British and 30% have a declared disability.

Key findings

- Success rates in preparation for life and learning qualifications have improved over the last three years and are satisfactory. Success in short courses is good. However, long course rates, though satisfactory overall, remain below national averages. Progression rates for foundation learners are good. However, 16 to 18 year-old learners' success in key qualifications such as functional skills and some vocational awards is low.
- Learners make satisfactory progress. They enjoy their sessions and develop the confidence to interact with each other and tutors well. Most develop satisfactory literacy and numeracy skills. Retention is satisfactory.
- Foundation learners gain good employability skills. They understand the world of work better and adopt suitable work behaviours. Learners in employability classes become more confident to apply for work. Community learners form good social networks through the classes together with the skills to help with their existing or potential jobs. However, too few benefit from placements with employers or in voluntary projects.
- Learners feel safe and adopt safe working practices well. Foundation learners become aware of what is unacceptable behaviour and treat others with respect. Staff reinforce the dangers of cyber bullying and the need for internet safety and general safe practices to all learners. Learners clearly understand these issues.
- Community learners gain a satisfactory knowledge and understanding of safe health practices such as recommended alcohol levels through some activities in functional skills classes. Foundation learners develop a good understanding of

topics such as sexual health, drug and alcohol misuse and the benefits of exercise. Learners with learning difficulties develop a good understanding of their group's medical conditions.

- Foundation learners contribute effectively to their local communities and raise funds for charities. For example, they work with partners on projects to research local political and historical issues and share the results with the community.
- In the better sessions, tutors use a wide range of methods to engage learners well in practical and interesting activities. Learners benefit from the small class sizes where the tutors give good individual support. They enjoy the sessions and participate well. However, too many sessions are just satisfactory. Tutors do not always use interactive technologies well or provide sufficient challenge to all learners.
- NALS uses initial assessment effectively to identify starting points in literacy and numeracy as well as preferred learning styles. Learners' progress reviews are satisfactory overall. Tutors make good use of learner logs to celebrate progress. However, target setting is not always sufficiently specific, measurable or expressed in learner-friendly language.
- The provision meets the needs of learners sufficiently. While the provision is widely spread geographically, and NALS offers various levels of functional skills across English, mathematics and information and communication technologies, the mixed ability classes do not always meet learners' individual needs and tutors offer insufficient alternatives to this model. Foundation learners achieve a good range of qualifications.
- NALS works well with a wide range of partners that includes schools, statutory agencies and voluntary organisations, to enhance learners' experiences and provide extra support. They work particularly well with social services and the youth offending team to support learners with multiple barriers to learning. Links with Jobcentre Plus and some local employers are developing well to enhance employability programmes.
- Learners receive good care, guidance and support. Foundation learning staff work well with agencies to identify appropriate support for individuals; for example, those with criminal backgrounds and those in local authority care. All tutors give considered advice and guidance on progression and career opportunities. Learners have appropriate access to well qualified guidance workers.
- Curriculum managers have managed the transition to functional skills well. Managers support staff well and team working across the region is effective. Quality processes are effective. However, fragmented leadership of the curriculum area does not provide consistently challenging targets for staff. Arrangements for safeguarding and equality and diversity are good but not all tutors sufficiently incorporate equality and diversity in schemes of work.

What does NALS need to do to improve further?

- Increase success rates across preparation for life and work in long courses generally and in foundation learning specifically by ensuring that learning targets are specific, measurable and achievable within the planned time.
- Improve teaching and learning to provide sufficient challenge to all learners by effective planning to meet individual learners' needs, making better use of technology in teaching and in planning the promotion of equality and diversity.
- Develop the range of provision to meet the needs of learners' different levels of knowledge and give them a wider experience through more structured courses and work placements or voluntary experiences.
- Develop clearer roles and/or responsibilities for key staff to provide direct leadership for the continuing improvement and oversight of the curriculum.

Learning for social and personal development

Other social and personal development learning provision considered as part of the main findings but not separately graded: Information and communications technology, social sciences, family learning

Arts, media and publishing

Grade 3

Context

35. At the time of inspection 463 learners were taking part in arts, media and publishing programmes including a mix of both accredited and non-accredited courses. Courses included GCSE, AS and A2 levels in art and design and photography and an AS level in history of art. NALS also offers a wide range of creative craft qualifications and non-accredited courses. A newly appointed fractional senior tutor manages 18 part-time tutors. Of the learners, 84% are women, 93% are White British and 37% are aged over 55.

Key findings

- Although success rates have declined slightly over the last three years, recently introduced strategies have improved retention this year. Learners achieve their main learning goals well. New learners progress quickly and gain good subject specific skills and techniques. Learners produce a good standard of work as seen in portfolios and in exhibitions around all the centres.
- Learners develop good personal and social skills. They enjoy their sessions, gain confidence and have a positive attitude towards learning. One learner gave up smoking so that they could work on their quilting at home. Learners are articulate; they challenge and support each other well in group reviews of their work.
- Tutors promote safe learning practices in the classrooms and workshops. They pay close attention at all stages in the programmes to risks and hazards. Learners are very diligent in their working practices, to minimise risk. Learners feel safe in the centres and classrooms.
- Teaching and learning are good. The tutors are well qualified and many are practising artists and specialists in their field. Sessions are well paced and stimulating. Tutors use challenging techniques and skillfully-executed demonstrations to inspire and extend the learners' knowledge. Tutors make good use of technology to support their teaching. Learners are encouraged to use technology for research purposes at home and in some of the centres.
- Learners' records show good initial assessment, target setting, and include detailed evidence of the learners' progress. Tutors use photographic evidence well. They give prompt feedback on all projects and homework. Informal feedback is used to good effect and instils confidence that helps the learner explore their subject further.

- The curriculum is satisfactory and meets the needs of most learners. However, some learners travel long distances to their chosen programme. Sessions run throughout the day and evening. NALS provides courses in many venues across the county, including village halls and community centres.
- Partnerships are satisfactory. NALS organises many links across the geographical area with a range of community groups; this helps to promote programmes to target groups and encourages social inclusion through the arts and media.
- Care, guidance and support are good. Learners receive prompt and effective support when required. Pre-course information clearly provides the learner with information to make an informed decision on which course to choose. Detailed information is available about the costs of extra materials needed. The enrolment process is clear.
- Leadership and management are satisfactory. In the last six months, managers have reviewed the programme offer to focus more specifically on the key aspects of the curriculum. Most class sizes are small which, in many sessions, adversely affects the dynamics of the class. Locality managers meet on a regular basis to discuss strategy and have an open-door policy with staff.
- Managers have improved the observation procedures to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Non-subject specialist staff observe teaching sessions. However, some written feedback given to tutors does not support the grade given. Observation staff are receiving more training and NALS now moderates observers' grades and judgments to eradicate this practice. The self-assessment report is broadly accurate and matches inspectors' judgements.
- The promotion of equality and diversity in the curriculum is good. Tutors take every opportunity to explore other cultures and celebrate diversity within teaching sessions. Participation by men is very low.
- Accommodation and equipment are of a satisfactory standard. The centres provide learners with a safe learning environment. However, signage on the outside of some of the buildings is poor.

What does NALS need to do to improve further?

- Improve success rates by fully establishing the recently introduced strategies for closer monitoring of both retention and attendance.
- Put strategies in place to increase participation by men using more targeted marketing of the sessions available.
- Increase learner numbers in classes to improve dynamics and learners' interaction in the sessions.

Languages, literature and culture

Grade 3

Context

36. NALS offers accredited and non-accredited courses in eight foreign languages, English literature, English and British Sign Language (BSL) at a range of levels. At the time of the inspection, NALS had 496 learners on programmes, of which 420 were following accredited courses. Of these 496 learners, 67% were women, 8.6% had learning difficulties and/or disabilities, 12% benefited from fee concessions and 26% were over 65. The service employs 19 qualified part-time tutors. NALS offers sessions at 12 sites.

Key findings

- Learners' achievement and progress are satisfactory overall. Although success rates are improving, they remain just below national averages. Learners progress well and develop their skills effectively. Learners participate enthusiastically in sessions and are well motivated. Learners' attendance and punctuality are good.
- Learners develop their social skills well through participating in group and pair-work activities. Learners value the social aspects of attending their sessions as well as the intellectual stimulation. A number of learners attend classes as part of their professional development. For instance, some learners of BSL plan to use their skills in learning support, in working with members of the public and as interpreters.
- Learners feel safe in their classes and centres. NALS treats learners fairly and with respect. Learners are aware of sources of support and channels of communication in the event of difficulties, dangers or emergency. NALS actively promotes health and safety messages through displays at learning centres and in classrooms, and tutors reinforce these during classes.
- Teaching, training and assessment are good. Tutors make effective use of a range of appropriate teaching methods, including pair and group work. Tutors employ an adequate range of good quality materials and resources such as documentary and online texts and visual material. Tutors make good use of the foreign language to enable learners to develop their knowledge and understanding and to practise their skills.
- The range of languages and levels offered is good. However, no systematic needs analysis or consultation with employers, partners and other stakeholders informs the curriculum planning process. NALS does not systematically plan progression routes across the service; consequently, not all courses are readily available to all learners.
- Learners receive good support in lessons. Tutors skilfully select content and resources to meet learners' needs. Prompt, sensitive and appropriate interventions by tutors promote learning and development, and help learners to achieve. Tutors direct learners to useful sources of support between sessions, including websites. However, the pre-course information is confusing, inconsistent and lacks clarity.

- Curriculum management is effective. The new management structure facilitates effective support for tutors in developing their practice. Effective processes are in place for monitoring and evaluating performance and tackling weakness. Observation of learning and teaching is structured and systematic. Outcomes of observation lead to targets and to action that promote improvement.
- Effective measures are in place to safeguard and to protect learners. NALS prioritises learners' safety well. The service carries out risk assessments; thorough clearance and vetting procedures are in place. Induction has a safeguarding focus and all existing staff have attended training.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Managers monitor learners' outcomes by gender, ethnicity and disability and take appropriate action to reduce gaps. Lesson plans refer to equality and diversity; however, tutors do not always reinforce this learning and its application during lessons.
- NALS uses learners' feedback and course reviews effectively to improve the quality of provision. Outcomes of termly learner forum sessions inform quality improvement through evaluation at management group meetings. For instance, requests for improved information and communication learning technology resources have led to significant investment in more and better equipment. A group of learners participated in compiling the self-assessment report.
- Observation of learning and teaching, course reviews and tutors' feedback all inform and underpin the curriculum self-assessment report. Tutors contribute through the annual staff survey and the tutors' conference. The management group considers and acts on feedback from tutors. For example, they provided workshops on effective use of information and communication technology for foreign language tutors.

What does NALS need to do to improve further?

- Improve curriculum planning strategies to identify and meet community needs more effectively.
- Improve pre-course information to clarify and define the range of levels available and be fully clear what each course in each locality is intended to achieve.

Information about the inspection

37. Four of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and three additional inspectors, assisted by the provider's head of service 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 funding bodies, Framework for Excellence indicators, the previous inspection report, reports from the inspectorate's monitoring visit and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.

38. Inspectors used group, individual interviews, telephone calls and emails to gather the views of learners. They looked at questionnaires learners and employers had completed on behalf of the provider. They also visited learning sessions, assessments or progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subjects the provider offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)
Northumberland County Council
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. **Social and personal development:** all adult safeguarded provision

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	16-18 Learner responsive	19+ Learner responsive	Employer responsive	Social and personal development
Approximate number of enrolled learners					
Full-time learners	312	65	9	238	0
Part-time learners	2827	193	1750	183	701
Overall effectiveness	3	3	3	3	3
Capacity to improve	3				
A. Outcomes for learners	3	3	3	3	3
A1. How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	3				
A1.a) How well do learners attain their learning goals?	3				
A1.b) How well do learners progress?	3				
A2. How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2				
A3. Do learners feel safe?	2				
A4. <i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	3				
A5. <i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	2				
B. Quality of provision	3	3	3	3	3
B1. How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	3				
B2. How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	3				
B3. How well do partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	2				
B4. How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2				
C. Leadership and management	3	3	3	3	3
C1. How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	3				
C2. <i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	3				
C3. How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2				
C4. How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	2				
C5. How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	3				
C6. How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	3				
C7. 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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