

Skills and Development Alliance Ltd

Inspection report

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Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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Information about the provider

1. The Skills and Development Alliance Ltd (the Alliance) is a consortium of community-based education and skills training providers, making provision primarily across London and the surrounding areas. The Alliance was formed in August 2011 in response to the requirements of the Skills Funding Agency and is made up of eight partners, all of whom were previously independent learning providers.
2. Leaders and partners have established a management structure which has an overarching executive committee with one representative from each partner's organisation to oversee the provision. Appropriate sub-committees are staffed by members with relevant expertise. Partners chose the shared and equal approach of the Alliance rather than sub-contracting from larger providers. The executive committee chair, who is elected by the partners, wrote an interim self-assessment report in response to the inspection notification.
3. The partners and number of learners with each are in the table.

Partner	Number of learners
Happy Child	87
Happy Computers	174
Paddington Development Trust	45
Wise Owls	263
Maximal Learning	28
Dynamic People	46
Upskill Training	0
The Skills and Development Agency (S&DA)	228

4. The Alliance offers apprenticeships and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) up to level 3 across the following subject areas: health, public services and care; engineering; information and communication technology (ICT); arts, media and publishing; education and training; preparation for life and work; business, administration and law. In addition, the Alliance provides employability training and workplace training. Employers range from large national organisations to small businesses. Approximately 90% of the Alliance's income is from publicly funded learners.

5. The Alliance does not provide training for any other organisation or use subcontractors.

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	
Health and social care	3
Transportation operations and maintenance	3
ICT for users	2
Preparation for life and work	3
Business, administration and law	3

Overall effectiveness

6. The Alliance is reasonably successful in helping learners to achieve, and the number of apprentices is growing. Learners enjoy their programmes and many of them complete their training successfully, the majority finishing by their planned end date. Learners are making good progress especially in ICT. Learners develop particularly good workplace skills and improve their knowledge and understanding well, increasing their job prospects and helping the businesses they work in. Those for whom English is a second language benefit a great deal from their training. Training and assessment are satisfactory. Learners meet assessors for a review of their progress regularly, but this does

not often involve employers or lead to a clear idea of what the learner needs to do next. The Alliance is very good at developing partnerships with employers especially in railway engineering, hospitality in the City and Canary Wharf, and a range of care homes and children's nurseries. The community-based partners of the Alliance work very effectively together in collaboration and learners are beginning to benefit from an increased range of courses. The Alliance has a strong culture of improvement and in a few short months has implemented a clear learner handbook, recruited specialist staff for a struggling area and developed its online learning facility. Learners feel safe and equality and diversity are promoted satisfactorily. The Alliance gives good value for money and partners are starting to share good practice.

Main findings

- Outcomes for learners overall are satisfactory. Learners in ICT achieve well and gain good skills. In other subjects success rates are satisfactory, some having improved since the Alliance introduced new systems and staff. Learners make good or satisfactory progress on their programmes with many benefiting from courses in English and mathematics.
- Learners gain good workplace skills which help them obtain jobs and get on at work. Some have been promoted after gaining their qualification and generally are more active team members, often helping other employees and relating better to customers.
- The quality of teaching and learning varies between the partners but overall is satisfactory. Generally, lessons are well planned and resources good. Teaching in some lessons is good with effective strategies to engage and motivate learners. In others teaching does not sufficiently challenge all learners. Similarly, the use of the results of initial assessment of learners' numeracy and literacy skills to plan learning varies from good to poor.
- Assessment is generally satisfactory with clear feedback to learners. In railway engineering, assessments are inconsistent and learners' recorded work is not always fully corrected. Feedback from assessments does not always provide enough information on what learners need to do to improve.
- Overall progress reviews are effective, giving learners clear targets with appropriate completion dates. However in some areas, for example ICT, targets and timescales are often too general to be measurable. Employers are insufficiently involved in many reviews.
- The provision appropriately meets the needs of learners and employers, offering a good range of subjects and levels. Assessors plan off-the-job training and assessments to meet the needs of employers and to suit the shift patterns of learners. Some provision is free of charge to enable learners to attend who might otherwise not be able to.
- The Alliance has developed very effective partnerships, especially with employers, which benefit learners. Examples are the close working relationships

with a railway engineering contract company, a prestigious hospitality company and a good range of care homes and nurseries.

- Support for learners is generally satisfactory; in railway engineering and care it is good. In these subjects learners receive particularly effective initial advice and can contact their assessor easily.
- The Alliance has established a particularly strong culture of collaboration alongside well thought out and rigorously produced partnership agreements. Partners benefit from sharing in the design and management of the consortium, rather than taking part as subcontractors. They are already achieving economies of scale, and are committed to improving the quality of their provision.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. The Alliance has recently placed well-written material on its website that gives learners the opportunity to develop their understanding. However, assessors use progress reviews insufficiently to reinforce learners' understanding of equality and diversity. The Alliance and each partner have suitable policies and procedures. Staff training is satisfactory. Effective strategies engage learners who would not otherwise be involved in training.
- The processes for the observation of teaching and learning are currently satisfactory, although variable between partners. Some partners grade the observations and some do not. The Alliance has developed a new consortium-wide process and plans to introduce it across the partners. Inspectors found the new system to be accurate.
- Partners are starting to work collaboratively and share materials and good practice, but some have better-developed approaches to self-assessment than others. The consortium has designed a rigorous self-assessment process to identify strengths and areas for improvement across partners, so that curriculum areas can be improved systematically. However, the Alliance has not yet completed its first cycle of self-assessment.

What does Skills and Development Alliance Ltd need to do to improve further?

- Share good practice across the whole of the provision to help raise the quality of the weaker lessons to that of the best.
- Ensure that assessment is effective and fair across all the provision, through further staff training.
- Be more consistent and systematic in the use of the initial assessment of learners' numeracy and literacy skills to plan their subsequent learning.
- Train staff to set better targets in reviews, and involve employers more to accelerate learners' progress whilst reinforcing their understanding of equality and diversity.

- Support partners in developing an open and honest self-assessment of their strengths and areas for improvement, so that the quality of work in each curriculum area can be improved further across the whole of the consortium.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- the opportunity to learn at their own pace, developing new skills that help to improve their confidence
- that the times of the training are arranged to suit shift patterns
- the enjoyable and informative courses
- the good organisation of the programmes
- good training, support and advice from helpful and friendly assessors
- help from other learners.

What learners would like to see improved:

- the quantity of online resources that can be accessed remotely
- the amount of off-the-job training
- greater involvement of employers in progress reviews
- the number of opportunities for them to improve their mathematics and English.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- that the assessor knows the industry well and fits the training to the job role, which is linked to the apprentice's development in the workplace
- the good development of skills, in particular language, literacy and numeracy skills, which improves learners' work and confidence
- the way the programmes raise staff morale
- the very flexible assessors who fit in with work patterns
- that learners enjoy their learning and sharing experiences with each other
- the good communications that assessors have with line managers.

What employers would like to see improved:

- the amount of information they receive about learners' progress.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 3

7. The Alliance has in eight months established a firm expectation of improvement and set clear targets across its disparate partners, some of whom already have a sound track record of improvement and rigorous self-assessment. It has yet to complete its first full year of operation, so a partnership-wide self-assessment report is not yet available for evaluation. There are already discernible improvements in training standards, particularly in railway engineering and business administration where success rates have risen. Outcomes for learners are satisfactory, as is the quality of provision. The Alliance's strong vision and the shared values of its partners contribute to a collective enthusiasm to improve the quality of provision. Leaders have created a strong culture of improvement. They have worked assiduously with partners to establish appropriate management structures, procedures and protocols to raise standards, for example through sharing resources. The sharing of best recruitment, teaching, training and assessment practices across all partners and subject areas is an aspiration that is, as yet, only partially realised, and considerable inconsistency remains in these core aspects. Partners have, however, developed mutual trust to enable them to benefit from sharing good practice between themselves, without the need for central approval. They are already working together to produce new consortium tools and materials such as online equality and diversity training.
8. The Alliance has developed clear procedures for the observation of teaching and learning across the provision and plans to standardise such quality assurance, although practices are not yet fully consistent. Inspectors found the new observation system to be accurate. The Alliance has developed a comprehensive manual collaboratively, with contributions from all partners through its working group and with thorough arrangements for monitoring and audit.
9. The Alliance's interim self-assessment report, produced immediately before the inspection, made good use of data to inform judgements, and inspectors largely agreed with the grades given.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 3

10. Outcomes for learners are satisfactory. As the Alliance is a new provider, no validated data are available, and many NVQs in the workplace programmes previously run by partners have dwindled whilst new apprenticeships have increased. Success rates in ICT are good and learners demonstrate good skills. In other subjects success rates are satisfactory and in transport operations and business administration they have improved from lower values. In these areas, the Alliance has improved initial assessment and the tracking of learners' progress.

11. In all areas learners gain good skills that aid their employability, enhancing their job skills and promotion opportunities. Many achieve supervisory or management roles. They work better in teams, share information more and help other employees, contributing to the profitability of their organisations. Learners feel safe and work safely in their job roles. They receive good health and safety training in the workplace, particularly in railway engineering and care settings.

The quality of provision

Grade 3

12. Teaching and learning are generally satisfactory, although with some variations between the different partners. Most tutors plan their lessons well to take into account the differing needs of their learners. Resources are mostly good. Some teaching is good, for example in English and mathematics. However, in care and ICT, some lessons insufficiently challenge all learners. Initial assessment of learners' numeracy and literacy skills is carried out effectively, but in some areas the results are not used well to plan learners' programmes. The Alliance has an effectively-used virtual learning environment which is available to all learners and staff.
13. Assessment is satisfactory. The more effective assessments are done regularly with an emphasis on the workplace and feedback is clear and sensitively given. However, in ICT, even when learners are in the workplace, assessment takes place off-the-job. In railway engineering, assessments are inconsistent and errors in written work are not always corrected. Assessors do not always give learners sufficient information about how they can improve their work.
14. Progress reviews are conducted appropriately in most areas, although in some areas targets that are agreed are insufficiently precise, making them unclear to the learner, and timescales are often too general. The monitoring of progress towards these targets is not effective, and employers need to be involved more.
15. Overall, the Alliance satisfactorily meets the needs of learners and employers offering an effective range and level of programmes and planning new courses to meet the needs of specific groups. Off-the-job training sessions on apprenticeship programmes are planned to fit in with employers' and learners' needs, such as work and shift patterns. In some areas the provision is free to learners giving them opportunities which they would not otherwise be able to take advantage of.
16. The Alliance has developed a good range of very effective partnerships which benefit learners. For example, it has a close working relationship with a railway engineering contracting company, a high profile hospitality company and a good variety of nurseries and care homes.
17. Care, support and guidance are generally effective in helping learners to achieve their goals. Learners on railway engineering receive good support, in particular advice and guidance provided during the early parts of their

programmes. Care learners also benefit from good support, with assessors who are very easy to contact. However, some learners receive insufficient information, advice and guidance to help them plan their training to meet their longer-term employment and training goals.

Leadership and management

Grade 3

18. The Alliance's executive committee has produced a rigorous and well-thought-out partnership agreement and individual service level agreements spelling out partners' rights and responsibilities. Since the establishment of the Alliance, partners have found working in a collaborative way exceeds their early expectations. The executive committee improves partners' performance by sharing resources and being explicit about required improvements. Each partner has specific targets, although these are not yet sufficiently demanding, and the systems for monitoring them at curriculum and consortium level are still developing. The Alliance is particularly good at accessing and distributing information about national priorities and initiatives, and each partner has strong links with its local community which it uses to plan and modify the provision.
19. The Alliance manages the safeguarding of learners appropriately. Every partner meets legislative requirements, checks the criminal records of staff and suitably records these in a central register. The Alliance also keeps a record of these, and has formed useful links with relevant external agencies. Learners know who to speak to regarding safeguarding issues. Training for staff is satisfactory.
20. The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. An atmosphere of mutual respect is evident between staff and learners. The Alliance has appropriate equality and diversity policies and procedures; partners use their own policies and procedures, all of which are satisfactory. Staff training in equality and diversity is satisfactory. The consortium has promoting equality as one of its corporate values and is effective in engaging with learners who might otherwise not be involved in education and training, reducing social exclusion. However, analysis of data is not used effectively to identify any differences between the performance of different groups of learners. Although most learners have an adequate understanding of equality and diversity, progress reviews are not used to reinforce learners' understanding. The Alliance has started to offer a range of effective equality and diversity materials for learners on their website.
21. Each partner's own external links are particularly effective in identifying and specifying the needs of local communities and learners. The Alliance's quality improvement plan identifies how feedback will be sought from learners and employers. Each partner collects and submits their own feedback, but this is only just starting to contribute to decision making at curriculum or consortium level.
22. The grades given in the interim self-assessment report are broadly accurate, although arrangements for self-assessment are still under development. Different partners have very different experience of self-assessment; the

Alliance is supporting partners in producing their own self-critical reports based on sound data. Leaders have a clear understanding of each partner's strengths and areas for improvement. Because the provision is managed across the consortium as a whole, no strengths or areas for improvement are expressed by subject area in the interim self-assessment report to support the grades awarded.

23. Value for money is good and partners and their learners are already reaping the benefits of economies of scale. For example, partners have access to a dedicated data service rather than employing their own data managers. They are beginning to share good practice in the form of shared materials as well as staff. Learners have access to a wider choice of provision through the consortium than they previously had through each individual organisation.

Subject areas

Health and social care

Grade 3

Context

24. The Alliance provides apprenticeships in children's care, learning and development and health and social care. It also offers the children and young people workforce certificate and diploma as standalone qualifications. Care programmes are offered by six of the Alliance's partners. Currently, 155 learners are on programme. There are 74 apprentices and 21 are advanced apprentices, whilst 60 learners follow NVQ programmes. Training and assessment are carried out in the workplace, with off-the-job training sessions taking place at most of the training venues.

Key findings

- Overall success rates are satisfactory, although those on childcare apprenticeships are low. In 2010/11, success rates for apprenticeships were unsatisfactory and success rates for advanced apprenticeships were satisfactory. However, current care apprentices make good progress. Overall success rates for NVQ programmes, the majority of learners, are satisfactory at around the national average.
- Learners develop effective workplace skills and demonstrate a satisfactory standard of work within their portfolios. They are able to relate childcare theory to practical situations. Most learners are sufficiently confident to plan and carry out activities independently whilst applying safe working practices and safeguarding procedures. They can explain how to maintain a safe environment for children and older people.
- Care apprentices have good progression opportunities; most learners are employed and many take on additional responsibilities or full-time positions during their training. Learners are ambitious and most have clear plans for the future, including careers in nursing and teaching. However, the provision of information, advice and guidance is inconsistent across the Alliance; therefore, not all learners are well informed about further opportunities or progression routes.
- Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Tutors take into account different learning styles but they do not always use high-level questioning to extend learners' understanding, provide further challenge or improve the pace of learning. Learners see the benefit of the online learning programmes but find that written assessments are often repetitive; learners miss the opportunity to mix with other learners and share experiences.
- The Alliance has good and extensive links with nurseries and care settings across London. Dynamic People works closely with social services to tailor their care support to meet the needs of clients. Happy Child collects the views of

managers through surveys at different stages of training. This feedback is used to improve training and support for learners.

- Effective assessment and review support learners' development of vocational skills. Assessors meet the needs of individual learners using a wide range of evidence to assess them in the workplace. Assessment is regular and targets for achievement are reviewed regularly and updated. Learners are clear about their progress and what their next steps should be.
- Recruitment and selection of learners onto programmes is not standardised across the Alliance. The approach depends too much on the manager of the nursery or is left to the discretion of centre staff. For example, one partner places learners with little experience onto an advanced apprenticeship, whilst another insists that all learners must complete an NVQ at level 2 before progressing to level 3.
- Initial assessment is poor and results are not used well to plan differentiation in classes. Although initial assessment correctly identifies learners' current literacy and numeracy levels, some are inappropriately placed on programmes.
- Assessors are very responsive, give good pastoral support and are flexible in meeting the needs of learners. Learners are able to phone or email for guidance and they always get a quick response. Technology effectively enables good communication between learners and assessors. Many learners choose to use the electronic portfolio which provides good access to their assessors, and prompt feedback or guidance.
- Professional development for staff is good. Assessors are well qualified and have relevant work experience. Most have teaching qualifications as well as occupational qualifications. They have worked in a wide range of settings and use their experience well to refer to successful workplace practice. Effective training programmes update them and maintain their high level of knowledge. Most staff are offered support to improve their teaching and assessment.
- Safeguarding of learners is satisfactory. All assessors and learners have Criminal Records Bureau checks. Learners have a good understanding of the importance of safeguarding within their settings as part of their work with children and older people.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Learners have an appropriate level of understanding of equality and diversity in the context of working with young children or older people. The Alliance recruits a wide range of learners from minority ethnic groups to the programme. Data on different groups' success rates are insufficiently used for planning or evaluation.
- The Alliance has not fully established common quality systems. Each partner has their own different quality procedures and processes. Some are more effective than others. However, the Alliance has introduced new areas of commonality, such as the helpful induction handbook for learners and a quality committee has been established. However, the actions resulting from the work of the committee have yet to be fully implemented.

What does Skills and Development Alliance Ltd need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that learners' initial assessment informs recruitment and selection onto the appropriate programme and that learners are well informed of their choices.
- Give better access to off-the-job training for childcare learners to complement the online learning system.
- Develop teaching and learning strategies that include opportunities to extend learners' understanding of themes and to challenge more able learners.

Transport operations and maintenance

Grade 3

Context

25. There are 122 learners following apprenticeship programmes in railway engineering; 13 at intermediate level, 108 at advanced and another preparing for an NVQ. There are 107 adult apprentices and 14 learners are women. A wide range of ethnicity is represented, with the largest group of 52 being African. For many learners English is their second language. All the provision is with one partner and has been developed in response to the government's initiative to convert Train to Gain programmes to adult apprenticeships.

Key findings

- Success rates are satisfactory. The adult apprenticeship programmes have only been running for five months; however, early indications are that learners are performing well in the online tests, with significant numbers achieving merit grades. For the programmes transferred from another provider, the proportion of learners completing within planned times were low but have now improved to be in line with the national average.
- Many learners acquire good employability skills. They develop confidence in their literacy and numeracy skills and employed learners confirm their workplace knowledge. Those who are unemployed improve their self-esteem and are more enthusiastic about finding employment. However, attendance is poor on most programmes.
- Learners feel safe. The Alliance places a strong emphasis on the development of safe working practices, both in theory sessions and the workplace. Learners speak with confidence about safety and feel able to challenge unsafe practices. Tutors regularly, and very effectively, reinforce learners' awareness of health and safety issues.
- Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Tutors use a wide range of techniques to engage and encourage learners. Numeracy is well integrated into the sessions and tutors are supportive and empathetic to the needs of those for whom European numbering is not the norm. However, the results of initial assessment are not used to individualise the activities or to extend the more able. Learners are positive about the training and enjoy the sessions.
- Assessment, particularly for the NVQ elements of the frameworks, is weak. The standard of work in the portfolios is inconsistent and assessment by direct observation is often inadequate. Assessors do not comment on learners' work or correct mistakes; spelling and grammar are not corrected and trainers do not give feedback on how work could be improved. Inadequate internal verification fails to improve assessment practice.
- The reviews of learners' progress are underdeveloped. The frequency of the tests, rather than the needs of learners, controls the target setting and the

monitoring of learners' progress. The reviews do not develop or extend learners' understanding of equality and diversity.

- The programmes meet the needs of employers and learners very well. The provision is flexible and adjusted to meet the shift patterns and unsocial hours that most of the learners work. The courses are provided free for all learners, giving training and accreditation which would normally not be available to them. The Alliance has extended the provision to provide progression to advanced apprenticeships.
- Partnerships are satisfactory. The Alliance formed a close working relationship with a railway engineering contracting company for NVQ programmes and the development of a range of apprenticeships. The Alliance successfully uses its pre-apprenticeship and employment services to support learners joining these programmes.
- Support for learners is good. Advice and guidance during the initial phases of the programmes are particularly effective. A progressive skills development programme is provided for those who are unemployed. Most make substantial improvement in their skills. However, ongoing monitoring and tracking are underdeveloped. Support for recently-made redundant workers is particularly good, enabling them to complete training and develop new employability skills.
- The Alliance has a clear vision for the training and an expectation of a supportive learning environment. Managers set high standards, raise learners' expectations and promote the development of employability skills. Staff are encouraged, through proactive performance management, to continue their own personal development. Training opportunities are good. Appropriate resources are available to support the programmes and learners.
- In order to raise standards and in response to significant issues identified through performance management, learner surveys and external verifier reports, the Alliance has recruited full-time engineering staff to manage and teach these programmes rather than using agency staff. This has significantly improved teaching and learning.
- Learners' and employers' views are frequently gathered, but they are not effectively incorporated into self-assessment or improvement planning. Self-assessment is satisfactory; there has been a recent focus on quality improvement and improving learners' performance. However, at programme level, self-assessment is less effective and tutors did not identify key issues about assessment and learners' progress.

What does the Alliance need to do to improve further?

- Ensure assessment and verification are fair and reliable, implementing practices that support learners and ensure they receive appropriate feedback on how to improve their work and employability skills.
- Use self-assessment and quality improvement at programme level so that they correctly identify issues that directly impact on the learners' experience.

ICT for users

Grade 2

Context

26. The Alliance provides apprenticeships in ICT and learners work towards level 2 qualifications. Around 120 learners are on apprenticeship programmes and 50 are working towards NVQs. Over two thirds of the learners are women and two thirds are from minority ethnic groups. There are 23 learners who have a reported disability. Four of the partners offer ICT training. Learners are employed in a range of organisations in the public and private sectors.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are good and overall success rates are good for 2010/2011. The number of learners completing within their planned time for 2010/2011 was just below national averages. The standard of work in learners' portfolios is good.
- Learners are making good progress. They are more confident in their job roles and willing to share their newly-acquired skills with colleagues. Learners are undertaking increasingly complex tasks such as financial analysis and using computers to plan night shift rotas. Learners are well motivated and enthusiastic about their learning and move on to programmes such as accounting technicians and computerised accounting to improve their employability skills.
- Learners have a satisfactory understanding of health and safety. They feel safe in the workplace and adopt safe working practices. However, not all are fully aware of the dangers of the internet and social networking. A few learners do not understand how to keep their computers safe.
- Overall, teaching and learning are satisfactory. Teaching is good with well-planned, well-resourced and challenging sessions. However, a few computer-literate learners are insufficiently stretched. The provider determines all aspects of training with no choice of optional units. Learners make no contribution to the curriculum design and the choice of units is insufficiently related to their work.
- Assessment is satisfactory, and following awarding body guidance takes place during off-the-job training, although all learners are in work. Assessors rely on written questions at the end of each training session to test background knowledge. There are missed opportunities to assess in the workplace and to use witness testimony from supervisors to confirm learners' performance.
- Progress reviews are satisfactory. The review of progress is good. However, learners develop their own targets and timescales and these are often too general to be meaningful. Employers are not involved in progress reviews except for providing a comment at the end of the process. Learners do not

always have a copy of their review and some confuse the review process with assessment feedback.

- The programme meets the needs of learners and employers satisfactorily with training sessions offered outside of working hours where necessary. The choice of optional units is limited but generally meets the needs of learners either to refresh their knowledge, develop their computing skills or gain accreditation for their existing skills. Partners communicate well with employers on recruitment but give insufficient feedback on learners' progress.
- The Alliance has good working relationships with employers. All training takes place outside office hours and is flexible to meet the needs of employers. Employers are enthusiastic about working with the Alliance and continue to send learners as they are confident that the training is good and leads to a successful conclusion.
- Support, advice and guidance are satisfactory. Employers encourage learning by providing increasingly complex tasks and encouraging learners to take additional courses. All learners benefit from the opportunity to take a free additional course. Tutors are supportive and learners are directed to other providers for progression. The Alliance gives learners a series of comprehensive booklets on various aspects of computing to encourage high levels of achievement.
- Operational management is good. Communications are good and staff attend regular, productive monthly meetings. One partner sets targets for staff on retention, achievement and customer service. Staff are well qualified with good industrial experience, and they have good opportunities for professional development. One partner gives staff an individual budget for development.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory, and learners have a good understanding of their wider implications in the workplace. Equality and diversity are promoted during induction and through the employee rights and responsibilities workbook. In better training sessions, equality and diversity are incorporated in the materials and relevant examples are used. All trainers are required to attend an annual update on equality and diversity.
- Quality improvement is good. Good practice is shared across the consortium through project groups. Internal verification and the monitoring of teaching and learning are satisfactory. The self-assessment process is inclusive but insufficiently self-critical. The grades in the self-assessment report are accurate.

What does Skills and Development Alliance Ltd need to do to improve further?

- Increase learners' involvement in their programme by a thorough analysis of their existing skills and a wider choice of units relevant to their work role.
- Use more workplace assessments and minimise the paper trail for learners by carrying out workplace visits, using workplace evidence and recorded discussions to assess background knowledge.

- Implement a more rigorous approach to progress reviews to ensure precise task-related, time-bound targets and full involvement by employers.

Preparation for life and work

Grade 3

Context

27. Currently 68 learners undertake preparation for employment programmes, 212 apprentices are enrolled on functional skills courses and 80 learners are following English courses at foundation and intermediate level on classroom programmes. Courses take place in the workplace and in community venues and all lead to external qualifications. All learners are adult and from a wide range of minority ethnic backgrounds.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are satisfactory. Overall success rates and completion within planned timescales for qualifications in personal and vocational skills are satisfactory and current in-year completion rates are high. Pass rates for the functional skills of English and mathematics are good overall. However, the numbers of learners achieving mathematics at level 2 is very low.
- In accredited courses in preparation for work, learners improve their knowledge of a range of vocational options. Learners gain a better understanding of, for example, the retail sector, childcare or customer services leading to gains in personal confidence and employability.
- Employed learners who follow discrete courses in English and mathematics make good progress in developing their skills. The majority of learners have English as an additional language and they improve written and spoken fluency well, helping them in their workplace. All learners feel very safe and enjoy their learning, working well together in a supportive learning environment.
- The quality of provision is satisfactory. Teaching and learning on discrete courses are good. Teachers make good use of question and answer in lessons to challenge and extend learners' understanding. Learners actively extend their knowledge and understanding of English vocabulary and good emphasis is given to clear pronunciation.
- Lesson planning is good with a variety of learning activities included which interest and engage learners. Plans demonstrate a good understanding of learners' individual needs. The recording and monitoring of learners' incremental progress through qualifications is good and the internal verification of external qualifications is rigorous.
- Initial assessment is satisfactory and the Alliance places learners on programmes at the correct level. However, the diagnostic assessment of learners' English and mathematics across all partners is inconsistent and does not always lead to good target setting. Learners do not always receive the additional support they need to improve.
- The provision is satisfactory in meeting the needs and interests of learners. The programme of functional English and mathematics meets the needs and interests of learners well in some partners but not in others. Good practice in

the provision of vocational options has also been identified in pre-employment programmes. However, these models of good practice are not yet consistent across the Alliance.

- Partnership working, both with employers and with community organisations, is good. Relationships with employers are very good and they comment favourably on the quality of the provision for their employees, particularly in relation to improvements in spoken English.
- Support for learners is satisfactory. Teachers give good one-to-one support informally and within lessons. Learners are very positive about the support and guidance they receive from staff. Additional support in English and mathematics, when provided, is very effective but is not yet in place for all functional skills learners.
- Management is satisfactory. Success rates on pre-vocational qualifications are at national averages. Pass rates for English at level 2 and mathematics at level 1 are high, but insufficient numbers of learners progress in mathematics. Communications across the staff team are good and improving. Teachers are well qualified. Arrangements for the safeguarding of learners are satisfactory.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory overall and good in lessons. Good initiatives are taking place to provide local minority ethnic communities with opportunities to improve their English. However, it is too early to assess the effectiveness of this programme.

What does Skills and Development Alliance Ltd need to do to improve further?

- Develop and apply more effective and consistent systems for diagnostic assessment in English and mathematics and use the results to identify the additional support needs of all learners.
- Give sufficient support to learners who need it actively to improve their English and mathematics within the context of their vocational areas.
- Increase the opportunity for learners to progress to level 2 in mathematics, so improving their employability.

Business, administration and law

Grade 3

Context

28. The Alliance offers apprenticeship training in customer service, business administration, team leading and management. The training is provided by five of the partners across the London area. There are 71 learners on apprenticeship programmes and 61 are working towards NVQs. The majority of learners are on customer service programmes, and over half work in the hospitality sector. Of learners, 73% are women and 86% are from a minority ethnic heritage.

Key findings

- Overall success rates are low, and vary considerably between partners. In 2010/11, success rates for Train to Gain and apprenticeships were both significantly below national averages. However, Paddington Development Trust's apprenticeship success rates were good and in the largest provision, at Wise Owls, NVQ success rates were satisfactory. The Alliance has implemented improved initial assessment and tracking systems, and most current learners are making at least satisfactory progress.
- Learners are improving their literacy and numeracy skills well, particularly older learners who did not achieve qualifications at school or for whom English is their second language. The acquisition of these skills enables many learners to move to supervisory roles or progress to further qualifications. Learners are well motivated by their learning and feel valued by their employers.
- Many learners develop improved confidence, better team working skills and greater insights into their jobs as they become more aware of the impact of their skills on colleagues and customers. They smile at customers more and speak to colleagues and customers in English. This is helping to improve sales. However, some mature apprentices have been in their job roles for a long time and are not extending their skills sufficiently.
- Learners feel safe and work safely in their job roles. They receive good health and safety training in the workplace. However, many learners have insufficient awareness of e-safety or data protection.
- Teaching and learning are good. Tutor assessors plan learning well, and learners enjoy sharing their experiences with peers in group sessions. Tutors produce professional resources and learners are directed well to appropriate websites for research. The teaching of functional skills by specialist tutors on site is particularly effective when provided discretely. The vocational assessor and the functional skills tutor liaise closely to make the teaching relevant.
- Assessment is effective. Learners are assessed regularly and frequently in the workplace, and feedback is sensitive and constructive. Assessors make good use of recorded professional discussion and probing questioning. Learners use either electronic or paper-based portfolios, which contain good-quality diverse

evidence. However, many learners have insufficient involvement in portfolio-building and cross-referencing their evidence.

- Initial assessment is effective, and results in learners being on the right programme. Learners identified with language, literacy or numeracy support needs receive good support from qualified staff. Some partners provide basic skills and language tuition before learners start their apprenticeships.
- Progress reviews are ineffective and do not involve line managers. They take place regularly but are too informal, not well recorded, and do not identify support needs sufficiently. Learners and employers are insufficiently aware of what progress the learner is making or how far through the programme they are. Target setting is often not well recorded or individualised. The planned end dates in individual learning plans are often the same for all learners.
- The range of programmes is satisfactory, and provides good progression pathways. One partner offers pre-apprenticeship training in functional skills to unemployed young people, transferring them to an apprenticeship on finding a work placement. However, employers would like more afternoon sessions for literacy and numeracy to avoid busy times when they are preparing food and serving customers.
- Partnership working is good. Wise Owls has particularly good relationships with large, prestigious employers in the hospitality sector, and assessors work in the employer's premises most days, so are available to guide, coach and assess learners on demand, as well as having regular contact with line managers. Some partners work particularly well within the voluntary sector and community groups. Assessors visit workplaces flexibly to suit work patterns.
- Care, guidance and support are satisfactory. Assessors are flexible, accessible and give good, individual support to learners in lessons. Learners receive effective advice and guidance on the choice of NVQs and optional units to fit their job roles. Induction prepares learners well for their programmes, but is sometimes too rushed, especially for learners for whom English is a second language.
- Operational management is satisfactory. Managers communicate well with staff and set and monitor performance targets. Assessors are aware of the low success rates and are using strategies to improve them. Team working between assessors is good. However, the Alliance does not provide enough support for part-time assessors to undertake professional development or to share best practice.
- Social inclusion is good. The diverse partners recruit a range of disadvantaged learners from within local communities, increasing their social well-being and employability through literacy, language and vocational skills training. Although most learners come from minority ethnic groups, little discernible difference can be found between their achievements. Learners have a satisfactory understanding of equality and diversity, but assessors insufficiently widen their awareness after induction.
- Internal verification at each of the partners is effective and thorough. Verifiers provide good feedback to assessors on their performance, and follow up action

points. The Alliance has introduced better initial assessment, improved induction, and better tracking of progress.

What does the Alliance need to do to improve further?

- Raise success rates at all partners through improved monitoring and support of learners at risk of leaving or falling behind, and designing more differentiated activities to stretch and challenge more experienced learners.
- Adopt a more structured progress review that informs learners and employers better by means of more detailed and better recorded targets.
- Drive improvement and sharing of good practice between the different partners at programme level by improving coordination across them.

Information about the inspection

29. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and six additional inspectors, assisted by the provider's executive committee chair, 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 body, and data on learners and their achievement.
30. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails to gain the views of learners and employers. They also looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed for the provider. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subject areas the provider offers, but have not reported on creative media which has a low number of learners.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)
Skills and Development Alliance Ltd
Learning types: 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	19+ Learner responsive	Employer responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners			
Full-time learners	871	80	791
Overall effectiveness	3	3	3
Capacity to improve	2		
Outcomes for learners	3	3	3
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	3		
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	3		
How well do learners progress?	3		
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2		
How safe do learners feel?	3		
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	-		
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	-		
Quality of provision	3	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?	2		
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	3		
Leadership and management	3		
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2		
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	-		
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?	2		

*where applicable to the type of provision

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