

Pre-School Learning Alliance

Inspection report

Unique reference number:	50230
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Type of provider:	Voluntary organisation
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Information about the provider

1. The Pre-school Learning Alliance (the Alliance) is a national organisation, which started in 1961 and has grown as a membership organisation supporting and promoting the work of 14,000 independent voluntary early years settings across the country. During the last 10 years, the Alliance has also become a provider of early years services in its own right, operating nearly 500 settings. It also runs over 8,500 crèches.

2. The national centre in York Way, near Kings Cross in London, is the base for the director of quality improvement, who has responsibility for management of the Skills Funding Agency contract, which is a relatively small part of the Alliance’s work. As a member of the senior management team, he reports directly to the chief executive and the board of trustees. The national centre training team works with the training centre in Tonbridge, Kent. Across England, the Alliance is organised into four divisions. A divisional director, supported by an assistant, heads each division.

3. In September 2010, the Alliance started to offer the new diploma and certificate for the children and young people’s workforce and introduced employer responsive provision through apprenticeships and Train to Gain programmes. The profile of Alliance learners is predominantly women aged over 25 years employed or volunteering in early years settings. Most courses are day release, combining classroom-based theory sessions with work-based assessment. Classes are held in local, community-based venues such as children’s centres and village halls.

Type of provision	Number of learners in 2010/11
Provision for young learners: Further education (16 to 18)	47 learners
Provision for adult learners: Learning for qualifications	1,341 part-time learners
Employer provision: Train to Gain Apprenticeships	40 learners 70 apprentices

Summary report

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

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Grade 2
	Grade
Outcomes for learners	2
Quality of provision	2
Leadership and management	2
Safeguarding	2
Equality and diversity	2
Learning for qualifications	Grade
Child development and well-being	2

Overall effectiveness

4. A high proportion of advanced learners are successful in achieving their qualifications. Learners improve their employment prospects and develop good vocational skills and gain in confidence. Lessons are well planned and link theory to practice particularly well. Learners are very enthusiastic and make good progress; however, this is not formally shared with employers. Arrangements to meet the needs and interests of learners are good as the timing and location of courses fit well with childcare arrangements. Good partnership working adds to the learning opportunities and expertise available to learners. All learners receive good support from tutors as their key contact within the Alliance and support for those with additional learning needs is well planned and effective. Leadership and management are good. The board of trustees offers excellent strategic direction and senior managers provide very effective operational management. Safeguarding arrangements are good and staff ensure learners' understanding is reinforced throughout their courses. Equality and diversity are promoted well and integrated into lessons effectively. Quality improvement arrangements are well established and effective. However, the completion of course documentation, for example reports on learners' progress and achievement, is not consistent and is not always sufficiently

detailed or thorough. The Alliance provides good value for money and uses its resources well.

Main findings

- Success rates are high on advanced level courses, representing good outcomes for the large majority of the Alliance's learners. The small number of apprentices performs particularly well. Success rates are satisfactory for the remaining 30% of learners who complete foundation and intermediate courses.
- Advanced level learners relate childcare theory to their work practice well and demonstrate a good standard of work. The standard of learners' work in lessons is good and all learners are confident in expressing their knowledge and understanding of their studies.
- Learners at all levels are gaining good vocational skills. They are enthusiastic about how the course is developing their skills. Progression from foundation to advanced level courses is good and many learners move from voluntary work to paid employment.
- Learners benefit from good teaching which supports their learning well. Particularly well planned lessons meet individual learners' needs and promote equality and diversity effectively; tutors often use the learners' own cultural heritage as a starting point. Their promotion of literacy and language skills within lessons is good.
- 'Learning assistant', the new e-learning system used by most learners, is very effective in enabling them to view their progress at a glance. However, progress updates are not routinely shared with employers.
- Arrangements to meet the needs and interests of learners are good. Lessons take place in community venues, accessible to learners and offered at times that fit in with parents' and carers' needs.
- Partnerships to offer progression pathways for learners are good. Partnerships with early years specialists to develop bespoke training courses leading to accreditation enhance opportunities for learners and widen participation.
- Support for learners is good. Tutors have a good understanding of each learner's literacy, numeracy, language and vocational skills levels and barriers to learning. Tutors provide good individual support in lessons and tutorials.
- Strategic and operational management are excellent. The experience and expert knowledge of trustees and senior managers enable the Alliance to influence national childcare policy. Senior staff provide good support and oversight of the provision. Management roles and responsibilities are clearly understood by all staff.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The Alliance promotes social inclusion by recruiting learners from areas of deprivation and learners who face barriers to learning. Learners have a good understanding of all aspects of equality and diversity as they affect them and their work with children.

- Quality improvement is good. Managers have made significant improvements to the observation of teaching and learning, which now result in clear grades and accurate judgements. They make good use of the management information system to monitor performance and manage the provision. However, quality assurance of the course documentation is not sufficiently thorough to ensure consistently high standards of completion.
- The management of resources is good. Staff are well qualified and experienced and arrangements for continuing professional development are good. Teaching resources are good and additional computers and scanners are available to enable learners and tutors to make best use of the 'learning assistant' programme.

What does the Alliance need to do to improve further?

- Develop and implement procedures to ensure the systematic and timely feedback of learners' progress to employers, enabling them to support learners' advancement towards their learning goals and maximise their learning opportunities at work.
- Provide good practice guides for tutors and improve quality assurance checks to ensure all course documentation is completed to a consistently high standard.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- the supportive and helpful tutors and assessors who will go the extra mile to ensure learners are successful
- the improvements made in confidence, social and personal skills since starting the course
- the good mix of theory and practical skills development
- the local venues and convenient times of classes which enable mothers and other carers to pick up children from school
- the on-line portfolio which is particularly helpful for those who wish to use it, and which can show at a glance progress towards completion
- the feedback from assessors which is timely and helpful, enabling learners to improve their work
- the way employers can clearly see an improvement in learners' practice at work and compliment learners on their achievements.

What learners would like to see improved:

- the explanation of the on-line learning system that is given at the start of courses, which needs clearer step-by-step guidance for use written from a learner's perspective

- the language in the handbook, which is overly complex and includes a lot of repetition.

Summary of the views of employers and partners as confirmed by inspectors

What employers and partners like:

- the mutual benefits gained by working together in partnership, for example in developing new courses and offering accreditation
- the long standing and well-established reputation of the Alliance and the vast experience of their staff
- the fact that learners progress at a good pace and are able to apply skills learnt in lessons to everyday early years practice.

What employers and partners would like to see improved:

- the formal opportunities for employers to get feedback on learners' progress
- more involvement in the learning process with regular contact with tutors and assessors.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

5. The Alliance has demonstrated a good capacity to improve. Success rates have continued to improve and are now high. Teaching and learning are good and the Alliance has developed thorough systems for the observations of teaching and learning to improve standards further. Managers continue to maintain and promote good partnership working with local authorities, other training providers and other professional organisations. It has rectified the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. The management information system is good and used well to monitor the overall performance of the provision as well as the performance of different groups. The use of 'learning assistant' and e-portfolios across the provision is extensive, although provision remains for paper-based portfolios for those learners who would prefer it.
6. Quality improvement is good and the internal quality assurance is detailed but insufficient at present to ensure that the completion of all course documentation, including the reviews of learners' progress, is at a high standard. The self-assessment process is thorough and accurate. Tutors, learners and employers all contribute to the process and all staff see the draft report before it is finalised. The most recent report is critical with good evidence-based judgements. Self-assessment grades broadly match those awarded by inspectors.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 2

7. Overall, success rates are high. Success rates for the large group of advanced level learners have improved from 79% in 2008/09 to 84% in 2010/11 against a national rate of 75%. For the 18 apprentices who left in 2010/11 success rates were high at 94%. Success rates for the very small number of learners at foundation level have improved from 82% in 2008/09 to 89% in 2010/11 against a national rate of 84%. For the last two years, success rates have remained satisfactory for learners on intermediate level courses representing 23% of all learners. However, male learners' success rates were low in 2010/11. The current cohort of male learners have all remained on programme and are making good progress.
8. Learners demonstrate good standards of work in advanced level portfolios and are able to relate very well childcare theory to practical situations. Their written work demonstrates their ability to plan and carry out creative and learning activities independently. The standard of learners' work in lessons is good and learners ably express their knowledge and understanding of the subjects studied.
9. Learners at all levels are gaining good vocational skills. At foundation level, learners are very enthusiastic about how the course is developing their skills both in their voluntary work and with their own children. Learners gain in

confidence and develop information and communication technology skills as a result of using the e-learning programme. Progression from foundation to advanced level courses is good. Learners make good progress in lessons and some complete extension activities. Apprentices make satisfactory progress and complete within their agreed timescales.

10. Learners feel safe and have a very good understanding of safeguarding in relation to their practice in the workplace and their own safety. This includes internet safety. Learners make a good contribution to the community and work or volunteer in community playgroups and neighbourhood nurseries.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

11. Good teaching and learning underpin the courses. In the best lessons, excellent planning for learning takes note of social inclusion, differentiation activities to meet individual learners' needs, as identified through initial assessment and excellent promotion of equality and diversity in the content of lessons. Particularly good references made to the learners' own experiences and cultural heritage enrich the learning experience. Tutors promote literacy and language skills well within lessons, for example introducing new vocabulary and enabling learners to read aloud, increasing their confidence. Through their use of information and communication technology, tutors engage and enthuse learners in lessons and create classes where learners are lively, enthusiastic and focused. Apprentices benefit from good off-the-job training closely linked to work roles.
12. Assessment is frequent, regular and well planned. Learners are able to dictate the pace of assessment to meet their own goals and aspirations. 'Learning assistant' is a new e-learning system used by most learners; they enjoy using the system and say that this has enabled them to complete work more quickly and to get a timely response from their assessor. However, some assessment at work happens late in the programme, particularly for apprentices, and no procedures or policies are in place that support or direct assessors to report the progress of learners to employers. Employers are often unaware of the progress learners are making.
13. Lessons take place in community venues, accessible to learners and offered at times that fit in with parents' and carers' needs, such as picking children up from school and part-time work commitments. Opportunities to progress from foundation to advanced level and into higher qualifications are good. For some learners the development of information and communication technology skills linked to the use of the e-portfolio is a valuable extra. Paediatric first aid is included as a separate certificated course, enhancing employability prospects.
14. Partnerships between local authorities and the Alliance to offer progression pathways, including management qualifications for learners, are good. The partnerships with early years specialists to develop bespoke training courses leading to accreditation enhance opportunities for learners and widen participation. The extensive links with nurseries across the country are good

and lead to the widespread recruitment of learners. Managers in nurseries continue to use the Alliance to train new staff or to develop the skills of existing staff.

15. Good support is available for learners with additional literacy, numeracy and language needs. Specialist staff give tutors very effective guidance that enables them to provide individual support to learners with identified needs or who face barriers to participation and learning. Learners have good access to their tutors by email and text. Tutors have a good understanding of each learner's circumstances and outcomes from initial assessment of literacy, numeracy, language and vocational skills and provide individual support in lessons, tutorials and at other times. Good use is made of mentors to support learners at work.

Leadership and management

Grade 2

16. Strategic management is excellent. Trustees and senior managers have a very good understanding of national childcare and training priorities. They also have a very good awareness of the characteristics of the workforce and the market demands. They set a clear strategic direction for the organisation and demonstrate strong leadership. They communicate this well to all staff who have a good understanding of the aims and future direction of the organisation. The management of change within the Alliance through two restructures has focused on improving efficiency and using staff skills to their best advantage.
17. Procedures for the day-to-day management of courses are well established and very effective. These enable flexibility to meet the needs of learners well. Access to good teaching resources and frequent visits from Alliance staff support tutors well. Communication is very good with a comprehensive meeting structure, regular informative newsletters and much informal communication. Staff understand their roles and responsibilities which are clear and structured well to make the best use of their skills.
18. Effective safeguarding policies and procedures are comprehensive, clear, and updated bi-annually. Bespoke staff training, offered every two years, uses current and appropriate case studies to help staff deal with difficult situations and ethical dilemmas. The promotion of safeguarding through teaching is good. Support for tutors in their key role as a single point of contact for learners is good. The introduction of safeguarding during induction is effective and reinforced throughout training. Valuable help from the Alliance's national safeguarding adviser contributes to a whole service approach to the protection of children and vulnerable adults.
19. The Alliance has a clear strategy to identify and engage learners from a wide variety of backgrounds especially those from disadvantaged areas or those who experience barriers to learning. The exploration of equality and diversity within lessons is good and monitored through the observations of teaching and learning. Learners have a good understanding of equality and diversity. The Alliance has produced a variety of high quality publications and has devoted its most recent newsletter to diversity issues. Managers analyse data well to

identify performance differences between groups and use this information to manage the provision.

20. The Alliance gets feedback from learners in a variety of different ways including mid- and end-course evaluations, tutorials and reviews and through email and phone calls. The Alliance is responsive to issues raised and makes changes to the organisation of the programmes in response to this feedback. Recent changes include course venues and timing, and additional information about e-portfolios. The Alliance also uses employers' feedback in a positive way and has responded by putting into place some evening classes and developing additional training modules in the early years foundation stage.
21. The collation and analysis of management information are now much more efficient using the 'learning assistant' software. Tutors and learners are developing the use of e-portfolios well, although some users need extra support. Observations of teaching and learning have improved and the assessments are very thorough and detailed. Feedback informs staff appraisals and managers monitor action points. Tutors' completion of course documentation is not consistently thorough. For example, learners' progress and achievement are not always formally recorded in sufficient detail. Self-assessment is inclusive and uses feedback from staff, learners and employers. The report is critical, with good evidence-based judgements and grades which match those awarded by inspectors.
22. The Alliance uses its available resources well to secure good value for money. All learners progress well to develop skills, knowledge and gain their qualifications. Teaching resources are typically good. The provision of additional resources for learners or tutors with particular needs is good. The Alliance has a commitment to sustainability.

Information about the inspection

23. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and three additional inspectors, assisted by the Pre-School Learning Alliance's Director of Quality Improvement, 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, the previous inspection report and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
24. Inspectors used group, individual interviews, telephone calls and emails to gather the views of learners. They looked at questionnaires learners and employers/partners had completed on behalf of the Pre-School Learning Alliance. They also visited learning sessions, assessments or progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from all programmes in the main subject the provider offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)
Pre-School Learning Alliance
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
Approximate number of enrolled learners				
Part-time learners	1,103	33	1,063	7
Overall effectiveness	2	2	2	2
Capacity to improve	2			
A. Outcomes for learners	2	3	2	1
A1. How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	2			
A1.a) How well do learners attain their learning goals?	2			
A1.b) How well do learners progress?	2			
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>	N/A			
A5. <i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	2			
B. Quality of provision	2	2	2	2
B1. How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2			
B2. How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	2			
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	2	2	2	2
C1. How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	1			
C2. <i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	1			
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?	2			
C6. How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	2			
C7. 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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