

learndirect

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates		12–21 March 2013
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good-2
	Previous inspection:	Good-2
Outcomes for learners		Good-2
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Good-2
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Outstanding-1

Summary of key findings for learners

This provider is good because:

- A very good proportion of learners achieve their planned qualification in learndirect centres; overall the outcomes for apprentices are good and workplace learning achievement of qualifications was very good in 2011/12 but is declining slightly in the current year.
- Learners attending centres clearly enjoy their learning and the learndirect experience, showing significant improvements in self-confidence and the ability to learn, while improving their skills well, particularly those relevant to potential employment.
- Online learning materials effectively aid learners' development of knowledge and skills; this is enhanced by very committed staff providing specialist and general support, resulting in motivated learners succeeding and progressing to other learning or employment.
- In this complex organisation inspirational leadership at all levels and exceptionally good team working ensures, at a period of change, a very large number of learners, many of whom have had limited successful previous learning, have at least a good experience.
- Arrangements for quality improvement and performance management are exceptionally well carried out and are linked with thorough use of data and excellent sector knowledge which leads to a very good range of learning opportunities.
- Management of subcontractors is excellent; in learndirect subcontractors are known as suppliers emphasising their full integration into the routine work.
- learndirect has a particularly strong focus on equality of access to learning and the safeguarding of all learners throughout the provision.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- The rise in achievement of qualifications to a particularly high level is relatively recent and this needs to be sustained.
- The planned improvements in the online learning materials, to make them all as engaging as the more recent programmes, have not yet been completed, and a greater proportion of the face-to-face teaching needs to be at the highest level.

Full report

What does learndirect need to do to improve further?

- Continue to monitor closely the workplace learning programmes, carrying out further investigation into their delivery and taking appropriate action if the outcomes or the quality of training decline.
- In some of the growing number of taught sessions, improve learning resources, range of methods, accommodation, learning technology and staff expertise to ensure that even more sessions are outstanding.
- Improve staff understanding of short-term targets so that more-helpful and precise targets can help learners fully develop their independent learning skills.
- As a priority, make sure that the systems for searching for courses on the learndirect website are fully functional to enable accurate information to be easily accessible.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Good
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- A very good proportion of learners achieve their planned qualification in learndirect centres. The provision is mainly short courses at or below level 1, with an expectation of high success rates, but outcomes for nearly 200,000 learners a year are consistently high. In-year data show further significant improvement. The relatively small provision for learners who are given a longer period for course completion is improving from a satisfactory to a good level.
- Learners' achievement of goals in the main learndirect provision of information and communication technology (ICT), English and mathematics are all good. Learners also achieve at a good rate in an increasingly wide range of vocational topics, such as health and social care or building and construction, and in gaining specialist qualifications, for instance in security work.
- Outcomes for apprentices are good overall. The large majority of apprentices recruited through the previous JHP programmes are achieving their qualifications at about the same rate as their previous good inspection, before JHP merged with learndirect. The smaller learndirect element of the apprenticeship provision has outcomes at satisfactory rates. Action to improve quality in both areas is having an impact on outcomes, for instance, in closing a previous variation between male and female completion rates.
- Workplace learning outcomes were very good in 2011/12. In-year data suggest a slight decline in the proportion achieving their qualification, and in those who do so by their planned end date. learndirect managers have reviewed this wide-spread national programme carefully but have not identified any consistent cause for this as yet.
- Learners attending centres very clearly enjoy their learning and the learndirect experience. They like the online training material, and welcome the opportunity for independent learning at their own pace. However, they also respond positively to particularly good subject specific and general support from learndirect staff and advisers and carefully managed interaction with other learners.
- learndirect monitors the achievement of differing groups of learners, and responds well to tackle any identified variations in performance. The wide geographical spread and variety of learners means that variations, and resulting effective actions, are mainly at an individual centre level.
- Learners show significant improvements in self-confidence and their ability to improve their knowledge and skills. While this is best seen in employability programmes it is an integral part of every element of the learndirect experience. This is particularly helpful for the many learners tentatively re-entering learning who routinely start with relatively simple and short provision, but

then willingly progress to more complex and demanding work. The extremely positive views of hundreds of learners submitted as part of the inspection process included references to the infectious enthusiasm of staff, the learndirect experience being a life-changing event and achievement of a qualification giving the confidence to go forward and find employment.

- Learners develop good skills in English, mathematics and ICT and apply these in their personal lives in a variety of ways such as household budget planning, calculating discounts when shopping and producing promotional materials for fundraising events. Learners on employability programmes use their newly acquired skills and knowledge well including writing effective personal statements for university applications and successful job application letters. Progression to higher-level qualifications or additional learning is good.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teaching, learning and assessment are good and this is reflected in the good achievement of qualifications and development of learners' skills, knowledge and understanding.
- Members of staff have high expectations of learners but also have an extremely encouraging and friendly approach, which helps learners quickly feel at ease when visiting centres. The high level of respect between staff and learners is greatly appreciated and leads to highly motivated learners. Learners who do not attend learning centres and learn wholly through online learning materials also benefit from good support and technical assistance from a well-resourced service centre.
- Many learners, large numbers of whom have been previously disengaged from education, are properly encouraged to participate actively in learning again. Learners on employability programmes value the increased confidence they get after the isolation caused by losing their jobs. Learners welcome and take advantage of the good opportunities for additional programmes that provide specific qualifications needed for employment.
- The learndirect approach enables learners to become proficient at working independently. Most staff strike a good balance between intervention and allowing learners to work quietly and independently online. However, a small minority of tutors miss opportunities to suggest additional activities for learners to complete between sessions to further promote independent learning.
- Online learning materials are good overall and allow learners the flexibility to choose their own pace and place of learning. Materials are interesting, well presented and logically structured with newer learning packages providing greater learner interaction with better integration of video and graphics, improved navigational features and good use of realistic contexts to develop knowledge and skills.
- The teaching of employability skills is good. Tutors encourage learners to discover how to produce good curriculum vitae and to conduct themselves during interviews. One tutor made excellent use of role play and body language to get learners to think about how much first impressions affect perception and can influence the outcome of job interviews.
- Individual coaching is good, and very helpful if learners are finding the online material challenging. However, a minority of group sessions do not engage all learners or sufficiently challenge individuals. In the small but increasing element of face-to-face teaching the occasional lack of resources, including data projectors or interactive whiteboards as well as basic equipment, reduces the effectiveness of some teaching.
- Members of staff delivering English and mathematics are appropriately qualified and experienced. However, as recognised by learndirect, the increased emphasis on face-to-face teaching in other subjects necessitates a re-evaluation of the appropriateness of the current requirements for tutor qualifications and experience. Most training centres provide good quality accommodation and a professional learning experience.
- Initial assessment is effective and ensures that learners are on the right course and at the right level. In English and mathematics a recently revised initial and diagnostic assessment process

very effectively helps with the development of individualised courses. Individual learning plans are fit for purpose in setting timely targets for unit completion.

- Progress reviews are frequent and give learners a good understanding of how they are moving through their course. Learners taking courses wholly through online learning are set additional tasks during progress reviews to check that they retain previous learning and are able to apply it to everyday situations. However for other learners, written short-term targets are at times too general and often focus on the completion of units rather than on broader learning.
- Assessment practice is good. Oral assessment feedback is thorough and, while written feedback is at least satisfactory, spelling and grammatical errors are not always corrected to help learners improve their English skills.
- Good initial advice and guidance meet the diverse needs of learners and ensure that the chosen mode of learning meets their requirements. However, the current learndirect website does not facilitate easy searching for specific courses at centres. Most learners receive good advice on progression to employment, apprenticeships, other courses and to higher-level qualifications in colleges and universities.
- Learners with multiple barriers to learning are referred to appropriate local agencies to provide assistance in, for example, housing needs or overcoming drug and alcohol abuse. Learners who previously were reluctant to leave their homes due to depression are now confident and look forward to attending a centre and completing their qualifications.
- Equality and diversity are promoted well within centres creating a strong culture of respect. Newer online learning materials are sensitively designed to ensure that a range of cultures and backgrounds are used to illustrate teaching material. In a few instances centre staff miss opportunities to challenge inappropriate attitudes and comments during individual or group sessions.

ICT for users

Learning programmes for 19+

Good

- Teaching learning and assessment for learners undertaking ICT courses are good. This is reflected in the consistent and high outcomes in this area. Although more of this provision is delivered online than other learndirect programmes learners still benefit from the impressive engagement, care and support from tutors and advisers in centres and from online support staff at the service centre.
- Online learning materials are good. Overall they are interesting, well presented and logically structured, but with enough flexibility to allow the faster learner to progress quickly. However, if packages identify that a learner has failed to grasp a topic the learning does not always offer alternative explanations, with, in some instances, repetition of a whole topic rather than targeting specific weaknesses. But the great majority of learners have the benefit of helpful tutors in centres for occasions when they are puzzled.
- The newer learndirect material, for instance on formatting documents, is presented in a lively and engaging style with good use of video and graphics. The older, higher-level packages, such as how to produce a pie chart in a spreadsheet, are very clear, but lack variety in their approach. The older material is in the process of being completely revised.
- In the small but increasing number of face-to-face sessions, performance is good, although occasional lack of technology, including data projectors or interactive whiteboards, reduces the effectiveness of teaching of topics such as how to use email.
- Care and support are exceptionally good. The vast majority of learners attend centres where staff are often passionate about the opportunities they are providing for learners. At all stages of their experience, learners receive good levels of guidance and encouragement. Learning is monitored well, with positive and appropriate intervention by tutors where people are struggling or are not engaging with their courses. Learners who are working with the provision that is

available purely online, not attending centres, also benefit from close monitoring and supportive action by a central team of tutors.

- The learndirect approach very effectively develops independent learning. This is particularly important for those who are returning to learning and may be starting at relatively low levels of competence. Staff monitor learners working online and in centres, giving them the right degree of independence but helping when appropriate. However, the formal system of setting targets, over and above those set online, does not always help learners to review and modify their own practice.
- Initial assessment is effective and is combined with good advice and guidance. Pre-course information is good and centres provide a welcoming and positive initial experience. A combination of discussion and testing ensures that learners are on the right course and at the right level. Courses tend to be relatively short and learners have a reasonable understanding of how their current course may be augmented by other opportunities in due course, including the development of English and mathematics.
- Assessment is very regular and effective. Learners are clear on the objectives of a particular unit, such as 'identify the main parts of a (spreadsheet) formula'. Online testing is adequate for initial confirmation and reinforcement of learning, but in most cases it is then enhanced with the submission of such things as completed databases which are promptly marked by local or remote tutors and returned with helpful comments.
- Learning materials motivate and engage nearly all learners, regardless of their age, ability and cultural background. Newer learning materials increasingly and sensitively use a range of cultures or scenarios to illustrate teaching points which challenge perceptions: a mock television interview about the benefits of emailing centred on a white male and black female; the male was the secretary.

Foundation mathematics, foundation English Learning programmes for 19+

Good

- Teaching, learning and assessment are good in English and mathematics, reflecting the consistently good development of learners' skills, knowledge and achievement of goals.
- Learners benefit from strong encouragement to overcome negative feelings about themselves and to value their existing skills and learn new skills. Learners are well motivated and some find their lives transformed through the positive experience of learning.
- Many learners, looking for a fresh start, are encouraged to aspire to higher-level jobs or to progress further with their learning. Learners generally make good progress with the majority progressing to the next level of learning.
- Most learners become proficient at working independently. Learners benefit from the learning materials but also are motivated by the good support they receive. For example, one learner received intensive individual teaching of fractions and long division to overcome a longstanding problem with these topics. However, a small minority of tutors miss opportunities to suggest additional activities for learners to complete between sessions which might further promote independent learning.
- The small proportion of learners studying wholly through online materials, not attending centres, also receive good remote support. For example, a web-based system of discussion with illustrations helped one learner understand new tips and techniques for carrying out multiplication tasks and working with decimals.
- Online learning materials allow appropriate flexibility for learners to choose their own pace and place of learning, including working at home and late at night. Learners enjoy using materials which develop English or mathematics skills in a range of realistic contexts, for example, through interpreting timetables to book travel tickets or the application process for renewing a passport. Most group sessions are planned well and are effective in helping learners understand

a particular concept. For instance, in one centre, an excellent range of activities quickly developed learners' skills in tally and bar charts.

- Tutors use good coaching skills to encourage learners to reflect on their learning and how to improve their performance. They challenge learners well through direct questioning and help learners make appropriate links between their learning and home or employment contexts.
- Staff are appropriately qualified and experienced. Most training centres provide good quality accommodation and resources providing a good learning environment.
- Online assessment and feedback is generally effective in reinforcing learning. Oral feedback following assessment is good and provides clear information for learners about what they have done well and what they need to do to improve. Written feedback is satisfactory but spelling and grammatical errors are not always corrected to help learners improve their English skills.
- Initial and diagnostic assessments are used effectively to set up individualised courses. Progress reviews are frequent and helpful. Learners studying wholly through online learning have good short-term targets. However, for other learners, written short-term targets are often too general and actions for learners to complete often focus on the completion of units rather than on broader learning.
- Learners receive good initial guidance to ensure they are on the right programmes. Most learners receive good advice on progression to employment, other courses and to advanced level qualifications in colleges and universities.
- Equality and diversity are promoted well within centres. Online learning programmes are carefully designed to challenge stereotypical perceptions. Staff do not always make full use of opportunities to reinforce or develop learners' understanding of aspects of equality and diversity.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- Outstanding leadership and management, at every level from senior leaders to tutors working with a group of a dozen learners, have ensured that, over a period of significant change, standards for hundreds of thousands of learners across the country have been maintained at least at good levels. Across the organisation, leaders provide clear strategic direction. learndirect has developed a positive culture clearly focused on helping learners improve skills and enhance their chances of employment. Improvement and ambition are thoroughly embedded in routine actions at all levels.
- Communications are highly effective across the organisation. The recently revised organisational structure, from the board downwards, has very clear lines of communication and responsibility leading to good challenge as well as knowledgeable support. The pace and excitement of change has been greatly enhanced by the high calibre of the management communications. The rationale for the recent merger with the JHP Group was very clearly explained with a very positive subsequent staff response.
- learndirect's strategies for monitoring and improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment are highly effective and have resulted in ensuring that a good standard of online materials, and offline support, are maintained. learndirect uses a variety of methods for monitoring the quality of delivery well; this is done by both suppliers and learndirect staff.
- learndirect applies an effective range of activities to help staff develop their skills. Managers appropriately use the results of observations to guide coaching, training and other staff development. However, in a very few cases staff do not have all the skills required to deliver offline teaching, such as appropriate questioning techniques and ensuring that those learners who learn more quickly than others are given sufficient challenge.
- learndirect manages the performance of suppliers exceptionally well. learndirect has developed exceptionally good working relationships with suppliers, but also uses well-developed processes to take swift and robust, but still highly supportive, actions to deal with underperformance.

- Arrangements for sharing good practice are comprehensive and effective. learndirect develops resources well, with online delivery enhanced by innovative use of network technology. The central service centre has adapted standard contact centre technology well to meet the specific needs of learners in order to provide an excellent learner experience.
- learndirect sets clear standards for suppliers' staff and monitors the provision well to ensure they meet these standards, for instance in English and mathematics qualifications. As learndirect broadens its blended approach to learning, and moves its provision to outstanding, it is rightly reviewing the mix of teaching and professional qualifications and expertise that its staff need.
- Self-assessment is rigorous, routine and effective. learndirect uses data exceptionally well to monitor all aspects of performance and they share this effectively with suppliers to improve performance. A wide variety of sources of evidence provides a rich picture of the quality of provision.
- Quality improvements plans are detailed, covering well a range of actions at both operational and strategic level. Managers link these plans well to self-assessment findings, and actions focus effectively on how the improvement will benefit learners. learndirect monitors progress towards each action in the plan extremely well.
- learndirect staff have a very well developed understanding of the needs of learners and employers, and local and national priorities. They use views of learners and employers well to provide flexible well-located learning that meets those needs. learndirect is particularly adept at carrying out pilot developments then using learner and supplier feedback well to improve these initiatives. learndirect staff use the organisation's knowledge and experience successfully in contributing to national debates on adult learning.
- Equality in access to learning is a particularly strong feature of learndirect with learners benefiting greatly from the opportunity to take relevant courses, starting with small programmes, at convenient centres, with a welcoming and supportive environment. Data are well used to monitor performance, for instance in focussing support on learners with moderate learning difficulties to close a performance gap that was identified in a previous year. Learners' successes are used very effectively to celebrate personal achievements, encourage others and promote the effectiveness of the learndirect provision.
- Learners feeling safe is very important to all at learndirect. learndirect meets its statutory requirements for safeguarding learners. Well-established arrangements are managed by highly knowledgeable staff, with appropriate training and processes. Responses to incidents are good, and actions are well monitored centrally for trends and further investigation.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

learndirect		
Inspection grades are based on a provider's performance: 1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate	Overall	19+ Learning programmes
Overall effectiveness	2	2
Outcomes for learners	2	2
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	2	2
The effectiveness of leadership and management	1	1

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
ICT for users	2
Foundation mathematics	2
Foundation English	2

Provider details

learndirect	
Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	Full-time: N/A
	Part-time: 193,340
Principal/CEO	Sarah Jones
Date of previous inspection	June 2008
Website address	http://www.learndirect.co.uk/

Provider information at the time of the inspection								
Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 and above	
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
Full-time	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Part-time	366	8,406	0	5,071	0	509	0	0
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	1,909	5,583	802	6,852	0	75		
Number of learners aged 14-16	N/A							
Number of community learners	N/A							
Number of employability learners	N/A							
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Tabs Training ■ Ilc Manchester Limited ■ Ministry Of Defence ■ Business Training Ventures Limited ■ Pertemps Learning And Education Alliance Limited ■ Bestland Solutions Limited ■ Business Support & Development Ltd ■ Community Training Portal Limited ■ Learning Links (Europe) Ltd 							

- Isis Training & Recruitment T/A E-Qas Training
plus a further 68 other sub-contractors

Additional socio-economic information

learndirect has over 400 learning centres across England, deliberately located in areas which have higher levels of deprivation; around two thirds of current learners are from the 40% most deprived postcode areas. Around 75% of learners are classified as White British. The proportion of learners who are unemployed has risen from 61% in 2009/10 to 84% in 2012/13. Mathematics, English and ICT are mainly delivered using online learning material, with tutor support. The growing employability training has about half online learning, half face-to-face sessions. Around 3% of learners complete their learning without attending a local centre, accessing online support from a learndirect service centre; these learners are predominantly female and employed. In 2010/11 learndirect funding changed from a grant to normal adult learner responsiveness funding. In 2012 the provider JHP merged with learndirect; JHP mainly provides apprenticeships, again across the country.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Andy Harris HMI

Four of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and ten additional inspectors, assisted by learndirect's Group Director of Adult Skills as nominee, carried out the inspection with short notice. Inspectors took account of learndirect's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the 2008 inspection report that to some extent summarised previous inspection centre reports. Inspectors also used data on learners' achievements over the last three years to help them make judgements. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected throughout the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews and reviewed online learning material. The inspection took into account all of the provision at the provider though it did not examine at first-hand the provision delivered by the provider known as the JHP Group before its merger with learndirect in late 2012. JHP had been inspected by Ofsted in July 2012 with an overall effectiveness grade of good. Inspectors looked at the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across all of the provision and graded the sector subject areas listed in the report above.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement
Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Requires improvement
Grade 4	Inadequate

Detailed grade characteristics can be viewed in the *Handbook for the inspection of further education and skills 2012*, Part 2:

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/handbook-for-inspection-of-further-education-and-skills-september-2012>

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