A4e Limited

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates		18–21 February 2014
Overall effectiveness	**This inspection:**	**Requires improvement-3**
	Previous inspection:	Inadequate-4
Outcomes for learners		Requires improvement-3
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Requires improvement-3
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Requires improvement-3

Summary of key findings for learners

This provider requires improvement because:

- Despite significant improvements, too few learners, including apprentices, complete their qualifications successfully. The majority of apprentices do not complete successfully in a timely manner.

- The proportion of learners on employability training courses who progress to employment requires improvement.

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement. Trainers do not assess sufficiently learners' starting points. Consequently, teaching and learning activities do not ensure that all learners with different levels of ability, including the more able learners, learn well.

- English and mathematics are not integrated well into teaching and assessment activities and do not help learners to develop these skills.

- Improvements in the management of the provision at different centres and performance management of staff have yet to deliver good teaching and learning for all learners.

- Although improved, quality assurance arrangements do not have a clear focus on the quality of learning. However, the quality of teaching and learning between subjects and in different regions is reflected in the variations in learners' outcomes.

This provider has the following strengths:

- In 2012/13, learners on classroom-based courses who studied health and social care, and information and communication technology (ICT) achieved well.

- Most learners develop good personal and employability skills and enhance their confidence and self-esteem.

- A clear strategic direction has contributed to more effective leadership and management of the provision.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Continue to improve outcomes for all learners, including the success rates and the rates that apprentices complete successfully within the planned time, by ensuring:
  - trainers use initial assessment to accurately identify learners' starting points and use the information effectively to plan teaching and learning activities so that all learners progress and succeed well
  - trainers integrate English and mathematics well in vocational subject areas and correct spelling and grammatical errors on marked work
  - all trainers extend learners' skills and knowledge using, when appropriate, information and learning technology (ILT) innovatively
  - learners receive good quality advice and guidance so that more progress to employment after completing their courses
  - trainers routinely promote equality and diversity in teaching, learning and assessment to extend learners' awareness of diversity matters, for example by ensuring that discussions on equality and diversity are relevant to learners' work and life.

- Further improve the operational management by:
  - ensuring managers make good use of management information on the performance of different regions and groups of learners in order to take rapid and effective actions as needed to improve achievement for all learners
  - ensuring managers in centres focus more on the quality of learners' experience and the teaching and learning which they receive and eradicate swiftly any issues which affect learners' experience.

- Increase the effectiveness of quality improvement arrangements by monitoring how effectively teaching, learning and assessment activities focus on learning.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Requires improvement

- Since the last inspection, success rates of learners, of whom the vast majority were long-term unemployed, on classroom-based short courses have improved considerably. However, the success rates require further improvement.

- In 2012/13, success rates of learners on classroom-based courses improved to marginally below the national averages and a high proportion of learners on health and social care courses, and ICT for users courses achieved well. However, success rates for learners on employability training courses were low, as were success rates for a smaller number of learners on building construction, retailing and wholesaling, warehousing and distribution, hospitality and catering and administration courses which required improvement.

- In 2012/13, the overall success rates for both intermediate and advanced level apprentices improved, but remained significantly below national averages and success rates within the planned time declined and were poor.

- Based on A4e's data, most current learners, including apprentices, are now making satisfactory progress from their starting points with a few making good progress. The standard of most recent learners' portfolios is satisfactory and a few are good. As the result of trainers' good coaching skills and sensitive support, most learners enhance their confidence, personal and employability skills.

- Overall, learners acquire sufficient English and mathematics skills to complete their qualifications. Most apprentices develop these skills well. However, too many learners on

classroom-based courses do not enhance their use of these skills sufficiently. In 2012/13, success rates in functional skills in English and mathematics were poor.

▪ Most learners with a learning difficulty and/or disability on classroom-based courses achieve as well as other learners. This is not the case for apprentices as those with a learning difficulty and/or disability are lower. Success rates for apprentices in different regions of the country vary too much.

▪ Learners have a good understanding of their rights and responsibilities. They respect each other and work together well. Not all learners have a good enough understanding of the broader equality and diversity issues.

▪ A4e has recently improved the system for collecting and recording learners' progression to employment or training, and the number of learners who have progressed to other courses or employment has increased. However, the proportion of learners who progress to employment requires improvement.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement

▪ The quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement, which is reflected in outcomes for learners. The variability in the standard of learning and assessment has contributed to the significant inconsistency in learner outcomes.

▪ Since the last inspection several new initiatives have been introduced to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment; such as coaching trainers, more thorough initial assessment and a greater focus on developing learners' functional skills, English grammar and spelling, and mathematics. The positive impact of some of these initiatives is now emerging, but others are not yet fully effective.

▪ Where trainers are well organised and plan sessions effectively, all learners participate fully in a wide and interesting range of activities and tasks. This sustains their interest and effectively develops their knowledge, understanding and skills. Good demonstrations delivered by trainers, individual coaching and effective verbal feedback help learners to improve.

▪ In too many sessions, trainers do not use initial assessment information sufficiently to ensure all learners learn well and progress. Trainers do not check the understanding of individual learners often enough to help them extend their knowledge. When questioning from trainers does not ensure less confident learners are fully engaged in discussions, their learning is not extended well enough. .

▪ Trainers ensure most learners receive good personal support that provides them with encouragement and confidence to ask questions and seek help. However, arrangements for extra learning support are poor. Trainers in employability sessions do not provide additional learning support tutors with sufficient direction to help them to support learners to progress.

▪ Most learners benefit from classrooms, learning resources and accommodation that are generally of a high standard, particularly those who attend the 'VOX' centres where realistic work settings such as hairdressing salons and kitchens are well established. The majority of learners do not have sufficient access to a good range of ILT resources and not all trainers use ILT well to extend learners' understanding, for example by presenting information in different ways and in different forms.

▪ They do not always monitor learners' individual progress accurately; the quality of learning is too inconsistent. Verbal feedback to learners is of a good standard on all courses but written feedback on learners' marked work is not always sufficiently detailed or helpful for learners to be clear on how they can improve the quality of their work.

▪ The smaller number of administration apprentices develop good skill levels in English and mathematics. However, on almost all courses, trainers do not plan thoroughly enough to ensure learners improve their skills in using English and mathematics.

▪ The majority of learners receive effective information, advice and guidance before joining programmes. Trainers ensure learners receive good advice and guidance on personal and

welfare-related matters. However, the quality of advice for progression to employment is not consistently effective in all regions; based on A4e's data, learners' progression varies significantly in different regions.

▪ The promotion of equality and diversity in teaching, training, learning and assessment is insufficient. On a small minority of courses, this is done particularly well, for example in health and social care. However, the extent to which all trainers actively promote relevant equality and diversity issues which impact on learners is variable and requires improvement.

Information and communication technology for users **Apprenticeships** **Employability**	Good

▪ Teaching, training, learning and assessment are good reflecting the high success rates in classroom-based courses. Training and assessment for the small number of apprentices are less effective which has contributed to the apprentices' low success rates. A4e has planned not to offer apprenticeships in ICT in the future.

▪ The more successful aspects of teaching and training in sessions are when trainers share clear aims and objectives with learners that help them understand the progress they make. As the result of good activities, all learners develop new skills, including learners who have more experience of ICT. For example, in one session, learners used a software presentation package to produce good slide shows with varied levels of complexity, stretching all learners.

▪ Sessions are not as good when trainers do not give learners sufficient time to reflect or practise their learning. Trainers do not always monitor learners' progress sufficiently well or consistently ensure that activities and their questioning stretch and challenge all learners including the more able learners.

▪ Very effective individual extra support helps learners overcome their barriers to learning. Trainers know the learners' challenges well and build their confidence and self-esteem through good support. Most learners speak highly of trainers and the support they receive which motivates them to achieve their qualification. However, until recently due to staffing issues, apprentices did not benefit from the same level of support.

▪ Trainers have good knowledge of ICT and use their experience well to ensure learners develop good ICT skills. However, not all trainers reinforce good posture when sitting and using computers. Not all learners benefit from using up-to-date software.

▪ Trainers do not always assess the starting points of learners' ICT skills well. The initial assessment often focuses merely on whether learners can use a range of software packages, rather than the level of their competency in using different features of the software. This results in little learning for the few learners who can use the more complex features of software packages.

▪ Learners, including apprentices, receive good verbal and detailed feedback which helps them to achieve their learning objectives in the sessions. This good feedback also motivates, encourages and helps engage learners. However, written feedback in a minority of cases is not sufficiently detailed to enable learners to refer and reflect on their marked work. Not all trainers correct learners' errors in their use of English and mathematics sufficiently.

▪ Information, advice and guidance are effective for apprentices, which keep them motivated and focused on finding employment. However, in classroom-based learning not all learners receive sufficient information on progression opportunities.

▪ Learners work together well and show respect and understanding. However, not all trainers link sufficiently well equality and diversity to learners' life and work.

Employability training Employability	Requires improvement

- Teaching, learning and assessment require improvement and this contributes to outcomes for learners, which are still below the national average. Although success rates are improving, too many learners do not achieve their learning goals. Support provided by trainers is effective in motivating the large majority of learners who have a variety of complex social and personal needs.

- Trainers have high expectations of learners in being punctual, self-disciplined and attending sessions regularly, which contribute to the development of their employability skills. The large majority of learners are well motivated and keen to secure employment or progress to further training.

- When learning is good, learners benefit from well-prepared sessions, which include a wide range of practical activities, allowing them to explore and learn different topics. For example, in one session learners worked in small groups to discuss and identify the different sources of job vacancies and presented their findings to the larger group. Learning sessions are lively and of a good pace which engage learners in purposeful activities. Trainers make good use of employment-related examples within sessions, further developing learners' understanding of the world of work.

- The range of teaching and learning strategies used in some sessions does not sufficiently help all learners to learn well and trainers fail to include activities that challenge all learners. They do not use learning technology, when appropriate, to enhance learning or to develop learners' independent learning skills. For example, trainers do not use opportunities to discuss how technology has changed the world of work especially in the sectors where learners are seeking employment.

- Trainers with good subject knowledge and appropriate vocational backgrounds and experience relate well to learners' circumstances and enable them to engage quickly with the courses. Their good care and support motivate and inspire learners to continue on their programme. A number of trainers are available outside taught sessions to provide extra support if required. For example, one learner had an unexpected job application opportunity and the trainer spent time after the session supporting him to update his curriculum vitae.

- Trainers are enthusiastic, experienced and committed and have the appropriate levels of vocational skills and qualifications. They use their vocational experience well to provide learners with good examples of the world of work.

- Initial assessment requires improvement. Trainers do not routinely use information from the initial assessment process to ensure that individual learners develop their skills beyond their starting point.

- Most trainers use a satisfactory range of assessment practices. Verbal feedback to learners is detailed and supportive. However, written feedback is often too brief to guide learners on how they can improve.

- The development of learners' English and particularly mathematics skills requires improvement. Not all trainers have the necessary skills to ensure that learners develop these essential skills well. Trainers do not routinely identify or correct errors in written English. When learners use the spell-checking function of software packages, trainers do not always correct spelling mistakes. For example, they do not provide feedback when learners use the wrong spelling-checker software.

- Advice, guidance and support for learners are effective. All prospective learners are interviewed to assure their suitability for the courses. Learners benefit well from advice and guidance during their courses about their next steps. For example, a trainer on an employability training course provided good details about job opportunities in different sectors, widening learners' job-search options.

- Mutual respect among learners reflects the approaches and attitudes of trainers. However, trainers do not sufficiently promote equality of opportunity and diversity through teaching and assessment. They often do not use naturally occurring circumstances to reinforce relevant equality and diversity matters.

Administration Apprenticeships Employability	Requires improvement

- Teaching, learning and assessment require improvement. There are early signs of improvements in teaching, training and assessment practices, which are starting to contribute to some improvement both in the low success rates for the smaller number of apprentices and for classroom-based learners.

- In the better sessions, trainers extend learners', including apprentices', knowledge and understanding of business practices. They plan to ensure learners build on theories and concepts to develop good occupational skills. For example, apprentices develop a good understanding of professional codes of conduct, and learners on classroom-based courses develop a structured approach in developing business plans.

- In the weaker sessions, trainers do not use a good range of teaching, learning and assessment activities to ensure all learners make good progress from their starting points. Trainers do not provide sufficient guidance and monitor learners' work, especially for learners on classroom-based courses, which they spend a very substantial part of their learning hours producing at home or away from training centres. As a result, not all classroom-based learners produce good written work with sufficient depth and analysis.

- Trainers use initial assessment effectively to identify apprentices' starting points and through good training, they enhance their vocational skills significantly. However, they do not use initial assessment well for classroom-based learners to provide them with training to extend their higher-level knowledge and skills.

- The quality of oral feedback is often good, but learners do not receive sufficiently detailed written feedback to extend their understanding and improve their work. For example, in assessing the work of classroom-based learners, feedback does not identify sufficient details about where the gaps are and how they can improve. Trainers do not examine learners' work sufficiently well to ensure that they have developed a good understanding of the material, which they have searched for on the internet and included in their work.

- Trainers review apprentices' progress well. They skilfully guide apprentices to focus on gathering a good range of evidence, employer statements, assessment records and written work. Apprentices are encouraged to use naturally occurring evidence taken from a variety of administrative settings and activities to show how their skills have developed and have progressed. For example, one learner working in a charitable organisation used her administrative skills effectively to plan summer activity courses for young people. Trainers do not adequately monitor and record classroom-based learners' progress.

- The promotion and the development of learners' English and mathematic skills are too inconsistent. Current apprentices make good timely progress towards functional skills qualification completion. However, trainers do not sufficiently plan and develop classroom-based learners' skills in English and mathematics beyond their starting points.

- Trainers provide good information, advice and guidance for apprentices. The improved frequency of visits has contributed well to apprentices' progress and motivation. However, the quality of advice and guidance for learners on classroom-based courses is too inconsistent and requires improvement.

- Apprentices develop a good understanding of equality and diversity through discussions focusing on their own vocational setting, considering customers and colleague's rights to privacy and care

in meeting individual needs. However, trainers do not promote sufficiently equality and diversity matters in business and legal settings for learners on classroom-based courses.

The effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement

- Since the last inspection, senior managers have established and communicated a clear strategic direction that focuses on raising standards and addressing identified performance shortfalls. The new structure has a strong focus on individual roles and responsibilities in relation to making improvements. Governance provides managers with appropriate challenge. A comprehensive review and dissemination of policies and procedures have improved staff understanding of their contribution to training delivery.

- Senior managers responded effectively to the recommendations from the last inspection. Arrangements for performance management are increasingly more effective. A4e has made significant investment in staff development to improve teaching, learning and assessment. Trainers now effectively use technology to monitor apprentices' progress. However, the impact of the staff development is not consistently effective across all of the provision.

- Operational management has improved, but requires further improvement as not all learners receive a consistently high standard of training. Teaching resources have improved though trainers do not always sufficiently use them to support learning. Managers have reduced the high full-time staff turnover, noted at the previous inspection, but they recognise this remains a challenge, impacting on the teaching and training which learners receive.

- The management information system has improved and managers are making better use of the information. They set and scrutinise a comprehensive range of sector and trainer targets for evaluative purposes that includes rates of learners' progress towards achieving their learning goals. Subcontractor monitoring arrangements secure some quality improvement. However, the arrangements have not been effective sufficiently in improving the quality of provision overall.

- The assessment of training quality through direct observation is now more effective. Staff using new quality policy and procedures focus appropriately on actions for improvement. However, as A4e has correctly identified, these processes do not yet consistently focus on learning. Trainers do not consistently raise all learners' English and mathematics skills and learners' individual needs are not always met during taught sessions.

- Self-assessment has improved since the last inspection and is now integrated well into an established quality cycle. Processes that underpin the associated report and development plan have improved and now provide a more coherent evaluation of the provision. However, A4e in its latest self-assessment has underestimated the impact of the further improvements, which are required; it has over-graded the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and leadership and management. A4e makes good use of learners' views but has only recently introduced a formalised process to gather the views of employers.

- In response to local demand, and to address national priorities, A4e continues to build its portfolio of programmes to support long-term unemployed people. It has responded effectively to the skills shortages identified by employers, particularly in the retail sector. Managers appropriately review the curriculum to check it meets learners' and employers' needs.

- Arrangements for promoting equality and diversity require improvement to ensure all learners' understanding is raised to a good level. Where trainers do this well they make use of vocational or other examples that learners can identify with. However, not all trainers routinely make the most of available opportunities to extend fully learners' understanding. A4e uses data appropriately to identify learner performance gaps and is making satisfactory progress to eradicate the gaps that exist within apprenticeship programmes, across regions, gender and disability.

- A4e meets its statutory requirements for safeguarding learners. A4e has ensured that all staff receive appropriate training and disclosure barring service vetting. Managers and staff deal

effectively with any concerns raised.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

A4e Limited									

Inspection grades are based on a provider's performance: 1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate	Overall	14-16 part-time provision	14-16 full-time provision	16-19 study programmes	Traineeships	19+ Learning programmes	Apprenticeships	Employability	Community learning
Overall effectiveness	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	N/A
Outcomes for learners	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	N/A
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	N/A
The effectiveness of leadership and management	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	3	N/A

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
ICT for users	**2**
Employability training	**3**
Administration	**3**

Provider details

Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	19+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	Full-time: N/A
	Part-time: 5602
Principal/CEO	Mr Andrew Dutton
Date of previous inspection	February 2013
Website address	www.mya4e.com

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**	
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	N/A	1032	N/A	373	N/A	3	N/A	N/A

Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total	
	N/A		N/A		N/A	

Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	**Intermediate**		**Advanced**		**Higher**	
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
	39	323	17	333	0	21

Number of learners aged 14-16	
Full-time	N/A
Part-time	N/A
Number of community learners	N/A
Number of employability learners	547
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency (SFA)
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	▪ Digital College ▪ UKLC limited ▪ Ground Work ▪ First Response Training & Consultancy Services Limited ▪ Shaw Trust Limited

Contextual information

A4e provides a wide range of short classroom-based courses mainly for unemployed people, in addition to apprenticeships. In 2012/13, the company offered provision in health and social care, horticulture, transportation operations and maintenance, building and construction, ICT for users, retailing and wholesaling, hospitality and catering, visual arts, employability training and administration. It operates from seven 'VOX' centres in Stockton, Darlington, Grimsby, Sheffield, Nottingham, West Bromwich and Brixton. The Director of UK skills and education is responsible for all aspects of the Skills Funding Agency's contracts which were the focus of this inspection. Four Head of operations and the Head of quality and curriculum support him. In total, 155 staff are involved in various aspects of delivering the provision.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector	Shahram Safavi HMI

Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and five additional inspectors, assisted by the Head of quality and compliance as nominee, carried out the inspection with short notice. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. 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. The inspection took into account all relevant provision offered by the provider. Inspectors looked at the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across all 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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