

Learning Curve (JAA) Limited

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates		24-28 March 2014
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good-2
	Previous inspection:	Good-2
Outcomes for learners		Outstanding-1
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment		Good-2
Effectiveness of leadership and management		Good-2

Summary of key findings for learners

This provider is good because:

- Success rates have improved significantly: they are now very high.
- Apprentices make very good progress and complete their studies within planned timescales.
- Teaching, learning and assessment are good, and are outstanding in flexible learning.
- Learners are highly motivated to learn; they apply their new skills and their improved working practices well.
- Flexible learning programmes provide an outstanding service to learners and employers.
- Learners on flexible learning programmes make rapid progress because tutors give very good and highly constructive feedback.
- Managers and staff work hard to engage and support reluctant learners.
- Managers and staff are passionate about the impact that their courses have on learners' lives.
- Learning Curve works exceptionally well with partner organisations to improve practice.
- Managers apply rigorous quality management processes when working with subcontractors.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- Although in-year success rates in functional English and mathematics are good, there has not yet been a full year of data to evaluate.
- Written feedback to apprentices and short-term targets for many learners are not detailed enough to help them do better in their work.
- Tutors do not correct errors that learners make in their spelling, punctuation and grammar consistently well.
- Not enough teaching sessions are outstanding.
- The organisational self-assessment report is not concise enough and so does not yet lead to clear, specific and measurable actions to bring about improvement.

- Tutors do not promote equality and diversity consistently well in their teaching and learning sessions.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Consolidate good outcomes in functional skills by:
 - sharing existing best practice in the integration of functional skills into learners' routine work and all elements of their study programmes or apprenticeships.
- Develop advice given to learners on how they can improve their work by:
 - ensuring that all written feedback is detailed and explains to learners what they need to do to produce better work in the future
 - setting specific, measurable and achievable short-term targets for personal and skills development.
- Increase the proportion of outstanding teaching, learning and assessment by:
 - focusing lesson observations explicitly on what the learners know as a result of teaching and assessment, and how tutors and assessors know that learning that took place
 - ensuring that learners develop personal, social, English and mathematics skills as they develop their job-related knowledge and skills.
- Refine self-assessment processes so that the self-assessment report becomes an effective tool for driving quality improvement by:
 - improving the quality assurance of operational self-assessment reports
 - producing a concise organisational self-assessment report that leads to specific and measurable actions to bring about improvement
 - monitoring and evaluating the progress that learners make in their learning and at work, including further learning, entry to employment, increased responsibility or promotion.
- Continue to develop their understanding of equality and diversity by:
 - promoting equality and diversity consistently within learning sessions.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Outstanding
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- Success rates for learners and apprentices have improved significantly over the last three years and are now very high. In most subjects, success rates are well above the national rate. In health and social care and in information and communication technology (ICT), for example, almost all learners get the qualifications they are studying. Success rates in many of the companies that work with Learning Curve are very high. Learners who take flexible distance learning courses do particularly well.
- Many learners begin their courses with no formal qualifications or with low-level qualifications. A large majority gain qualifications for the first time and meet the sometimes challenging personal, social and vocational targets set at interview and at the beginning of their courses. Learners in skill centres learn that if they attend regularly and arrive on time they will be better prepared for work. They have a very good attitude to learning. A substantial number of learners make very good progress and achieve additional qualifications.
- As part of community projects learners gain great satisfaction and develop greater awareness of their social responsibilities by, for example, installing furniture in a 'sensory garden' and working with the British Legion.
- On the very large flexible learning programmes, there are no significant differences in achievement of different groups of learners. Most apprentices achieve well. Sixteen to eighteen-

year-old apprentices make very good progress and a large majority complete their programmes successfully and on time.

- Managers, tutors and support staff ensure that those learners that require additional learning support achieve as well as their peers. For example, a learner with visual impairment received specially printed high-quality course materials, very quickly, in a larger font to help him with his learning.
- Learners on flexible learning programmes develop excellent vocational and technical skills and knowledge. Those in skills centres display appropriately high-level trade knowledge and skills in workshops, classrooms and in their conversations with tutors.
- The majority of apprentices, and learners following study programmes, develop their English and mathematics skills well. The teaching of functional English and mathematics began in September 2013, building on successful numeracy and literacy teaching. Learners take functional skills examinations when they are ready; in-year data show that a large majority are successful. They see how relevant English and mathematics are in doing well at work. Learners on a plastering course realised, for example, the implications of mixing too much plaster on the cost of completing a project and on the environment because of the waste they produced.
- Learning Curve staff ensure learners and apprentices are able to move on to higher level courses, further training, seek promotion or gain new employment. Learners confirm that their studies have increased their personal confidence and motivation: they enjoy their training and recognise how it is improving their employment opportunities.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Learners benefit from the high expectations of staff across the company and this reflects the high success rates in most parts of the provision. Learners not only gain qualifications, but also good technical and generic employment and personal skills. These are sometimes life-changing experiences for people with challenging backgrounds, with for example, some learners turning away from gang-culture to employment in the armed services, or from offending to work in building and construction. Learners undertaking flexible learning courses improve their professional skills and are often able to take on new roles at work. Very good support from staff throughout their course helps learners to succeed.
- Most staff are appropriately qualified and use their experience effectively to help learners. Many flexible learning tutors are particularly highly qualified and experienced in their respective field: their learners receive high quality support. Tutors plan their teaching well so that they meet learners' needs.
- Skills centres provide a basic but sufficient resource for both young learners on study programmes and for adult learners to work individually and in small groups to choose and then develop skills in their chosen trades. Extensive use is made of practical tasks to gain useful skills. Learners are attentive and enthusiastic: they gain as much as possible from their time in learning. In a minority of workshops, tutors miss opportunities to develop safe and hygienic ways of working likely to help learners both on their course and once in employment.
- Good use is made of information learning technology to enhance learning. Increasing use is made of on-line learning for flexible learning programmes to complement the high-quality printed learning resources. A recently introduced system allows the company and all its college partners to track the progress of their learners effectively. Learners in skill centres use basic computer facilities appropriately. For example, learners can watch footage of techniques required in each construction skill area to gain understanding and confidence before trying each required skill.
- Initial assessment is good and matches learners with the right level of course. It also helps identify specific skills each learner requires to become proficient. If the assessment confirms capability, learners on study programmes and apprenticeships study a higher level of functional

skills than their programme requires. Progress reviews are helpful and supportive but sometimes miss chances to reinforce, probe or develop needed aspects with learners.

- Learners’ work is marked promptly and learners get helpful, encouraging feedback on their work. Tutors give particularly detailed written feedback to learners on flexible learning programmes, helping them get the most from their course. In other programmes, tutors do not consistently correct spelling, grammar and punctuation to develop learners’ English skills.
- Functional skills development is good. Vocational sessions make good use of opportunities to apply mathematics. For example, in a welding session the tutor asked learners to calculate the length of one side of a triangle in order to calculate the most cost effective use of the metal provided. In a minority of sessions, while regularly including mathematics and English, tutors do not fully plan or make sufficient use of these to maximise learning.
- Information, advice and guidance are good. Adult learners in skills centres benefit from an introductory eight-week course to experience a range of trades before specialising in the trade of their choice. Young learners on study programmes experience more than one trade, if desired, to help them decide on a preferred progression route. Induction is good and, in flexible learning excellent. All learners benefit from face-to-face discussions with a Learning Curve representative. Advice and guidance towards further courses are very good, and learners clearly understand their options to progress to further training including apprenticeships. However, for learners in skills centres advisers occasionally miss opportunities to develop fully an understanding of available prospects and the skills learners need to exploit them fully.
- The company has made worthy attempts to improve their promotion of equality and diversity for all learners. Equality and diversity champions now support other staff towards good equality and diversity practice in teaching, learning and assessment. Posters and other useful material are now available on relevant topics. Skills centres successfully promote respectful attitudes between learners, and between learners and staff. However, tutors do not consistently develop learners’ understanding beyond a basic level.

<p>Health, public services and social care</p> <p>16-19 study programmes</p> <p>19+ Learning programmes</p> <p>Apprenticeships</p>	<p>Outstanding</p>
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- Teaching, learning and assessment are outstanding, and good for the smaller number of apprentices. Success rates are significantly above the national average and are now very high. All learners make extremely good progress from particularly low starting points, thoroughly enjoy their learning and develop their personal and social skills very effectively. For example, learners on pre-military courses stated the programme has transformed their lives; enabling them to progress to the armed forces.
- The comprehensive flexible learning provision offers a highly relevant and wide range of opportunities for staff in the care sector to develop their skills and improve their professional practice very well; many gain promotion on completion. For example, a mature learner progressed from a cleaner to senior carer as her self-confidence grew while completing a number of flexible learning programmes.
- Exceptionally well-planned teaching meets the needs of both learners and employers. Tutors are very highly qualified, experienced and skilled and bring extensive and current professional practice to enhance greatly learner knowledge and development. They are enthusiastic and motivated to improve the lives and employment prospects of learners.
- Tutors are particularly effective at detailed initial assessment, which they use extremely well to plan to meet learners’ specific needs. Tutors plan a wide and predominantly effective range of methods to engage learners. For example, learners on pre-military programmes enjoy and

benefit from team-taught sessions to identify the importance of maintaining rifles to a high standard with clear responsibilities for themselves and those within their squad.

- Initial advice and guidance are very good and ensure learners are on the appropriate programme. Learners are aware of planned end-dates and the importance of meeting these. Tutors meet regularly with learners to monitor and complete detailed records of achievement involving employers to monitor individual progress. Learners identify their long-term goals and work very well towards achieving them. However, short-term goals focus too much on unit achievement, sometimes at the expense of identifying personal goals.
- Assessment is outstanding on flexible learning programmes and good for apprentices. Assessments are regular and provide very detailed written feedback for those on flexible learning programmes enabling them to have a good understanding of what they need to do to improve. Apprentices receive thorough, clear and accurate oral feedback. However, tutors do not provide sufficiently detailed written feedback to help support further improvement.
- There is a clear and well-supported strategy to support learners to complete their courses. Learners on flexible programmes get regular text-messages, phone calls and emails to keep them motivated. Learners on pre-military courses are enthused by the opportunities they have to use social media to stay on track.
- There is good achievement of functional skills. Learners clearly recognise the importance of gaining good skills in mathematics and English for their future employment. Learners on every programme undertake initial assessment and receive specific support as required. Many on flexible learning programmes take advantage of specialist support to improve.
- Tutors fully integrate safeguarding into all aspects of learning and assessment activities. Learners demonstrate their understanding well in their work and adopt safe working practices. Learners on health and care programmes have a very good understanding of person-centred care and the importance of respecting individual differences. Tutors regularly update their training in safeguarding and equality and diversity. They use this well to promote discussion. However, tutors do not sufficiently reinforce the promotion of equality and diversity in apprenticeship reviews and in a minority of teaching sessions.

Foundation English and mathematics

16-19 study programmes
19+ Learning programmes
Apprenticeships

Good

- Teaching, learning and assessment are good. Learning Curve began teaching functional skills in September 2013. A large majority of learners who have taken functional skills tests are successful: effective teaching, learning and assessment have a good impact on learners’ success rates in English and mathematics. Learners develop good skills during coaching sessions with specialist functional skills tutors and improve their confidence when using mathematics and formal written English at work. Learners on study programmes develop their skills and confidence before working towards the achievement of functional skills qualifications.
- In English sessions, intermediate level apprentices develop good critical thinking skills and interpret information from articles well. They contribute articulately to discussions about how journalism, and other media, influence political thinking.
- Experienced and well-qualified tutors motivate and stimulate their learners to meet high expectations of achievement and learning. Many learners have low prior attainment levels in English and mathematics. Tutors help them realise their ambitions and a significant minority study functional skills at a higher level, for example, than the apprenticeship framework requirements.
- Tutors plan their lessons well. Individual coaching session plans are very detailed. Tutors link learning particularly well to learners’ job roles and activities they complete at work. For example,

in one session, a learner was able to link the monitoring of fluid balance in clients and calculated the volume of liquid consumed; linking ratios and units of measurement. Learners quickly develop confidence during mathematics sessions and are able to relate their learning to the workplace.

- In small group and individual coaching sessions, learners were able to show that they knew, and could explain, how persuasive text in advertisements and the calculation of area and perimeter were important in their work.
- Tutors use the outcomes of initial assessments to plan effective learning programmes. All learners complete initial screening assessments and apprentices also complete diagnostic assessments, which clearly identify support needs in English and mathematics. Tutors use the information about individual apprentices they build up over time to plan and use a variety of learning resources to meet each individual learner’s needs. This builds confidence quickly and helps learners to allay their fears about mathematics.
- Verbal feedback is good, motivating learners to improve their work. On flexible learning written feedback is very detailed and constructive. This helps learners improve their spelling and grammar. However, written feedback to apprentices and learners on the study programme often contains spelling errors, and tutors do not always correct learners’ spelling errors.
- Learners understand and value highly the progress they are making towards improving their English and mathematics skills. However, tutors do not consistently record short-term targets for improvement.
- Learners understand the importance of developing English and mathematics skills and can identify how they would use these skills, for example when pricing jobs, writing quotes and completing formal written letters and reports at work.
- Learners benefit from good support, advice and guidance. They have clear information about courses available and progression routes within Learning Curve and at local colleges. Learners value highly the individual support they receive to help them improve their English and mathematics skills.
- Tutors and learners promote equality and diversity during individual and small group coaching sessions through, for example, discussions on perceptions linked to incidents at work and linking the ethnicity of the workforce and its impact on care home residents. However, tutors in larger group sessions miss opportunities to develop learners’ understanding of equality and diversity and do not consistently challenge inappropriate comments.

<p>Business management and administration</p> <p>19+ Learning programmes</p> <p>Apprenticeships</p>	<p>Good</p>
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- Teaching, learning and assessment are good, reflecting the high overall and timely success rates for the majority of learners on both flexible learning programmes and apprenticeships. All staff are aspirational and have high expectations of their learners who make good progress and produce a good standard of work. Learners develop particularly relevant vocational and personal skills to sustain or advance their working roles and responsibilities.
- In the well-planned theory sessions, knowledgeable and experienced tutors effectively promote best business administration and management practice. Learners participate enthusiastically in activity-based tasks, delivered at a good pace and with some particularly effective examples of coaching and facilitation. Challenging tasks and discussions motivate and support problem solving, independent thinking and learning. Tutors contextualise and promote English, mathematics and ICT well in learning sessions, especially for apprentices. In a session focusing on improvement techniques, learners and tutors used business ratios in a meaningful way to explain productivity.

- Good use is made of both open and direct questions to check learner understanding. Many learners are able to give relevant examples of their learning and development, for example, by linking the theory of team building to the effective practice of leading and managing teams. Feedback is constructive and detailed, particularly for learners on flexible learning short courses. Feedback on written work submitted by apprentices is not detailed enough to inform learners how they can improve, and there is very little evidence of spelling mistakes being either identified or corrected.
- Tutors use progress reviews well, together with learner visit reports, to monitor closely the learners' advancement and to plan assessments. Tutors use a good and broad range of assessment methods to judge thoroughly the competency of learners. However, the setting of smart, short-term targets is not consistently applied.
- Support, advice and guidance for learners are good. Initial assessment is thorough and contributes effectively to learners being on the right course, with the right kind of support. Learners benefit from clear information about the qualification requirements and expectations, progression opportunities and the support that learners with additional needs get. Good use is made of several forms of communication by vocationally knowledgeable tutors to provide advice, feedback and support. Tutors have a very clear focus on supporting learners to succeed and enhance their job-related skills.
- Very high-quality resources ensure that learners make good progress. Workbooks are of a very good standard. Good use is made of technology to promote interaction and understanding. For example, tutors use laptops and tablet computers to encourage independent research and the completion of business related activities. In one session, tutors set homework for apprentices using social media.
- A responsive and flexible curriculum effectively meets the needs of learners and employers. Feedback is particularly positive, and very often results in learners taking additional courses. Employers acknowledge and value the knowledge and skills developed by learners.
- Staff promote equality and diversity well through resources and assignments for apprentices. However, equality and diversity are less evident in the flexible learning short courses. Business apprentices explored equality and fair treatment when thinking about managing teams. Learners work in safe and inclusive environments.

The effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
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- Learning Curve has a clear mission to provide high quality training and staff development for employers. Recently, managers have expanded operations through the development of local skills centres that aim to help reluctant young people and unemployed adults develop skills that prepare them for work. Managers expect high levels of success for all learners, regardless of their previous experiences of education and training.
- Managers successfully employ a range of approaches to raise standards across all learning programmes. For example, they have improved data reporting and have been successful in helping tutors to use the information this provides to support the progress of individual learners.
- Managers set demanding targets and these are highly effective in driving improvements in flexible learning and apprenticeship provision. Although the setting and monitoring of targets has not been as rigorous in skills centres; staff at these centres, nevertheless, have high expectations of learners and consequently, success rates are high. The recent introduction of a 'data dashboard' has enabled managers and staff at skills centres to focus more closely on monitoring targets but it is too early to judge whether this will raise success rates higher still.
- Staff have successfully implemented strategies that are improving the standard of teaching, learning and assessment. Managers monitor the performance of tutors and assessors very closely and tackle underperformance successfully. Performance management is particularly effective in the case of flexible learning where weekly reviews of tutor performance give rise to swift and effective identification of concerns, and prompt and successful corrective actions.

- Managers use lesson observation effectively to monitor the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. They use the outcomes of these observations to develop supportive action plans that help tutors and assessors to improve. However, observers focus too much on teacher processes and not enough on learner progress. As a result, improvement actions are not as effective as they might be.
- Managers support poorly performing staff to develop their skills; they also take decisive action when a member of staff fails to improve. However, they do not always fully record their actions.
- Managers identify the training needs of their staff through performance monitoring, observation and appraisal. As a result, staff members undertake an extensive range of relevant learning activities that improve their performance. They make good use of the opportunities to share good practice because of the close working arrangements Learning Curve has with partners and employers. Learning Curve and its partners share professional development activities to the benefit of both.
- All staff contribute to self-assessment and quality improvement planning and in monitoring progress. However, managers do not pay sufficient attention to the overall quality and coherence of the self-assessment report and improvement plan. As a result, both documents lack focus, although managers still make improvements to provision.
- When reviewing quality, board members and managers focus on success rates and are highly effective in improving these. Attention to other aspects of learner performance, such as destinations and the development of wider skills are good but have room for improvement.
- Managers monitor the performance of subcontractors carefully and as a result, their outcomes are excellent. A member of Learning Curve's senior management team supports each subcontractor to review its provision and this leads to improved performance.
- Managers consider learner views when reviewing provision. They obtain these through a range of surveys and focus groups. They use feedback well to make improvements to programmes, services and facilities.
- Managers work closely with a range of partners including employers, Jobcentre Plus, recruitment agencies and the Local Enterprise Partnership to ensure that provision matches local needs.
- All provision is highly flexible and accessible. Learners can study flexible learning programmes at any time; direct employer delivery allows learners to study in the workplace and the roll-on, roll-off nature of skills centre provision helps learners to begin learning quickly. Provision caters well for learners at different levels and with different needs.
- Staff at skills centres aim specifically to recruit young people who have had a poor experience of learning and are highly effective at encouraging their participation. In addition, they are successful in recruiting unemployed adult learners, many of whom have not taken part in learning for some time.
- Managers are developing Learning Curve's approach to equality and diversity and most staff have received training in this area. Equality and diversity champions are beginning to support their colleagues to promote equality and diversity in teaching and learning, but this is not yet consistent across all courses. Managers analyse data on achievement gaps and use this to develop improvement actions. However, these actions are insufficiently specific.
- The provider meets its statutory responsibilities for safeguarding learners. All staff are well-trained and know their responsibilities. There are no recent examples of bullying, harassment or safeguarding issues.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Learning Curve (JAA) Limited

<p>Inspection grades are based on a provider's performance:</p> <p>1: Outstanding 2: Good 3: Requires improvement 4: Inadequate</p>	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	2	N/A	N/A	2	N/A	2	2	N/A	N/A
Outcomes for learners	1	N/A	N/A	1	N/A	1	1	N/A	N/A
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	2	N/A	N/A	2	N/A	2	2	N/A	N/A
The effectiveness of leadership and management	2	N/A	N/A	2	N/A	2	2	N/A	N/A

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
Health and social care	1
Public services	1
Foundation English	2
Foundation mathematics	2
Administration	2
Business management	2

Provider details

Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	Full-time: 7
	Part-time: 3691
Principal/CEO	Mrs Judith Moran
Date of previous inspection	January 2009
Website address	www.learning-curve.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)								
Full-time	13	2	11	31	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Part-time	N/A	170	N/A	452	N/A	5	N/A	N/A
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	5	90	39	34	N/A	N/A		
Number of learners aged 14-16								
Full-time	N/A							
Part-time	N/A							
Number of community learners	N/A							
Number of employability learners	63							
Funding received from	Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Accent Regeneration and Community Partnerships Ltd ▪ Care-ex Services Ltd T/A Concerto Services ▪ KF Training Limited ▪ XISCAD Training 							

Contextual information

Learning Curve is based in Bishop Auckland, County Durham, and is one of the largest training providers in the North East. They provide flexible distance learning and training for learners in workplaces throughout England. They have set up six skills centres, in some of the most deprived areas in the north, to provide workshop-based vocational skills training to the long-term unemployed and young people at risk. Learning Curve offers apprenticeships, classroom based provision and flexible learning provision to both 16-18 year olds and those aged over 19 in: health, public services and care; construction and the built environment; information and communication technology; preparation for life and work and business, administration, finance and law.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Christopher Jones HMI

Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and five additional inspectors, assisted by the managing director 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 at the provider. 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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