

Northumberland County Council

Local authority

Inspection dates		16-20 June 2014
Overall effectiveness	This inspection:	Good-2
	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory-3
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:

- Apprentices achieve their framework qualifications within good timescales and are well equipped to progress into employment.
- The number of learners who successfully complete accredited courses and achieve long qualifications is very high.
- Learners develop good functional skills in English and mathematics.
- Staff and tutors provide good teaching, learning and assessment with some outstanding aspects.
- Tutors have high expectations of learners and use a good range of activities to motivate and challenge them to succeed and progress.
- Managers plan and develop the curriculum exceptionally well to meet the needs of a sparsely populated rural county.
- Managers collect and use information very skilfully to drive improvements in performance.
- Managers and staff actively promote equality and diversity, and a strong culture of inclusion.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- Success rates on mathematics GCSE courses have been below national levels for the past three years.
- Attendance is low on a minority of foundation and community learning courses.
- Not enough teaching, learning and assessment are outstanding.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Increase success rates on mathematics GCSE courses by:
 - improving the initial assessment of learners entering the programme
 - providing additional workshops on specific skills and topics for learners at risk of not achieving
 - improving the use and resources on the virtual learning environment for learners who miss sessions and to help them revise.
- Increase attendance in a minority of foundation and community learning classes by:
 - monitoring more closely the attendance of learners through the use of electronic registers
 - providing better support to learners at risk of leaving courses early.
- Further improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by:
 - ensuring that initial assessment is used effectively to identify precise targets for all learners
 - providing learners with clear written feedback so they are clear about what they need to do to improve
 - making more imaginative use of information and learning technologies to enhance learning
 - sharing good practice from the outstanding apprenticeship provision with other programmes.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Good
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- Learners with the Northumberland Adult Learning Service (NALS) gain their qualifications well and at a rate above those of similar learners across the country. Success rates for apprenticeships are outstanding, being well above the national average for all ages and at both intermediate and advanced levels. Apprentices achieve their framework qualifications significantly more quickly than their peers elsewhere in the country.
- Overall success rates in classroom learning are good. Most learners achieve their qualifications at above the national level. Since the last inspection, success rates for learners on long qualifications have improved significantly, particularly for 16- to 18-year-olds.
- Learners on non-accredited courses thoroughly enjoy their learning, and develop good skills and personal confidence. The majority of learners who start their courses stay until the end and almost all achieve the learning goals of their chosen programmes.
- Good skills and confidence building helps parents on family learning courses to support their children's learning. Older learners on digital skills courses can master the use of email and gain access to the internet for the first time. Learners' work is of a high standard, with one learner on a creative writing course having her work accepted for publication. However, attendance at a few community learning and foundation classes is low.
- Functional skills success rates in English and mathematics are good, being well above the national levels for all age groups and levels. Learners enjoy their sessions and use the skills gained well both at home and at work. For example, business administration apprentices write formal letters and emails to a range of businesses, punctuated correctly and using good quality English. Learners in construction trades use mathematics well to estimate supplies needed for their employers.
- The success rates in mathematics GCSE have been low for the past three years. NALS has improved advice and guidance for the course as well as implementing more comprehensive initial assessment processes and providing additional tutor support. Current data show these are having a positive impact, but this remains an area for improvement.

- There are no significant differences in performance between groups of learners. Where these have occurred in the past, the service has been proactive in understanding the issues and taking actions to close the gaps. The service's focus on different learner groups is highly developed. For example, staff analyse those who are disadvantaged through rural isolation, a significant issue in Northumberland. Managers take innovative action to remove these barriers, such as loaning out scooters to young people living in remote villages to enable them to gain access to work.
- Learners develop good personal, social and employability skills. Teaching assistants in special schools take the initiative, designing good learning activities and materials for learners with specific difficulties such as Down's Syndrome. Construction learners apply practical skills repairing car parks and community centres. Customer service apprentices learn strategies to cope more effectively with aggressive customers.
- Progression on to positive destinations such as employment, further education or voluntary work is good. NALS has established an effective and embedded destination tracking system. In the current year, two thirds of learners have progressed on to a positive destination. The large majority of apprentices move up to advanced levels or find permanent positions with their employers.
- Successful partnership working and the development of a well-designed employability programme has supported an increasing number of long-term unemployed learners to secure sustainable employment. Many started programmes with multiple barriers to learning and employment such as low literacy or numeracy skills, mental health problems, or housing difficulties.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
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- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good which is reflected in the high number of learners who achieve their learning goals and qualifications, and who acquire good personal, social and work skills. Learners enjoy the good lessons and often achieve high standards in their work. Learners on the study programmes can try out several vocational options so that they are better aware of the choices open to them such as cycle or motor vehicle maintenance and nail art.
- Learners benefit from very good personal and academic support from their tutors who have a caring and supportive approach that very effectively encourages all learners and raises their aspirations. Learners are highly motivated and readily engage in their learning encouraged by the challenging and high expectations of staff. Tutors promote good group collaboration and teamwork through well-planned activities that encourage learners to support each other. For example, in the craft class learners provided each other with helpful feedback on their projects in patchwork and quilting.
- Tutors are well qualified and they use their expertise productively to motivate learners which contributes very effectively to the good standards of work. Tutors draw on their good subject knowledge, relating examples to practice so that learners quickly improve their understanding. For example, a tutor gave classroom assistants good practical examples of how to support children with behavioural problems which led to an interesting discussion on the use of 'fiddle bags'.
- Tutors use well-planned and varied activities to sustain learners' interest and concentration. Assessment of learners is good and as a result, they know what they have done well and what they need to do to improve and make progress. Tutors use good questioning skills that effectively stimulate learning and engage learners in lively discussions. In a few instances, however, learners are passive and tutors do not plan sufficiently for them to take responsibility for their own learning.
- Resources are good and give learners a high-quality experience of learning. Interactive learning technology is used effectively by the majority of tutors to support learning. However, in a few

instances tutors do not use the technology as creatively or imaginatively as they could. The virtual learning environment is not used as well as it could be. NALS is aware of this and is upgrading the system to make it easier to use.

- Planning for lessons is effective and as a result, learners make good progress. Initial assessment is thorough and correctly identifies learners’ starting points. Most tutors use the results of the initial assessment very effectively to set group and individual targets to plan lessons. However, the quality and impact of target-setting is not consistently high and not all tutors set targets relating to wider personal and career aspirations.
- Tutors provide good oral feedback, giving clear guidance on how learners can improve and this helps them to reflect on their learning. However, not all tutors provide enough written feedback on what learners can do to improve.
- The teaching and learning of English, mathematics and information and communication technology very effectively supports learners in developing the skills they need to progress. Most learners gain in confidence, applying functional skills in English and mathematics in practical contexts. For example, in a lesson on team leading, learners calculated the percentage and ratio of time spent in their working week in meetings. However, less emphasis is placed on developing skills in information and communication technology.
- Learners receive good information, advice and guidance about their learning programmes and progression opportunities. Tutors are knowledgeable about the options open to learners and engage in regular discussion with them about how they can progress. As a result, the majority of learners have a clear picture of what they want to do next.
- Additional learning support is good and ensures that learners succeed. Tutors have a good understanding of potential barriers to learning and provide effective additional support to ensure that learners remain on their programme. Staff visited a visually impaired learner at home to assess their needs prior to enrolment. NALS supports learners well to complete their courses where their circumstances change, for example when they secure employment.
- Learners treat each other and staff with mutual respect and recognise that tutors give good support according to their individual needs. Learners have a very good understanding of health and safety and safe working practices. The promotion of equality and diversity in lessons is particularly good, and tutors make good use of discussions to broaden learners’ understanding. In a craft session the tutor used examples of patchwork completed by males to prompt discussion on stereotyping, and beauty learners talked about the changes in legislation on enforced marriage.

<p>Building and construction</p> <p>Apprenticeships</p> <p>16-19 study programmes</p> <p>19+ Learning programmes</p>	<p>Outstanding</p>
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- Teaching, learning and assessment are outstanding, as reflected in the outcomes which are also outstanding.
- Learners make very good progress and develop high levels of vocational expertise. Learners take on a wide range of construction-based maintenance tasks which are well directed and tutors give clear instruction for safe and effective on-site working. Learners quickly develop confidence in their abilities and their standard of hand and vocational skills are particularly good.
- The standard of teaching in construction is outstanding. All lessons are good or outstanding. Training staff are very experienced and well qualified. They check learning frequently and make effective use of open and directed questioning. Good use is made of learning technologies in classrooms for research and portfolio work. Smartphones and other devices are used well on

site for the collection of evidence for portfolios. However, the use of these technologies in workshops is underdeveloped.

- The standard of learning materials is particularly good. Written and printed materials used in training programmes are produced to a high standard and often exceed awarding body requirements. Resources within the training centre are very good and the workshops are well equipped, spacious and well lit.
- Health and safety are effectively reinforced in the training centre workshop areas. Personal protective equipment is used correctly and a high profile placed upon risk assessment and awareness of hazardous substances. This is particularly well developed in road maintenance work, where learners show a good level of understanding of the risks involved in handling corrosive substances, such as road salt.
- Progress reviews are highly effective. The documentation is very detailed and includes supportive comments from the reviewer and the employers, who consistently play an active role in the process. Target-setting for learners is excellent. Learners are fully involved, with targets that are time constrained and challenging. These targets drive progress and completion within the time planned.
- English and mathematics are embedded very effectively into personal learning and thinking skills sessions. The classes are well structured and develop learners’ spoken and written English and the practical application of number. Mathematics is reinforced in workshop sessions for example, measuring parts of wooden frames, and the use of spirit levels in setting out. Brickwork learners calculate areas, material requirements and convert between measuring systems. Written English in learners’ portfolio work is corrected accurately and consistently.
- Advice, guidance and support are exceptionally good. Information from screening interviews and diagnostic tests is used for effective lesson planning. Any additional support needs are effectively addressed. Learners completing level 2 programmes and entering level 3 are made well aware of what will be expected of them. Any potential barriers to progress are thoroughly discussed and solutions planned with employers.
- Arrangements for assessment in the workplace are comprehensive and well documented. Written work is thoroughly evaluated and feedback to learners is supportive and constructive. Learners are very clear about what they need to do to improve. Verbal feedback in practical sessions is particularly clear. Written feedback in portfolios and written submissions is clear and detailed.
- Equality and diversity are well promoted, particularly in taught sessions and work-based progress reviews. Learners are encouraged to consider issues of gender and ethnicity and to enter into discussion and express their opinions. The review process further promotes this and staff make good use of scenarios to stimulate debate. For example, learners actively participated in discussions about the difference in the working conditions of construction workers in Asian and European countries.

<p>Foundation English and mathematics</p> <p>16-19 study programmes</p> <p>19+ Learning programmes</p> <p>Employability</p>	<p>Good</p>
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- Teaching, learning and assessment are good, as reflected in the high proportion of learners who achieve their qualifications.
- Tutors have high, but realistic, expectations of learners and use these effectively to encourage and motivate them to reach their full potential and to develop useful skills. For example, in a

mathematics lesson, one learner reported proudly how she is now able to convert between grams and ounces and to increase and decrease weights and measures proportionately when baking. Most tutors support learners' individual learning needs effectively in lessons. For example, in an English lesson, the tutor monitored learners who were carrying out independent internet research very carefully, responding well to their individual queries.

- Tutors are well qualified and experienced. Most tutors plan effectively to meet learners' individual learning needs, although not all take sufficient account of their individual targets. Tutors use a wide range of teaching and learning methods and resources well to engage learners and to secure their progress. They make good use of learning technologies to promote learning. For example, in one lesson, the tutor used a video clip to present the mnemonic 'BODMAS' (brackets, order, division, multiplication, addition, subtraction) to demonstrate to learners the sequence of operations for mathematical expressions.
- Tutors use initial and diagnostic assessment tools accurately to identify learners' starting points and individual learning needs. Most tutors use the outcomes of diagnostic assessment well to set individualised targets for their learners. However, many learners do not have targets relating to their wider personal and career aspirations. In a very few cases, tutors do not use the outcomes of diagnostic assessment to set individualised targets that relate specifically to functional skills. Most tutors use a range of assessment activities successfully and monitor all learners' progress well in lessons. However, in a few lessons, tutors do not systematically check the progress of all learners.
- Learners benefit from effective verbal feedback that motivates them and improves their confidence. Most tutors provide constructive written feedback that effectively identifies key strengths and areas for improvement. However, in a few cases, written feedback is less effective in identifying areas for improvement. Most tutors identify and correct errors in learners' work systematically.
- Tutors develop learners' English, mathematics and information and communication technology skills effectively in teaching and learning activities. In an English lesson, the tutor incorporated information and learning technology effectively to enable learners to practise using a mouse very quickly to identify accurate use of the apostrophe. In a mathematics lesson, the tutor embedded English skills well by asking learners to present their ideas clearly to their peers about different ways of carrying out mathematical calculations. Learners are very aware of the importance of developing their English and mathematics skills to enhance their employability skills.
- Information, advice and guidance are good. Many tutors have information, advice and guidance qualifications. They advise learners on apprenticeship programmes effectively about the requirements to achieve English and mathematics qualifications, and guide all learners accurately to English and mathematics courses at the appropriate level. Learners benefit from a comprehensive induction that informs them well about the demands of their functional skills English and mathematics programmes and about their rights and responsibilities as learners. Tutors advise learners well about their options for progression to further education, training and employment.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is very good. Learners demonstrate good understanding of equality and diversity and high levels of respect for each other in lessons. Tutors incorporate equality and diversity issues effectively in teaching and learning. For example, in an English lesson, learners considered the wide differences in living conditions and lifestyles of different groups of people in Brazil and the different views about the amount spent on the football world cup compared to health and education services.

Community Learning**Community learning**

Good

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment in community learning is good, as reflected in good outcomes for learners. Learners find sessions stimulating and most make good progress, producing work of high standard. For example, in a creative writing class learners gained confidence and good skills in writing, with much of their work accepted for publication or included in innovative displays in an art gallery.
- Tutors have high expectations of learners, encouraging work of good standard and very active contributions to discussions. Teaching is very supportive and encourages effective mutual support between learners. Learners develop good skills and confidence, and are well motivated to learn independently. However, tutors do not all use the virtual learning environment to reinforce learners' understanding or help them catch up if they have difficulty in attending any sessions.
- Tutors are well qualified, many with relevant vocational experience, which learners value. They use questioning well to check understanding. In a family learning session, the tutor's questioning of learners about how they would construct punctuation rules and conventions guided them to better understanding of the topic. Tutors plan learning well, with much stimulating teaching, good use of suitable resources and varied activities to encourage learners to reflect and discuss well. Learners in a family learning class created innovative games so that they and their children could visualise numeracy concepts and understand them better.
- Initial assessment is used well in all courses, with some specific adaptations to identify starting points in information and communication technology and language courses. Tutors on many courses make good use of induction sessions and initial one-to-one conversations to develop a good understanding of the group, identifying any additional needs and signposting learners to help with functional skills. However, the results of initial assessment or the information gained in group profiles is not always used for the planning of subsequent lessons or used fully to identify individual targets.
- The way that tutors track progress in individual learners' records and their written support and encouragement sustains learners' confidence. In the best courses, tutors record areas for further development and provide challenges for learners to develop their skills. However, some written feedback does not clearly set additional targets or give positive reinforcement of learning success.
- Good planning of courses identifies opportunities to develop English, mathematics and functional skills throughout community learning. Tutors encourage learners to use notebooks and worksheets and they correct errors in spelling and grammar. A conversational Spanish class enabled learners to become confident with material written in Spanish, with good reinforcement of correct spellings.
- Tutors plan well to give learners useful information, advice and guidance. Many learners progress to a range of other community and qualification-based courses. Managers plan successfully with other partners in rural areas and in deprived communities to help more people take up learning. This includes training for volunteers in food banks and advocacy projects, and employability training for those on benefits.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The culture in classrooms is one of mutual respect and tolerance between learners, and tutors and learners. The outreach centres all display useful information on social inclusion. Tutors include learning about safety, safeguarding, equality and diversity in their lessons. Good use of simulations and case studies in a counselling class, for example, stimulated effective discussions of equality and bullying at work.

The effectiveness of leadership and management**Outstanding**

- Managers and staff at all levels of the service demonstrate a very high level of commitment to providing high-quality adult education that meets the learning needs of the people of Northumberland and enables learners to succeed and progress. Since the last inspection, managers have developed and implemented successfully a clear and ambitious strategy to improve the quality of provision and outcomes for learners. They set challenging targets and improvement actions for all aspects of the service's activity, and closely monitor progress towards their achievement. This has resulted in a very significant improvement in the quality of teaching, learning, and assessment, and in success rates that are now high in almost all areas of the curriculum.
- Senior officers and elected members of the council provide good support and challenge to managers. Councillors receive and scrutinise regular reports on the service's performance that include information about retention, achievement, and the outcomes of lesson observations. Senior officers and the head of service work together effectively to agree the service's strategic direction, and to make recommendations to members.
- Managers plan and develop the curriculum exceptionally well to meet local needs. A wide range of very effective partnerships with community organisations and with other departments in the local authority enable managers to develop and deliver courses that respond successfully to local priorities. For example, the service has responded well to an identified shortage of people to work in adult social care by developing a programme with courses at different levels for unemployed adults.
- Learners have good access to a wide range of learning opportunities that are located close to where they live. The service provides courses in 16 well-resourced centres and in many community venues across a large and sparsely populated county. Programmes are structured well to enable learners to progress through different levels and into employment or further study.
- Performance management is outstanding. Managers collect and use information about the service's performance exceptionally well to set targets for curriculum areas and for individual tutors. Curriculum and centre managers receive regular and highly detailed reports on progress towards the service's high aspirational targets for learners' success and the quality of provision. They use this information extremely well to review the performance of tutors and to identify areas for improvement in teaching, learning and assessment. Staff benefit from a wide range of professional development and training that enables them to achieve their improvement targets.
- Self-assessment is very rigorous and enables the service to identify accurately its strengths and areas for improvement. Managers use the outcomes of lesson observations and their close analysis of retention and achievement rates to make secure judgements about the quality of provision. They use feedback from learners extensively to evaluate the quality of learners' experience and they respond quickly to learners' suggestions and concerns. The service's evaluation of teaching, learning and assessment is accurate and rigorous and enables tutors to improve their practice successfully. However, in a few instances, managers do not fully review the progress made by tutors towards the targets set following observations.
- The service's promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Managers have successfully established an inclusive culture in which tutors promote equality and diversity particularly well in their lessons and learners increase their understanding of a wide range of issues that affect their lives. The service publicises widely its zero-tolerance approach to discrimination and harassment, and acts quickly and effectively to deal with the very few incidents that occur. Strategies to widen participation among under-represented groups are effective. They have led to increased participation of adults from isolated and deprived communities and an increase in the number of men and women in curriculum areas where they are under-represented.

- The service meets its statutory requirements for safeguarding learners. Safeguarding is promoted very well by the service in lessons and through publicity and posters in centres and, as a result, learners have a good understanding about how to stay safe. All staff undertake appropriate training in safeguarding and those with designated roles are well trained and qualified to fulfil their responsibilities. Managers respond sensitively when safeguarding concerns are raised, and make appropriate referrals to other agencies when needed.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Northumberland County Council

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	2	N/A	N/A	2	N/A	2	1	2
Outcomes for learners	2	N/A	N/A	2	N/A	2	1	2	2
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	2	N/A	N/A	2	N/A	2	1	2	2
The effectiveness of leadership and management	1	N/A	N/A	1	N/A	1	1	1	1

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
Building and construction	1
Foundation English and mathematics	2
Community learning	2

Provider details

Type of provider	Local authority							
Age range of learners	16+							
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	5205							
Principal/CEO	Ms Heather Thomas							
Date of previous inspection	March 2012							
Website address	www.northumberland.gov.uk/adultlearning							
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+
	145	1244	73	510	6	104	N/A	7
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	114	117	47	93	N/A	N/A		
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
	N/A		N/A		NA			
Number of learners aged 14-16	N/A							
Full-time	N/A							
Part-time	N/A							
Number of community learners	1521							
Number of employability learners	124							
Funding received from	Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	N/A							

Contextual information

Northumberland Adult Learning Service is part of Northumberland County Council. It has contracts with the Education Funding Agency and the Skills Funding Agency to provide training to learners from the age of 16 years and upwards. It delivers 16–19 study programmes, apprenticeships and classroom learning to adults aged 19+, and community learning across the county of Northumberland.

Northumberland is the most sparsely populated county in England, with a population of 316,000 spread across 501,000 hectares. The majority of the population is concentrated in the south east corner of the county, where there is also a concentration of its most deprived wards and towns. Northumberland has 3.4% JSA claimants compared to 4.5% in the North East and 3% in Great Britain (November 2013). Northumberland has above average qualifications at levels 2, 3 and 4. The percentage of children achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C (including English and mathematics) is 54.8%, compared to the national average of 59.2%. The minority ethnic population is 0.5%.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector

Charles Searle HMI

Three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and four additional inspectors, assisted by the Performance Manager – Business and Operations 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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