Somerset Skills and Learning

Local authority

Inspection dates		16–20 June 2014
Overall effectiveness	**This inspection:**	**Good-2**
	Previous inspection:	Good-2
Outcomes for learners		Requires improvement-3
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:

- Leaders ensure good strategic planning and management of the service's curriculum and learning programmes to meet the needs of learners, employers and the wider community.

- Managers maintain and promote extensive and highly-effective partnership working with managers of subcontracted provision, which helps expand the range of provision and widen participation across the county.

- Most learners make good progress, developing knowledge and skills which enable them to progress successfully and make a positive contribution to the community and in the workplace.

- Tutors promote well in lessons the development of employability skills and functional skills in English and mathematics.

- Tutors plan lessons well to address the individual needs of learners.

- Staff provide particularly good initial advice and guidance to learners, and support those who experience difficulties in learning.

This is not yet an outstanding provider because:

- The proportion of learners who successfully complete classroom-based courses leading to qualifications is too low.

- Rates of attendance and retention of learners on discrete functional skills and learning to work programmes are too low.

- Managers and tutors do not focus sufficiently on actively promoting progression to further or higher levels of study or employment, particularly on community courses.

- Tutors' written feedback to learners following assessment provides insufficient guidance on the skills and knowledge they need to develop.

- The corporate quality review and action plans do not accurately identify and tackle all the high level priorities for improvement, or set suitably stringent targets.

- Managers do not analyse and interpret data in sufficient detail to identify and prioritise key outcomes that require improvement.

Full report

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Raise success rates on courses leading to qualifications, by identifying those courses where outcomes are lowest and developing suitable teaching, learning and assessment strategies to improve the effectiveness of this provision.

- Identify differences in performance of the various groups of learners more accurately, analyse why these differences occur, and ensure managers develop strategies to address these discrepancies.

- Improve the attendance and retention rates of learners on discrete functional skills and learning to work programmes.

- Plan and promote internal and external progression routes for learners more thoroughly.

- Raise the quality, consistency and detail of feedback given to learners following assessment.

- Establish more ambitious targets and learning outcomes for all learners.

- Improve the use of, and access to, information and learning technology (ILT).

- Ensure the service's self-assessment identifies the key priorities for improvement more accurately, and that quality improvement plans contain more focused, specific and measurable targets.

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for learners	Requires improvement

- The proportion of learners who successfully complete classroom-based courses leading to qualifications has improved over the past year; however, for both long and short courses, success rates remain low. In 2012/13, success rates for adult learners were particularly low in comparison to those for learners aged 16 to 18. In 2012/13, success rates were broadly above average in a minority of areas including science and mathematics, languages, education and training, business administration and law. Success rates were, however, below average in health, public services and care, construction, retail and commercial, leisure, travel and tourism, arts, media and publishing, and preparation for life and work. Too few learners on courses leading to qualifications progress successfully on to further or higher-level courses, or into employment.

- The vast majority of learners on non-accredited community programmes successfully complete their courses. Learners gain significant personal and social benefits from these programmes, such as improved health, well-being and social networks. Too many of these courses, however, target predominantly people who wish to learn for leisure. On many of these courses tutors do not focus enough on promoting opportunities for progression; learners' targets do not provide sufficient challenge to develop and extend their knowledge and skills. Learners tend to re-enrol on the same course and too few of them progress successfully to higher-level courses.

- Differences in achievement between the various groups of learners are too big. Most adult apprentices successfully complete their qualifications, and do so within the planned timescale; however, this is not the case for apprentices aged 16 to 18. On both classroom-based courses leading to qualifications and on apprenticeships, female learners outperform male learners. The relatively small number of apprentices with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve less well than other apprentices.

- Learners undertaking the broad range of community development programmes make good progress, achieve well and improve their job prospects. A significant proportion acquire suitable knowledge, skills and confidence to enable them to progress successfully on to further relevant

study, or to play a more active role in their communities through voluntary work, or paid employment.

▪ The rates of attendance, punctuality and retention of learners on many courses are high; however, in a significant minority of discrete functional skills lessons and learning to work programmes, attendance and retention rates are poor. The strategies that staff have adopted to tackle these issues are not yet having sufficient impact in ensuring all learners are attending and making suitable progress.

▪ Learners generally produce work of an appropriate standard in lessons and in workplace settings. Tutors maintain a particularly strong focus on developing learners' broader transferable and functional skills that will help learners progress and increase their chances of gaining suitable employment.

▪ The promotion across the provision of employability skills and functional skills in English and mathematics is generally good. Managers previously identified this area as requiring improvement. Through a range of improvement initiatives, opportunities for learners have improved and they are now making better progress towards developing their skills and acquiring appropriate qualifications.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good

▪ Good teaching, learning and assessment are enabling learners on community learning, community development and family learning courses to achieve good outcomes. However, learners in other types of learning are not yet as successful.

▪ Tutors and assessors quickly develop a constructive rapport with their learners and choose work and activities that encourage and motivate them to enjoy their learning and to make good progress. Frequently, individuals and small groups of learners engage in separate activities in the same classroom; tutors plan activities carefully to give each learner the greatest chance to learn. Tutors ensure that each activity is appropriate for each learner as they progress through the course. This attention to planning lessons well ensures learners work hard and confidently and allows tutors sufficient time to support individuals who need help.

▪ Lessons regularly include lively, enquiring discussions between learners and staff. Learners are very clear about their motivation for attending their course and a very high proportion believe their courses are providing them with the skills and knowledge they require in their everyday life or the workplace.

▪ Tutors provide very good extra support or guidance to learners who experience difficulties in learning. Tutors set up special arrangements for individual learners who are unable to attend lessons. This includes enabling them to complete their studies through distance learning. Support staff work closely with tutors to supervise and support learners well. Assessors keep in close contact with apprentices and visit them regularly to ensure they are making progress and applying their learning effectively in their jobs.

▪ Tutors regularly encourage learners to make their own decisions about how to complete tasks by asking them insightful and probing questions. This helps ensure learners apply the theories and practical techniques they have learned previously, for example to problem solving.

▪ Many tutors use interactive whiteboards well, but the use of further ILT, such as tablet computers and a virtual learning environment (VLE), is in its infancy. The recent appointment of an ILT specialist and implementation of a new ILT strategy are beginning to provide learners with access to a wealth of resources and activities.

▪ Most tutors and assessors monitor their learners' progress very well. They have up-to-date records of what elements their learners have completed and what remains to be achieved. However, too few learners are set sufficiently clear targets to ensure they know exactly what they need to do in order to make the progress of which they are capable. On community courses, most learners identify, themselves, the outcomes they would like to achieve, but tutors do not moderate these to ensure they are sufficiently achievable and challenging.

- Tutors check their learners' knowledge and skills well at the beginning of their course, and most use this information well to plan lessons suited to learners' individual needs. Tutors assess work regularly and many provide useful verbal feedback to learners on the quality of their work. However, too much written feedback describes what work learners still need to complete; it provides little guidance on the skills they need to practise and the knowledge they need to develop. Most apprentices and learners on access to higher education programmes receive useful and regular feedback on their progress, and assessors regularly assess their work accurately.

- Tutors and managers have taken effective action to tackle weaknesses in the teaching of English and mathematics that have led to low success rates in previous years. A high proportion of staff have been trained to teach mathematics or English, and most tutors promote learners' use and understanding of mathematics and English well in lessons. Learning support staff provide good guidance to learners on their English and mathematics during lessons.

- Information, advice and guidance for learners are good, and tutors take care to place learners on appropriate courses. In many curriculum areas, including English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT), learners are able to progress through the course and to higher-level courses at a pace that suits them.

- In each centre, the community of learners is diverse and harmonious. Staff and learners are highly respectful of each other and sensitive to the different needs of individuals. Tutors make suitable adjustments to lessons and activities if they recognise how it might benefit learners.

Early years and playwork 16-19 study programmes 19+ learning programmes Apprenticeships	Good

- Teaching, learning and assessment in early years and playwork are good. A committed staff team structure teaching and learning activities well to address learners' individual needs. Learners understand their tasks and requirements in both classroom and workplace settings. This enables them to make good progress and achieve their learning aims.

- Staff actively promote learners' participation and ensure learners develop good personal and employability skills. Learners enjoy lessons and value the welcoming atmosphere. Learners' confidence and self-esteem are high. Tutors support learners to develop good skills in planning and delivering a broad range of exciting activities to engage the children with whom they work, and to promote good language development in the children.

- Tutors develop learners' ICT skills well so that learners know how to research theories on childcare and produce high-quality, creative written work.

- Tutors plan teaching, learning and assessment activities well in the workplace. Assessors hold relevant qualifications and are very experienced. Enthusiastic tutors motivate and inspire learners through stimulating and engaging activities, such as linking observations of children to the stages of their development.

- Staff provide much good support for learners. As a result, learners who might otherwise struggle remain on their programmes and successfully complete them. Support for learners with health problems is particularly good; staff produce individually-tailored programmes and activities to support learners who are less confident. Learners who have learning difficulties or disabilities receive extra one-to-one support and individual tutorials and, as a result, they progress well.

- Staff assess learners' skills and knowledge well so that they are clear about their skills and interests, as well as their English, mathematical and writing skills. They use this information effectively in planning learning to meet individual learners' needs. Learners value the way they can easily contact staff through email, by telephone or through social media, and staff are quick to respond to queries.

- Most learners know what they need to do to improve their work. Verbal feedback is good, but tutors do not reinforce this with supportive and detailed written feedback. Learners who use the e-portfolio tracking system have a greater understanding of their progress than those who only have a paper-based portfolio. Learners and tutors agree actions following assessment, but on occasions the actions lack suitable detail and do not include specific times for completion.

- Staff place a strong emphasis on developing learners' English and mathematics and are succeeding in developing these skills well with learners. Tutors continually reinforce the importance of these skills in learners' future careers. Learners take pride in their work and demonstrate good literacy skills in their written submissions.

- Staff provide good information, advice and guidance on progression opportunities and career choices. This motivates learners and helps them to make successful connections between their learning and progression in their chosen careers. More than half of the learners completing a level 2 qualification successfully progress to level 3 and into employment.

- Staff reinforce learners' understanding of equality and awareness of diversity well through regular discussions in lessons. As a result, most learners are aware of matters relating to equality and diversity and are able to promote understanding of these themes in their workplaces. Tutors also promote learners' understanding of topics such as disability. Learners treat one another with respect and demonstrate good understanding of the needs of children and young people with disabilities. Learners know how to carry out risk assessments and are knowledgeable about how to safeguard children.

Visual arts **19+ learning programmes** **Community learning**	Good

- Teaching, learning and assessment in visual arts are good. Learners enjoy their courses, they have good opportunities to develop their confidence and involvement and achieve good outcomes.

- The standard of learners' work is high. For example, a group of level 2 learners skilfully used digital photographs and drawings of disused industrial buildings as the stimulus for a printmaking project, resulting in highly imaginative, multi-layered images incorporating vibrant surface patterns. In a small minority of lessons, learners' studio work relies too much on copied images selected by the tutor, rather than learners personally researching their own images.

- In lessons, many learners discuss their progress with confidence and demonstrate their knowledge and insight well, making good references to art theory. For example, level 1 learners were able to discuss the concept of abstraction after studying paintings from the mid-twentieth century. Similarly, after considering the paintings of Cezanne, learners in a painting class were able to observe and discuss their local landscape as interlinked blocks of colour, tone and texture.

- Most learners make good progress. For example, in a watercolour session, learners practised the transition from simple pencil drawings to the inclusion of watercolour, and then clearly evaluated their work. Learners make best progress when they evaluate their own work and when tutors encourage and challenge them to experiment with new techniques.

- In a small minority of lessons, learners make slower progress. In these lessons, the pace is often too slow, with little sense of discovery or excitement. Tutors do not set sufficiently challenging individual targets for the more advanced and returning learners. Students carry on with project work rather than undertaking more challenging tasks. In these lessons, tutors do not provide sufficient opportunity for students to learn from each other's knowledge and experience.

- A broad arts curriculum is provided at many venues across the county. Classrooms have appropriate resources for drawing and painting and specialist three-dimensional work. However,

- in the pottery studio, general housekeeping is poor. Learners in pottery and stained glass do not always wear suitable protective clothing or footwear.

- In the small community centres, learners do not always have access to ILT to support their development. The VLE does not provide a sufficient range of resources for learners to use for independent study.

- Individual support for learners is good. Tutors provide high quality additional learning support, which enables more vulnerable learners to gain confidence and to improve their knowledge and skills.

- Too few learners progress successfully to higher-level courses. While some learners progress within the service between recreational, introductory and intermediate levels, few learners move on to full-time programmes and too many recreational learners re-enrol on the same programme each term.

- Assessment practice is variable. Staff frequently provide suitable guidance and feedback; however, on occasions, individual learning plans do not sufficiently capture the progress and rich experience that are evident in portfolios and sketchbooks. At times, written feedback is brief and congratulatory, rather than providing helpful comments on how learners might improve their skills.

- Learners develop their literacy skills well and use appropriate technical vocabulary. Students develop appropriate mathematical skills in drawing, for example with estimates of proportion and consideration of the 'golden mean' and the Fibonacci series.

- Learners benefit from a suitable range of enrichment activities such as specialist craft and drawing workshops and visits to museums and exhibitions. Learners develop suitable vocational skills by participating in community projects and regional exhibitions.

- Lessons effectively promote an understanding of equality and awareness of diversity. Tutors create an inclusive and supportive atmosphere in lessons and ensure that learners respect everyone's viewpoint and ability. For example, after watching the recent Reith lectures, learners discussed contemporary art practice and re-assessed their own perceptions of sexuality.

Foundation English and mathematics 16-19 study programmes 19+ programmes Community learning	Good

- Teaching, learning and assessment in foundation English and mathematics are good, reflecting recent improvements in the outcomes for learners over the past 12 months. Learners receive high levels of support, encouragement and individual attention from tutors, which enable them to progress well in lessons.

- A broad range of courses exists to address the developmental needs of the community and to help widen participation. Tutors are keenly aware of the psychological barriers for some adults returning to education; they handle these situations sensitively and appropriately, so learners can grow in confidence and make good progress.

- Tutors show good knowledge of their subjects, with coherent explanations of technical vocabulary; they motivate learners well in lessons and help them understand key topics such as the correct use of punctuation in English and the four rules of number in mathematics.

- Tutors plan lessons effectively and use their classroom management skills well, so that learners remain focused and make productive use of their time. Tutors use a wide variety of learning activities and resources effectively to interest learners, such as practical measurement exercises with everyday objects to develop estimation skills. Tutors also use ILT effectively to reinforce topics and help learners achieve.

- Learners' work is of a high standard; Learners are enthusiastic, and enjoy their learning. Tutors facilitate classroom discussions effectively to support the development of English and mathematical skills. This allows learners the opportunity to exchange ideas and develop their confidence with others.

- The strategies by which tutors plan to address the individual needs of learners are not always clear. On occasions, tutors do not fully stretch and challenge more able learners, or offer more intensive support to less confident individuals to help them understand basic concepts.

- Initial advice and guidance are thorough. Tutors meet learners prior to the start of their programme to assess suitability and identify possible difficulties they may face in learning. They then use this information well to ensure they place learners on the appropriate courses and provide them with suitable support.

- Learners benefit from regular developmental feedback on how to make improvements to their work. Tutors regularly assess and evaluate their learning and progress. Tutors run regular plenaries and, in better lessons, they engage learners very effectively in monitoring their own progress and achievement. Verbal feedback to learners is comprehensive but, on occasions, tutors' written feedback is scant and does not provide sufficient information to help learners to improve. In a minority of lesson plans, tutors do not record assessment methods in sufficient detail. As a result, in a few lessons, learners are not clear about the purpose or goals of learning activities.

- Learners develop their confidence and communication skills well, and also skills to increase their chances of gaining employment, such as completion of CVs and job interview techniques. Tutors actively support individuals to develop English and mathematical skills they can apply in their personal and social lives, such as identifying value for money when purchasing fairtrade groceries or writing to the council about a housing matter. They receive timely advice and guidance on progression opportunities. Many learners successfully progress to higher-level courses.

- Tutors actively promote understanding of equality and awareness of diversity in lessons, which helps develop good working relationships and peer learning opportunities. Learners feel safe and protected and accommodation is fit for purpose.

The effectiveness of leadership and management	Good

- Leaders and managers ensure effective implementation of the service's clear aim, which is to deliver learning and leisure opportunities that meet the individual and business needs of the community. Senior managers raise standards well; they have thorough and comprehensive strategies in place for the planning and delivery of the learning programmes, working closely with other subcontractors across the county.

- The advisory board, consisting of elected councillors and senior managers, is fully aware of the service's strengths and areas for improvement. It provides effective scrutiny and challenge, and plays a key role in supporting and shaping the service's strategic direction.

- Managers have successfully developed effective strategies to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. This includes revised lesson observation monitoring processes and changes to the management of staff performance. These systems have been effective in tackling the very small proportion of underperformance. Managers make good use of observations and development plans to identify and share good practice and to prioritise wider staff development and training needs. These initiatives are having a positive impact on helping to raise the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

- Arrangements for quality assurance are mainly effective. The quality improvement cycle focuses strongly on the learners' experience, through its evaluation of the curriculum, users' and employers' feedback, staff performance and outcomes for learners. Each curriculum area produces a detailed self-assessment report and quality improvement plan. The service-wide self-assessment is however insufficiently evaluative. Managers have a clear understanding of the

service's strengths and areas for improvement, but have not reflected this fully in the high-level self-assessment report. In the quality improvement plans derived from self-assessment, targets are often not sufficiently specific and measurable.

- In the analysis and evaluation of data on learners' performance, current progress and progression after their courses, managers have not focused sufficiently on the relatively low success rates on classroom-based courses leading to qualifications, or the variations in performance of different groups of learners.

- The monitoring and evaluation of the quality of subcontracted provision is thorough. Managers have developed clear criteria to inform and assess progress in termly performance reviews. All subcontractors produce an evaluative and suitably detailed self-assessment report and quality improvement plan for their provision. Each subcontractor has a designated link manager who closely monitors their performance and progress in maintaining and improving the quality of provision.

- Planning and management of the curriculum and learning programmes to meet the needs of learners, employers and the local and national community are good. Managers make effective use of data and information on learners' and employers' needs, to design the provision and identify suitable progression routes. The curriculum focuses well on raising the standard of learners' English, mathematical and functional skills and the development of their employability skills.

- The service's work with its partners is extensive and very effective. The well-developed network of subcontracted provision enables managers to extend the service's curriculum and geographic range. The timings, locations and modes of delivery of the provision help increase accessibility for learners. The community development programmes are highly effective in widening participation through partnerships, and provide valuable education and training opportunities to more vulnerable members of the community.

- The promotion of the understanding of equality and awareness of diversity is evident across the service, both in the strategic priorities of the service and also in the way managers and tutors promote learners' awareness in lessons. Good support arrangements ensure that all learners can participate effectively in their learning programmes. All staff maintain a suitable focus on protecting learners from harassment, bullying and discrimination. This generates a harmonious and industrious working environment for learners and staff.

- Managers give close attention to health and safety arrangements and manage risk appropriately. Staff and managers receive suitable training and information on safeguarding. The arrangements for safeguarding learners are thorough and meet statutory requirements.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Somerset Skills and Learning									
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**	-	-	2	-	2	2	-	2
Outcomes for learners	**3**	-	-	3	-	3	3	-	3
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment	**2**	-	-	2	-	2	2	-	2
The effectiveness of leadership and management	**2**	-	-	2	-	2	2	-	2

Subject areas graded for the quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Grade
Early years and playwork	2
Visual arts	2
Foundation English and mathematics	2

Provider details

Type of provider	Local authority
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	10,243
Lead Operations Manager	Susie Simon-Norris
Date of previous inspection	March 2010
Website address	www.learnsomerset.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**	
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
	44	225	22	399	5	117	0	5
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	**Intermediate**		**Advanced**		**Higher**			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18		19+	
	95	63	40	69	1		16	
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
	3		2		5			
Number of learners aged 14-16								
Full-time	0							
Part-time	0							
Number of community learners	1,986							
Number of employability learners	0							
Funding received from	Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	▪ M&O Training Ltd ▪ St. Loyes Foundation ▪ Train4All Ltd ▪ Accountancy Plus Ltd ▪ PGL Training Ltd ▪ Channel Training Ltd ▪ The Blue School ▪ Accountancy Learning Ltd ▪ British Red Cross ▪ Glastonbury Abbey ▪ Reminiscence Learning ▪ Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership ▪ Strode College							

	- The West Somerset Community College - Somerset College of Arts and Technology - Bridgwater College - Pathway for Success Ltd

Contextual information

Somerset Skills and Learning is located in the learning and achievement service area of Somerset County Council. It operates out of 15 dedicated training centres around the county, as well as providing workplace learning with employers. It delivers learning to over 10,000 learners each year and is one of the largest providers of workplace training in the county.

Somerset is predominantly a rural county; whilst it is generally prosperous, some pockets of significant urban and rural deprivation exist. The proportion of the population in Somerset from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds is very low. Around 75% of employment in the region is in the service sectors. Although the proportion of the population claiming Job Seeker's Allowance is low, reducing unemployment and improving employability skills remain a priority for the county.

Information about this inspection

Lead inspector	Peter Nelson HMI

Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and four additional inspectors, assisted by the teaching and learning manager 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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