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Mr Neil Leitch
Chief Executive
Pre-School Learning Alliance
50 Featherstone Street
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Dear Mr Leitch

Short inspection of Pre-School Learning Alliance

Following the short inspection on 20 and 21 September 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the Alliance was judged to be good in June 2012.

This provider continues to be good.

Your learners continue to receive good-quality education and training. They work productively to acquire good work-related skills, make good progress on their courses, and most achieve well. Training and personal and professional development are at the heart of what the Alliance does and this is amply reflected in the undoubted commitment of leaders, managers and tutors to your learners and their development.

Learners are significantly fewer now than at the previous inspection, as reduced funding for training in the early years sector has lessened demand for courses. However, your managers and trustees are alert to the challenges the sector faces and have responded well, in the best interests of learners and employers, to expand their opportunities for training. Your managers are resilient in addressing the many challenges facing the early years sector and, therefore, your learners. To help in this, since the previous inspection, your collaborative work with employers has significantly and productively expanded.

Particularly important, in this respect, is the Alliance's reintroduction of apprenticeships, offering an attractive alternative training route for some learners, and your leading work within the early years sector on the introduction of distance learning courses, often better suiting the training needs of non-corporate, individual learners.

Trustees play a key role in working with you and your senior managers as you ensure that the Alliance is best placed in its pursuit of becoming an 'outstanding'

trainer, and in your response to current and future opportunities and challenges. As part of this, the Trustees take a keen and productive interest in the Alliance's training work, including its scope and quality. For example, they have recently considered senior managers' 'training review' proposals, in the light of the need for the Alliance to respond to changes in the market for early years training, and they have specific meetings to consider the Alliance's annual summary of its strengths and areas for development and your proposed actions to bring about improvement. They significantly influence the work of managers in this respect.

At the previous inspection, inspectors identified significant strengths in the Alliance's leadership and management. Excellent strategic and operational management resulted in the achievement of good outcomes for learners, the good quality of provision, and leaders' and managers' good capacity to make and sustain improvement. Your safeguarding of learners was good, as was your promotion of equality and diversity. All of these strengths remain and have been built upon.

Specific areas for further improvement from the inspection were to: develop and implement procedures to ensure the systematic and timely feedback of learners' progress to employers; and provide good practice guides for tutors and improve quality assurance checks to ensure that all course documentation is completed to a consistently high standard. More broadly, your own quality improvement plans since the inspection have focused on the need to maintain, and improve, standards of teaching, learning and assessment, improve all achievement rates to high levels, and continue to ensure excellent safeguarding of learners.

You have fully and successfully addressed two specifically identified areas for further improvement. At the same time, in pursuit of offering 'outstanding' training, managers have worked increasingly well with tutors to raise standards of teaching and learning, and hence, learners' achievements.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment continues to improve. Learners develop their skills well and benefit from their courses, both in the workplace and in raising their own children. For example, they apply observational skills, develop and applying theoretical knowledge in the workplace, apply attachment theory for a better understanding of new children joining the nursery, and apply good safeguarding practice. Learners on the developing distance learning programmes quickly gain in confidence and most manage and organise their study well. Assessment opportunities are diverse, well planned and clearly documented. Teaching and learning are well supported by good-quality online learning resources.

Inspectors agreed with your priorities for the further improvement of teaching and learning, identifying the need for more precise individual learning targets which are more sufficiently measurable, the insufficient use of assessments to help plan learning for all learners, and the too-frequent occasions when tutors explained practical and theoretical aspects of childcare, rather than asking learners what they already knew or enabling them to work out the answers for themselves. Within the

developing area of apprenticeships, in a few instances, training is hindered where employers do not meet their obligations to release their employees for training.

You have embarked on the implementation of well-founded strategies to promote the effective teaching, learning and assessment of English and mathematics, but recognise that there is more to do to meet your own high expectations. English and mathematics are now often well taught by tutors in lessons, but managers are ensuring good training and support for tutors to help them further understand the need for explicit teaching of English and mathematics, and how best to do this. Managers' checking of progress is good. They scrutinise e-portfolios for English and mathematics content, and coverage in lessons is a specific item for the observation of lessons.

The Alliance's capacity to sustain the quality of its provision, and to push forward with further improvement, is helped by your rigorous quality-assurance and improvement arrangements, consistently applied and monitored throughout your national provision. For example, rigorous standardisation meetings help to ensure that there is consistency of teaching observation and assessment practice across your four geographical regions. They also act as a strong forum for sharing good practice. You are developing your scheme for the observation of lessons well, now moving from grading to a system which positively identifies priorities for professional development. Your target areas for improvement largely matched those identified by inspectors.

Your self-assessment report and quality improvement plans are valuable drivers for improvement, but they each pay insufficient attention to learners' outcomes, even though the Alliance has sound evidence which is analysed elsewhere.

Overall, outcomes for learners, in terms of achievement, remain relatively high and the historic poorer performance for learners on foundation and intermediate has been removed. However, while overall achievement for classroom-based courses in 2015/16 is high, as it is for each level of course, it has fallen back from the very high rates achieved in 2014/15. This is most marked for level 3 diplomas, although there are very few learners. At levels 1 and 2, constituting most learners, the decline in achievement has mostly stemmed from declining retention, and pass rates are still very high. For the relatively recently reintroduced apprenticeship programmes it is too early to comment on outcomes, but most apprentices make good progress.

Safeguarding is effective.

The safeguarding of your learners has the highest priority and you have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Since the previous inspection, trustees and managers have ensured that your good arrangements for safeguarding continue to be implemented rigorously, with no current safeguarding cases in relation to the Alliance's responsibilities. Staff training is exemplary, in its timeliness and detail. Safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty are clear priorities for the board of

trustees, with a standing item on board agenda meetings. There is a designated board member for safeguarding and all trustees are suitably trained.

Learners demonstrate a good understanding of safeguarding and of the 'Prevent' duty, and how these apply to themselves and in their workplaces. Safeguarding is well covered across all teaching and learning activities. For example, in one session, a well-structured safeguarding activity started with a focus on learners' own perspectives, and was then broadened out to children's experiences, and then to theoretical aspects.

Your response to the introduction of the 'Prevent' duty has been very skilful. Together with the consideration of British values, learners' and staff's understanding of the 'Prevent' duty has been seamlessly integrated with your arrangements to promote excellent safeguarding.

Inspection findings

- The leadership and management of the Alliance continue to be good, with excellent strategic and operational management.
- Resilient and insightful trustees, leaders and managers have ensured that the quality of provision for learners remains good, while working well to ensure the sustainability of high-quality training in a challenging economic environment.
- Outcomes for learners remain good overall, although they have fallen back from the very high levels of 2014/15.
- Leaders and managers have continued to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment since the previous inspection. Learners benefit from good training, promoting the good progress they often make, including the development of very good workplace skills. The Alliance's programme for judging the quality of training continues to improve and successfully identifies aspects which require improvement if training is to be judged outstanding.
- Managers are paying good attention to the further improvement of teaching and learning of mathematics and English. Well-conceived professional development is helping tutors to improve their skills to explicitly help learners improve their English and mathematics within work-related lessons.
- The Alliance continues to have good capacity to make and sustain improvements. Within the context of the organisational commitment to quality improvement and professional development, leaders, managers and tutors share an enthusiasm to do the best for learners. Consistently effective quality arrangements secure improvement, including the self-assessment report and the frequently reviewed quality improvement plan, although in these two documents insufficient attention is paid to outcomes for learners.
- Trustees' expectations of themselves and of managers are high. They have a good understanding of what the Alliance needs to do to match the training needs of childcare employers, employees and prospective employees. They also understand the strengths of the Alliance's training and the areas where

improvement is needed, and pay careful attention to the detailed reports on performance which they receive.

- Since the previous inspection, leaders and managers have paid good attention to closer working with employers. Links with childcare employers are now strong and productive and the Alliance provides significant support to employers, both in relation to the training of their employees and more broadly.
- Leaders and managers are alert to the changing needs and demands of learners and of the early years education sector. This ready awareness of their industry is reflected in the positive development of distance-learning courses and of apprenticeship programmes, to meet changed demands.

Next steps for the provider

In pursuit of the Alliance's aim to become an outstanding provider, trustees, leaders and managers should ensure that:

- learners' achievements are consistently high, for all levels of course, by continuing to promote their best practice in teaching and learning, further removing the areas for improvement identified by the refreshed training observation scheme, including poorer target-setting
- to maximise improvement, analysis and judgements on outcomes for learners in self-assessment reports and in quality improvement plans are fully included, making the best of the Alliance's substantial evidence on learners' performance
- the positive work to further improve learners' English and mathematics continues apace.

I am copying this letter to the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

David Martin
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors were assisted by the director of quality improvement, as nominee. We met with your senior managers, tutors, learners, apprentices and trustees. Inspectors observed teaching, learning and assessment, and reviewed learners' and apprentices' written work. We reviewed key policies and documents, including those relating to self-assessment, performance and safeguarding. We also considered the views of learners, apprentices and employers.