

Essex County Council

Local authority

Inspection dates

6–9 December 2016

Overall effectiveness		Inadequate	
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Inadequate	Adult learning programmes	Inadequate
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement	Apprenticeships	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Inadequate		
Outcomes for learners	Requires improvement		
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection		Requires improvement	

Summary of key findings

This is an inadequate provider

- Safeguarding arrangements are not effective.
- Too many weaknesses identified at the previous inspection have not been rectified; as a result, a smaller and declining proportion of learners and apprentices achieve than nationally.
- Leaders do not ensure that tutors and assessors improve their practice in a timely manner. The observation of teaching, learning and assessment process is ineffective.
- Leaders' self-assessment is overgenerous and insufficiently self-critical, and results in weak action planning to secure improvement.
- Too few tutors plan to enable learners on accredited courses to develop good work-related skills.
- County councillors do not challenge leaders effectively because leaders fail to provide them with accurate information on the achievement and progress of learners and apprentices.
- Tutors fail to challenge learners and apprentices to make good progress in theory lessons.
- Too many tutors and assessors do not set and review meaningful targets with their learners and apprentices that motivate them to excel.
- Too many unemployed learners who are looking for work do not secure employment.
- Too few learners enrolled on family learning courses progress to study formal qualifications.

The provider has the following strengths

- Leaders and county councillors plan the provision of adult learning well; each strand has a clearly defined purpose that is relevant to local employment opportunities and the needs of communities across a very large geographical area.
- Learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive high-quality support that enables them to make good progress.
- Tutors of English and mathematics GCSE courses challenge their learners adeptly to deepen their understanding and apply their higher-order skills cogently; as a consequence, most learners improve their skills rapidly and achieve higher-grade passes.
- The majority of learners make good progress in their practical skills development and produce good standards of practical work.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Essex is a large county with urban, rural and coastal areas. The county has a population of around 1.7 million people. Essex County Council commissions 'ACL Essex' to provide learning across the whole county. The provider has centres in Basildon, Brentwood, Chelmsford, Clacton, Colchester, Harlow, Harwich, Maldon, Ongar, Rayleigh, Stansted, Saffron Walden and Witham. In addition, the provider delivers learning in around 200 venues in smaller communities.
- 'ACL Essex' provides accredited and non-accredited adult learning in 13 subject sector areas and apprenticeships in three. Leaders have recently ended contracting arrangements with a number of poorly performing subcontractors providing traineeships programmes on its behalf; they now subcontract Essex County Council's youth service as the sole subcontractor for a small volume of trainees. The provider offers 16 to 19 study programmes but leaders have recently put in place actions to terminate this provision because of underperformance, and the volume of learners has reduced greatly.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Urgently ensure that all safeguarding arrangements for all groups of learners are effective.
- Improve rapidly the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that:
 - tutors' and assessors' planning enables learners and apprentices to understand how theory underpins their practical skills development and motivates them to develop their higher-level thinking skills and excel
 - tutors promote the value of work-related skills effectively with learners on accredited courses and enable them to progress to higher levels of learning or purposeful employment
 - tutors assess, check and reinforce learners' and apprentices' understanding and application of knowledge and skills before introducing new learning
 - tutors and assessors set and review challenging targets that motivate learners and apprentices to reach their potential
 - leaders and managers rectify urgently the identified weaknesses in the observation process.
- Ensure that leaders' self-assessment is robust, appropriately self-critical and drives effective action planning that secures sustainable improvement.
- Leaders should provide county councillors with accurate information on all aspects of performance in order for county councillors to challenge them effectively.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Inadequate

- Leaders and county councillors have set ambitions for the provider to play a key role in meeting local and regional employment needs and skills priorities, including within the construction, science, technology and health provider job sectors. Leaders have established productive working partnerships with employers and the Essex Employment and Skills Board and as a result, a small number of unemployed learners, such as those studying courses in the provider's care sector work academy, are securing purposeful employment. However, there remains much work to do to enable staff and learners to understand leaders' expectations of the provider.
- Leaders and managers have not improved the quality of teaching, learning and assessment sufficiently since the previous inspection. Too many areas identified as requiring improvement at the previous inspection remain weak. As a result, a smaller and declining proportion of learners and apprentices achieve than nationally.
- Leaders and county councillors do not monitor rigorously the progress that all groups of learners and apprentices make to ensure that none is disadvantaged or underachieves. As a result, they do not challenge managers rigorously to ensure that learners and apprentices are making good progress.
- The process for observing teaching, learning and assessment is ineffective. Leaders and managers do not ensure that all tutors and assessors are observed and improve their practice in a timely manner. For example, a fifth of all tutors were not observed at all in 2015/16. Too many observers focus their assessment of practice on the actions of tutors rather than their impact on learners' and apprentices' skills development and outcomes. Consequently, too many observers are overgenerous in their judgements and provide insufficient recommendations to improve teaching, learning and assessment.
- Managers and the workforce development team now work collaboratively to plan purposeful training opportunities for tutors and assessors. However, managers do not monitor and observers do not check sufficiently that staff utilise their learning from this training to improve their practice. For example, tutors have received extensive training on promoting English and mathematics skills in vocational teaching but few plan the promotion of these essential skills effectively in lessons. As a result, too many learners do not make the progress of which they are capable.
- Leaders' and managers' self-assessment of the provision is not sufficiently rigorous. They do not make effective use of assessment information on learners and other data to inform their judgements. Leaders compare performance against incorrect national rates. They pay too little attention to the strengths and weaknesses of teaching, learning and assessment. Leaders do not set high enough expectations for learners' attendance. As a consequence, their self-assessment is overgenerous and insufficiently self-critical and results in weak action planning to secure improvement.
- Leaders do not use data accurately or monitor performance in a timely manner to secure improvement. Leaders set managers performance targets but do not review these until the financial year end; this is too late in the year to stem any decline in the quality of provision or in outcomes for learners. Managers review these targets with tutors regularly to identify performance concerns. However, too many managers do not take decisive

action to ensure that learners who fall behind in their studies receive the support they need to achieve. For example, managers do not make sure that apprentices at risk of not completing their programmes in the planned timescale are targeted to make more rapid progress.

- Leaders and county councillors plan the adult learning provision well to ensure that each strand has a clearly defined purpose that is relevant to local employment opportunities and supports local and regional priorities. Leaders deploy adult learning funds efficiently to establish a good level of provision across a large geographical area that seeks to enable adults to acquire the skills and qualifications needed to improve their lives and/or secure meaningful employment. Leaders have secured additional funding through the Essex Employment and Skills Board to realise ambitious plans to expand the provision and work productively with employers to meet skills and employment gaps in Essex. For example, leaders are piloting a leadership and management qualification pathway to meet the needs of employers in the care sector.
- As a result of poor performance, leaders and county councillors have taken the decision to end the provider's provision of 16 to 19 study programmes. In 2015/16, too many trainees on traineeships were not progressing to purposeful employment. Consequently, leaders and county councillors have removed all poorly performing subcontractors. They now contract with the local authority's youth provider, which continues to engage successfully young people with histories of poor educational experience and train the majority of them to find meaningful work.
- Leaders monitor the destinations of apprentices effectively. Although leaders have begun to measure the impact of the provider on a large proportion of adult learners, they acknowledge that more information needs to be secured, particularly of unemployed learners, to inform the planning of the curriculum.

The governance of the provider

- Governance is inadequate.
- County councillors do not challenge leaders effectively because leaders fail to provide county councillors with accurate information on the achievement and progress of learners and apprentices or use the correct national rates to compare performance. As a result, county councillors are not able to challenge leaders on any underperformance such as the decline in the achievement of learners and apprentices, decline in attendance or that too few unemployed learners looking for work secure employment.
- As a result of leaders' weak self-assessment, county councillors do not challenge leaders sufficiently on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and hold leaders to account to improve weak provision.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective.
- Safeguarding processes and procedures do not ensure that learners aged 16 to 18 learning alongside adults, and vulnerable adult learners, are safe. Leaders have not ensured that appropriate risk assessments are in place to monitor the safety of these groups.
- Leaders have not ensured that all staff working with learners aged 16 to 18 and vulnerable adults have the appropriate Disclosure and Barring Service safeguarding clearance and checks to confirm they are safe to work with such groups.

- The providers' safeguarding policy is not sufficiently robust to ensure that accountabilities and actions make sure that all groups of learners are safe; for example, the policy does not stipulate what actions staff should take if a safeguarding matter arises that involves vulnerable adults.
- Leaders ensure that staff receive appropriate training to improve their promotion of British values and the dangers of extremism. However, few tutors promote these effectively in lessons and as a consequence, too many learners and apprentices do not gain a good understanding of these aspects of life in modern Britain.
- Managers act promptly on any safeguarding referral and work effectively with relevant agencies, including social care providers, to full resolution.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Not enough tutors and assessors set high enough expectations of what their learners and apprentices can achieve. Too many tutors and assessors do not plan and execute teaching, learning and assessment that challenge their learners and apprentices to make good progress in theory lessons.
- Too many theory lessons are overly dominated by tutors who do not maximise opportunities for learners to share learning or take greater responsibility for their own learning and make the progress of which they are capable.
- Too many tutors do not use a sufficiently varied or creative range of teaching approaches to motivate all learners to accelerate their progress and consequently, too many learners do not excel. Too often tutors set the same task for all learners, with the result that the most able often finish quickly and grow bored waiting for others who struggle to complete the task.
- Too many tutors do not assess, check or reinforce learners' understanding sufficiently before introducing new learning. Too often, tutors ask questions which they then answer themselves, or allow a few vocal learners to dominate at the expense of the rest of the group. In lessons, a minority of tutors do not explain activities clearly or give precise instructions to learners to enable them to understand what is expected of them. As a consequence, too many learners and apprentices do not grasp fundamental concepts, principles and ideas or have the chance to practise their application before they are introduced to a new topic or subject matter.
- Most tutors and assessors have high levels of subject expertise and practical experience which they use to make learning relevant and enhance the development of learners' practical skills. Learners respect the views of others and, when tutors facilitate activities adeptly, learners collaborate willingly with their peers, supporting each other to learn.
- Target-setting requires improvement. Too many tutors and assessors do not use the information on their learners' and apprentices' starting points to plan and review meaningful and challenging targets that inspire them to excel. Too many tutors set group targets for learners which take too little account of individual needs. A minority of learners and apprentices are set a single general target that lacks specificity, or do not have a target at all. As a result, too many learners and apprentices do not understand sufficiently what they need to do to make swift progress. They are not challenged to achieve the best they can.

- Tutors review learners' progress regularly and their feedback to learners is overwhelmingly encouraging. However, their feedback does not provide precise guidance to enable learners to know exactly what actions they should take to rectify any identified weaknesses; consequently, too few learners reach their potential. This concern was highlighted by inspectors at the previous inspection. For example, in a review of progress, a learner expressed confusion over adverbs and adjectives but the tutor simply agreed that these terms could be confusing and did not provide any further explanation or technique for the learner to deploy in order to distinguish the difference confidently.
- The majority of tutors encourage learners to learn regularly outside of the classroom, for example by setting follow-up homework tasks to build on previous learning. However, this work is often predicated on tutors' poor use of assessment information on learners' and apprentices' starting points and progress; consequently, not enough learners and apprentices augment their knowledge and skills sufficiently.
- Tutors of English and mathematics GCSE courses challenge their learners skilfully to deepen their understanding and apply their higher-order thinking skills cogently. For example, tutors of English GCSE courses plan very carefully to enhance learners' descriptive and creative writing skills, bolster their analytical skills and enable them to grasp a sound understanding of language terms and structures. As a result, most learners studying English GCSE improve their skills rapidly and achieve high-grade passes.
- Tutors recognise the value of promoting English and mathematics with learners, but too many lack the skills and confidence to integrate these skills within their vocational subject teaching. Too many tutors do not routinely correct learners' errors in spelling and grammar or promote learners' understanding of how to form and structure written English. Too few plan to develop learners' mathematics skills in imaginative ways that enable learners to understand the value of these skills. Too many tutors fail to plan activities and tasks that challenge or extend learners' understanding of these subjects.
- Learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those who require additional help with their studies receive high-quality support from staff that enables them to overcome barriers to their learning successfully and make good progress.
- Not enough tutors and assessors promote equality of opportunity and celebrate diversity in teaching and learning. As a result, too many learners and apprentices do not improve their understanding of living and working in multicultural Britain.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Inadequate

- Overall attendance during the current year is too low; during the inspection around one in five learners was absent from their lessons. Attendance of adults studying accredited and non-accredited courses is lower than at the same period in the previous year and not high enough.
- The majority of learners make good progress in their practical skills development and produce good standards of practical work. However, too many do not develop their higher-level thinking skills and extend their understanding and application of underpinning theory to reach their potential. Consequently, too many learners do not achieve high standards of written work.
- The large majority of learners take pride in their achievements; their sense of

achievement is reinforced by regular displays of learners' work in classrooms and corridors, through presentations to other learners and external exhibitions of work.

- The majority of apprentices develop a good work ethic and often make an enhanced contribution in the workplace that is valued highly by employers.
- Learners studying GCSE English and mathematics courses make good progress and develop these essential skills well. Learners enrolled on entry-level courses in English and mathematics make good progress in understanding fundamental aspects of literacy and numeracy. However, not enough learners taking up functional skills courses at levels 1 and 2 advance their understanding and knowledge to apply skills confidently.
- Leaders acknowledge that few learners enrolled on study programmes improve their work-related knowledge and skills through purposeful work experience or work-related learning. As a result, leaders have put in place actions to terminate the provision of study programmes.
- The majority of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities broaden their understanding of personal, social and ethical skills. However, too many other groups of learners do not develop or deepen their understanding sufficiently.
- Nearly all learners and apprentices demonstrate high levels of respect, self-discipline, tolerance and understanding with staff and their peers.
- Too few learners and apprentices develop a good understanding of the importance of British values and how to protect themselves from the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism.
- Leaders have yet to ensure that all learners are safe. Too many learners, particularly those aged 16 to 18 and vulnerable learners, do not know to whom and how to report their concerns if they do not feel safe.
- Managers have started to implement new processes to ensure that staff provide learners and apprentices with impartial careers guidance. However, these are at an embryonic stage and actions are yet to ensure that high-quality guidance enables all learners and apprentices to make informed choices about, and be prepared fully for, the next stage of their education, employment, self-employment or training.

Outcomes for learners

Requires improvement

- In 2014/15, the proportion of adult learners studying accredited courses who achieved their qualifications was below the national rate. Leaders' data for 2015/16 indicates that this proportion declined further and is considerably below that nationally. A greater proportion of adult learners studying languages achieve than nationally but a smaller proportion of learners enrolled on retail, preparation for life and work and information communication technology (ICT) courses succeed than their peers in similar provision.
- The most recently published data for 2014/15 shows that the overall achievement rate for apprentices is around that of similar providers. However, leaders' data indicates that the overall achievement rate in 2015/16 declined to significantly below that of similar providers. All business and management apprentices completed their programmes successfully but around two-fifths of apprentices studying health and social care failed. The proportion of apprentices who achieve within the planned timescale also declined and is below that of similar providers.

- Just under a half of all trainees on traineeships leave their programme to progress on to employment, education or further training. Leaders recognise that this requires improvement and have recently rationalised their traineeships provision to one high-performing subcontractor.
- Most learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve as well as their peers. Learners with Asperger syndrome and autistic spectrum disorder perform highly. However, learners with dyslexia fare worse than their peers. Leaders do not monitor and evaluate the achievement of learners who receive discretionary bursary support or learners with experience of local authority care.
- The majority of employed learners progress on to higher levels of learning. However, leaders' data indicates that far too many unemployed learners who are looking for work do not secure employment. Leaders acknowledge that they need to monitor the outcomes for unemployed learners more effectively to secure a robust understanding of the impact of provision. As a result of good partnership working with employers, around three quarters of the small number of unemployed learners studying courses in the provider's care sector work academy have secured meaningful employment.
- A high proportion of adult learners studying English and mathematics GCSE courses achieve A* to C grade passes. However, too many learners studying functional skills courses at levels 1 and 2 do not develop their English and mathematics skills sufficiently or achieve.
- The vast majority of apprentices remain in employment; a minority advance to take up wider roles in the workplace. Leaders acknowledge that not enough younger learners on study programmes progress to employment or higher levels of learning. Leaders identify that too few adult learners taking up family learning courses progress to study formal qualifications.

Types of provision

Adult learning programmes

Inadequate

- At the time of inspection, 2,848 adults were enrolled on accredited courses across a range of subjects and levels. Around three-fifths of all 7,234 adult learners are studying on non-accredited provision. Of this total, 193 learners were enrolled on employability programmes.
- Leaders have not ensured that all adult learners are safe and feel safe. Managers have not ensured that vulnerable learners attending lessons with other learners at multiple sites across a large geographical area are safe.
- Leaders ensure that each strand of the provider's adult learning provision has a clearly defined purpose; courses providing vocational training, community learning, family learning and employability have precise remits and comprise a broad range of study to meet local needs. Leaders have established a broad range of provision that enables a large number of people to participate in multiple venues and at multiple locations across a large geographical area.
- Leaders and managers are well informed about regional and national priorities and use local information on population demographics to plan relevant adult learning provision to

local needs. Leaders work productively with a range of employers and partners to widen participation and improve people's chances of securing employment, for example work with Jobcentre Plus to provide learning in care and hospitality work-based academies. Very productive partnerships exist with local schools and children's centres to provide family learning opportunities.

- Leaders and managers use their community learning fund effectively to develop learning programmes and projects that develop stronger communities. For example, the recently developed 'Gift of Care' project is resourced through community learning funds to provide provision that trains people to provide care to vulnerable and elderly people in local communities.
- Too few tutors plan teaching, learning and assessment that enable all learners to make the progress of which they are capable. Too many tutors plan generic learning outcomes that do not meet the needs of their learners. Too many do not make effective use of assessment information on learners' starting points and progress. As a result, the most able learners are not challenged sufficiently to make rapid progress and those who require more time to understand how to complete tasks confidently do not consolidate their learning. Too many learners repeat courses without any additional targets to challenge them to excel and progress to higher levels of learning.
- Not enough tutors promote learners' achievement by recording their progress accurately and using this information to set pertinent targets. As a consequence, too many learners enrolled on non-accredited courses do not make the progress of which they are capable because their progress is not tracked and used to challenge them to improve their work and excel.
- Tutors enable the large majority of learners to produce and create high standards of practical work, particularly those enrolled on community learning courses. For example, learners produced industry-standard Christmas wreaths in a floristry lesson for beginners; learners enrolled on a dressmaking course created garments of high quality; most learners taking music courses achieve high grades.
- Tutors and support staff enable adeptly the large majority of learners with complex learning needs to overcome barriers to their learning and make good progress.
- Too few tutors on accredited courses plan for the development of learners' work-related skills. Tutors do not promote relevant industry-specific contexts sufficiently and, as a result, too few learners looking for work secure employment, while others fail to grasp the relevance of their studies to the world of work.
- Too few tutors improve learners' English and mathematics skills in vocational subjects. For example, tutors do not correct learners' errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar sufficiently and often pay scant attention to ensuring that learners understand how to structure sentences and paragraphs. In a minority of lessons, tutors' resources and presentations include poor use of written English. As a consequence, too many learners do not value the importance of these essential skills in industry and employment sectors.

Apprenticeships

Requires improvement

- A total of 269 apprentices were following programmes in health and social care, business administration and education and training at the time of the inspection. A total of 122

were studying at intermediate level, 109 at advanced level and 38 at higher level. Just under a fifth of all apprentices were aged 16 to 18.

- Leaders ensure that provision is planned and managed to meet fully the principles and requirements of apprenticeships. All apprentices receive sufficient on- and off-the-job training. However, managers' monitoring and evaluation of apprentices' progress is weak; their actions to improve apprentices' overall achievement rates and achievement rates within the planned timescale are not effective.
- The majority of employers are involved in the planning of apprentices' programmes. Where involvement is strong, employers select modules for study based on the workplace roles of apprentices. The majority of employers value effective communication with the provider. However, a minority of employers are not involved sufficiently in the planning of provision and view the level of communication as too infrequent to be of value.
- Too many tutors do not plan tasks and activities that challenge apprentices to augment their understanding of underpinning theory well. Consequently, not enough apprentices can relate the links between theory and practice confidently. Too many tutors do not check and consolidate sufficiently apprentices' understanding of topics before introducing new learning. As a result, not enough apprentices make the progress of which they are capable.
- Target-setting requires improvement; targets are often too ambiguous and do not challenge apprentices to excel. Too many targets lack the required specificity to inspire and motivate apprentices to reach their potential. Too few tutors and assessors plan to enable apprentices to accelerate their knowledge and skills beyond the minimum requirements of their programme.
- In practical sessions, tutors and assessors deploy their good industry knowledge and expertise to ensure that the majority of apprentices develop good practical skills and contribute effectively to the workplace. For example, administration apprentices improve their ICT skills by producing spreadsheet documents with a broad range of manipulation options that their work colleagues use to improve their data analysis. A minority of apprentices following programmes in health and social care gain additional qualifications, including dementia training, that enhance their roles in the workplace and are valued highly by employers.
- Tutors and assessors do not enable apprentices to develop their higher-order thinking skills or improve their English and mathematics skills sufficiently. For example, not enough apprentices are challenged to take up in-depth written research and analysis related to their programme such as exploring the rights and responsibilities of employers. Too many tutors and assessors pay little attention to identifying and correcting apprentices' errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar. Few apprentices are challenged to extend their mathematics skills and solve complex problems.
- The use of assessment requires improvement. Too much assessment fails to inspire apprentices to excel and make rapid progress. Too often, staff do not plan to enable apprentices to complete assessments to the best of their ability. A few apprentices are not provided with assessment plans soon enough after they start their programmes. Too many apprentices incur a backlog of assessments that inhibits their progress. Consequently, too many apprentices do not complete within the agreed planned timescales.

- Managers have improved the provision of information, advice and guidance to ensure that apprentices start appropriate programmes at the right level. Although managers' plans to improve careers guidance are at an early stage and yet to secure an impact, most apprentices who complete their programmes successfully progress to employment with their employers. However, leaders do not know the destinations of too many of those who fail their apprenticeship programmes.

Provider details

Unique reference number	51766
Type of provider	Community learning and skills
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	12,227
Principal/CEO	Peter Cook
Telephone number	0333 0131545
Website	www.essex.gov.uk/Adult-Learning

Provider information at the time of the inspection

Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4 or above				
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16–18 9	19+ 1,412	16–18 20	19+ 1,249	16–18 0	19+ 174	16–18 0	19+ 13
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18 35	19+ 87	16–18 10	19+ 99	16–18 0	19+ 38		
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
	30		0		0			
Number of learners on non-accredited learning courses	4,357							
Number of learners for which the provider receives high-needs funding	0							
Funding received from:	Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	Essex CC Youth Provider Interact First Stop Colchester CVS Signpost							

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the deputy head, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

Inspection team

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