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Ms Brenda McLeish
Chief Executive Officer
Learning Curve Group Limited
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Bishop Auckland
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Dear Ms McLeish

Short inspection of Learning Curve Group Limited (formerly Learning Curve (JAA) Ltd)

Following the short inspection on 12 and 13 July 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The inspection was the first short inspection carried out since the provider was judged to be good in March 2014.

This provider continues to be good.

Leaders and managers have a clear and ambitious strategy to provide education and training to meet the needs of a wide range of learners and apprentices, both in the north east of England and nationally. Skills centres in the north east of England are located in areas of high unemployment such as Middlesbrough and Sunderland. They attract young people and adults to programmes that successfully improve their skills for employment. Since the previous inspection, leaders have significantly invested in the staffing structure to improve further the delivery of English and mathematics, and the vast majority of learners and apprentices develop skills in these subjects well. You have ensured that learners and apprentices across all programmes continue to receive good education and training.

Your managers have very positive relationships with employers, who value your flexible and responsive approach to the provision of training for apprentices and other staff. As a result of this approach, employers return for additional training and work with you to provide innovative solutions to engaging and training apprentices and other staff.

The flexible learning programme, which is delivered mostly by distance learning, was a strength at the previous inspection. The programme continues to enable learners to follow training programmes that meet their needs. Good induction provides useful information to learners about course requirements and the support

that is available to help them to achieve. Learners use good-quality resources to improve their subject knowledge and skills.

Achievement among apprentices aged 19 and above, who make up the vast majority, is high. However, too few of the much smaller group of 16- to 18-year-old apprentices achieve their programme within the planned timescale. The achievement of the small number of apprentices on higher level apprenticeships is too low. Achievement among adult learners on level 2 programmes is high; however, it is too low for the small proportion of adult learners who study at level 3.

You work closely with a number of subcontractors who deliver the majority of the apprenticeship provision. Managers cease to work with subcontractors that do not meet their expectations. One subcontractor recently went into administration, affecting a number of apprentices in information and communication technology. Leaders responded by setting up an academy in the local area to work with the apprentices who were affected. However, managers were unable to mitigate fully the impact of the failed subcontractor, which has contributed to the current low achievement of 16- to 18-year-old apprentices.

Learners on study programmes make good progress. Many of these learners had a poor experience of education in the past and often begin their programmes reluctantly. Tutors ensure that these learners quickly become re-engaged and motivated to learn.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding policies and procedures are fit for purpose. Staff who have contact with learners and apprentices have appropriate Disclosure and Barring Service checks, and all staff carry out mandatory safeguarding training. The materials used for the training are of high quality and raise staff awareness of issues appropriately. Staff also have access to online training resources that managers develop in response to key safeguarding issues. For example, a module about young people and their mental health issues is now available. Managers ensure that staff who work for subcontractors receive appropriate training in safeguarding, the 'Prevent' duty and British values.

Managers act swiftly in response to any reports of safeguarding issues and referrals under the 'Prevent' duty. As a result of improved staff awareness, a greater number of referrals are made. Designated safeguarding managers respond quickly to provide effective support to learners or to involve outside agencies.

Managers discharge their responsibilities under the 'Prevent' duty effectively. The 'Prevent' duty action plan is comprehensive, monitored and updated regularly by managers. Managers ensure that staff are alert to the dangers of extreme views and radicalisation among learners, particularly within the skills centres. Learners across all programmes demonstrate a basic understanding of the dangers of extremism, and a significant minority display a sophisticated understanding. Managers have developed high-quality online materials on safeguarding topics,

which learners who study by distance learning use effectively.

Inspection findings

- Tutors encourage apprentices who already have qualifications in English and mathematics to develop their skills further through challenging assessment tasks. Tutors effectively develop apprentices' use of English within their written work, and ensure that apprentices use vocational terminology well and develop good proofreading skills. Tutors integrate mathematics effectively into vocational training. For example, learners in painting and decorating measure wallpaper requirements and calculate wallpaper paste ratios accurately. Apprentices in healthcare can calculate the correct medicine dosage. Resources on flexible learning programmes ensure that learners develop their English and mathematical skills well. However, too many adult learners on construction programmes do not receive sufficient support to improve their English and mathematical skills and achieve qualifications in these subjects.
- Tutors effectively develop learners' personal and job-related skills such as confidence, communication, independent research and the ability to identify and self-correct errors within their work. Apprentices develop new vocational skills as a result of their programme. They are highly motivated and display appropriate professional and work-related skills. For example, apprentices use their advanced information technology skills to good effect in a range of administration settings. In a few instances, tutors do not challenge the most able learners and apprentices sufficiently within lessons, and tutors do not take sufficient account of existing skills and knowledge, particularly for learners on higher level programmes.
- Leaders and managers monitor closely the progress that learners and apprentices make. Across all programmes, staff carry out thorough and accurate assessment of learners' progress in developing skills and understanding, including in English and mathematics. The vast majority of learners on study programmes start with few qualifications and make good progress, with many successfully completing their course and progressing into careers such as those in the army.
- Managers have improved the monitoring of learners' destinations; progress into employment or further study is good for adult learners, learners on traineeships and those on study programmes. However, the recording of apprentices' destinations and the positive contribution that they make to the workplace requires further development.
- Managers have successfully improved the achievement of adult learners following a decline in 2015/16, and achievement is now good. Achievement of English and mathematics qualifications for adult learners and 16- to 18-year-old learners on study programmes is high. The small proportion of adult learners who study courses at level 3 and are funded through advanced learner loans are less successful than the vast majority who study at level 2 or below.
- The proportion of 16- to 18-year-old apprentices who complete their programme on time is too low. Managers have recognised that they need to improve initial

advice, guidance and induction, and to increase the provision of support to help with personal issues for these apprentices. These actions have not yet had an impact on the proportion who achieve their qualification. The achievement of the small group of apprentices on higher level apprenticeships is too low. Managers now ensure that initial course advice provided to higher level apprentices is more rigorous, and comprehensively outlines all the requirements of the programme. Managers are also working with employers more effectively to ensure that higher level apprentices can provide evidence of their success in meeting the requirements of apprenticeship. However, it is too early to identify the impact of managers' actions.

- Since the previous inspection, managers have ensured that the observation of teaching, learning and assessment is more rigorous, with an improved focus on learning and progress, leading to very useful feedback for tutors. Effective coaching and support for tutors have resulted in an improvement in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment so that only a very small minority of tutors do not meet the company's high expectations. Managers monitor the quality of subcontractors' provision closely. They set challenging targets for subcontractors, meet regularly with subcontractors' managers to monitor and track learners' progress, and apply the same rigorous process of observation of teaching, learning and assessment that they use in directly delivered provision. The performance of subcontractors is in line with, and in a few instances better than, that of the directly delivered provision.
- Managers identify emerging concerns and areas of underperformance effectively. They intervene quickly where necessary to improve the provision successfully. However, arrangements to measure the impact of their actions are not sufficiently robust; too many measures of success in the quality improvement plan are not specific enough.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- adult learners in construction are supported well to gain the English and mathematical skills and qualifications that they need for work
- they further develop the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that all tutors provide sufficient challenge to the most able learners
- they review the reasons why apprentices aged 16 to 18, those on higher level apprenticeships and adult learners at level 3 achieve less well than others, and take appropriate action to improve achievement in these areas
- they improve the collection and analysis of information about apprentices' destinations and their contribution to the workplace
- actions that managers set to make improvements contain clear and specific targets and measures of success.

I am copying this letter to the Education and Skills Funding Agency. This letter will

be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Angus
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

The inspection team comprised two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Ofsted Inspectors, and you assisted us in the role of nominee. We met with you and members of your management team. We observed teaching, learning and assessment sessions in skills centres, and at employers' premises. We spoke to learners, apprentices and employers. We scrutinised key documents, including those related to safeguarding, self-assessment and quality assurance. We analysed achievement data.