

Activate Community and Education Services

Independent specialist college

Inspection dates

16–18 October 2017

Overall effectiveness		Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good	Provision for learners with high needs Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good	
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good	
Outcomes for learners	Good	
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection		Requires improvement

Summary of key findings

This is a good provider

- Extremely effective leadership has improved the culture of the organisation significantly.
- Leaders' exceptionally high expectations of staff and learners have improved the quality of teaching, learning and assessment so that it is good.
- Personalised information, advice and guidance and impartial careers guidance ensure that learners have highly individualised learning programmes that support their next steps when they leave the centres.
- Staff benefit from a wide range of relevant training and development opportunities. This has improved their teaching practices considerably, particularly in meeting the needs of learners who have complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Staff use a range of specialised learning resources skilfully in lessons, enabling most learners to make good progress, develop their communication skills and make decisions for themselves.
- The proportion of learners who achieve accredited qualifications, including English and mathematics, is good.
- All leavers in 2016/17 progressed to further education, supported employment, volunteering or community projects.
- Leaders do not use the findings from their observations of teaching, learning and assessment effectively in staff performance reviews. They do not robustly identify key actions to improve staff performance further.
- Staff do not make sufficient use of the long-term personal objectives of a very small minority of learners to enable them to achieve all of their personal goals by the time they leave the centres.
- Actions identified in the quality-improvement plan are not specific enough to measure accurately the rate at which key weaknesses are improved.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Activate Community and Education Services (Activate) is a charity that provides a variety of specialist services for young people who have a range of learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Approximately half of the current learners have complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Activate received its first direct-funding contract in 2014. Activate offers day provision for learners for three days a week, 37 weeks a year. Activate has two sites. The main site is located at Kirkby in Knowsley and the second site is at Birkenhead, on the Wirral.
- At the time of inspection, Activate had 59 learners, of which 50 were based at the Knowsley centre. The study programme provides learners with education, training and support towards independent living, supported employment, further education and community engagement. The Knowsley site has a range of vocational facilities, including animal care and horticulture.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Improve the setting and monitoring of learners' short-term individual learning goals using long-term personal objectives to ensure that all learners achieve their personal objectives by the time they leave the centres.
- Ensure that the outcomes of observations of teaching, learning and assessment are used routinely in staff performance reviews to set clear and specific actions for staff to improve their performance further.
- Improve the robustness of actions in the quality improvement plan and ensure that they are specific and relate to the key areas for improvement. Ensure that precise improvement measures are stated so that progress can be evaluated accurately.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Since the last inspection, leaders and managers have reviewed staffing and the courses on offer. This has led to a full staff restructure, including the appointment of a new chief executive officer. The leadership team is almost entirely new, as are many of the staff. The proportion of learners who have complex and/or multiple learning difficulties and disabilities has more than trebled since the last inspection.
- The newly appointed chief executive officer and her leadership team have exceptionally high expectations of staff and learners. They are extremely focused and have a clear ambition to improve continuously learners' progress and achievements. They have worked tirelessly to address the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. Although most weaknesses have been resolved, a few still remain.
- As a result of strengthened performance-management processes, many staff have left the organisation. This is because they did not have the skills or experience needed to work competently with learners who have very complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Teachers and learning support staff benefit from a wide range of staff training and development that has improved their teaching practices and the development of their specialist skills. For example, all learning support assistants have received training and achieved a teaching and learning support qualification at level 3. Teachers regularly observe teaching practices in other independent specialist colleges and share good practice in staff training and development sessions. As a result, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment has improved significantly.
- Leaders and managers have good working relationships with partners such as local further education colleges, employers and community organisations. Learners enjoy working on community projects, for example with a local day-care centre. Many learners benefit from a good range of external work-experience activities in cafés, shops, home improvement superstores and the national citizenship service. Work-related activities at the Knowsley centre, such as animal care and horticulture, are highly effective in supporting learners to develop their independence and skills for supported employment.
- Information, advice and guidance for learners have improved considerably. Learners and their parents and carers receive tailored information, advice and guidance based on rigorous assessments of learners' starting points. Thorough and impartial careers advice and guidance help learners and their parents and carers make informed and realistic decisions about learners' next steps on leaving the centres.
- Leaders use funding for learners with high needs very successfully. Leaders and managers have invested significantly in assistive technology, such as interactive whiteboards and tablet computers, to support learners' communication and choice-making skills. At the previous inspection, no therapies were available for learners. Learners now benefit from a range of therapies, including speech and language, hydrotherapy and physiotherapy. These are used skilfully to develop learners' physical, language and communication skills.
- The environment and culture at Activate ensure that all learners, staff and visitors feel welcome and safe. Learners enjoy their learning. However, they only have a very basic

awareness of the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism and the values of living in modern Britain.

- A new electronic tracking system has recently been introduced to check learners' progress against personal objectives. However, teachers and managers do not use long-term objectives effectively to set specific and individualised short- and medium-term targets for a minority of learners. Targets set for learners are not broken down into small enough steps. Sometimes they are too difficult for learners, and a small minority of staff, to understand. As a result, a few learners make slower progress towards their targets than they should.
- All staff are involved fully in the self-assessment process. However, the resulting draft report is very critical and focuses too much on quality processes rather than on the effect that actions have on improving all aspects of provision. As a result, actions identified in the quality-improvement plan are not specific enough to measure accurately the rate of improvement. Although the draft self-assessment report is broadly accurate, leaders and managers have been too harsh in their self-assessment grades.
- The outcomes of observations of teaching, learning and assessment are not used appropriately to inform regular performance reviews. Actions from performance reviews focus on organisational expectations, for example adhering to policies and procedures or attending mandatory training, and not on improving the quality teaching, learning and assessment further.

The governance of the provider

- Since the previous inspection, three quarters of board members have been replaced. The board now has a broader range of members with relevant experience and expertise. Board members use their skills effectively to provide support for leaders and managers. A board member with considerable expertise in the education sector has recently joined the group. The board is actively seeking to recruit further members to strengthen all aspects of governance.
- Board members continue to have a clear understanding of their strategic role. However, they recognise that they do not challenge leaders sufficiently about all aspects of the provision at the centres.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Staff receive regular training in safeguarding, including the 'Prevent' duty, which enables them to help learners to stay safe. The checking of learners' individual risk assessments is thorough. Very close partnership working with the local authority, the multi-agency safeguarding hub, external agencies and the police ensures that safeguarding issues and concerns are referred swiftly.
- Policies and procedures for safeguarding, including health and safety and the 'Prevent' duty, are comprehensive, appropriate and updated regularly. Incident and accident records are thorough and reported to board members at every meeting.
- Leaders follow strict guidelines on the safer recruitment of staff. Thorough checks on the suitability of staff are made prior to appointment. Staff members are not left unsupervised

with learners until all checks are complete.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teachers plan interesting and highly individualised lessons based on learners' starting points. The extremely caring and respectful culture and ethos of the centres means that learners' physical, emotional and educational needs are met fully. Learners enjoy their lessons and participate enthusiastically in activities that develop their independence, communication and decision-making skills successfully.
- The vast majority of learners make good progress. As learners' skills increase, they develop high levels of confidence and are increasingly able to work independently or with decreasing levels of support.
- Teachers and learning support staff prepare learners very skilfully for life after leaving the centres. Learners participate in tasks that develop good vocational skills. They have access to real working environments at the Knowsley centre and in external work placements. For example, learners on work experience in the kitchen of a day-care centre produced high-quality food, including homemade bread, soup and drinks for centre users.
- Teachers and learning support staff are committed, enthusiastic and caring. They provide encouragement for learners to succeed. Teachers' oral feedback to learners is positive and developmental, which helps learners to increase their skills and, as a result, most learners make good progress. However, some of the most able learners require more challenging tasks and developmental feedback to support their progress.
- Learners' timetables are highly personalised. This helps learners to choose the activities that they enjoy most and this also prepares them successfully for their next steps after leaving the centres.
- Staff use questioning techniques effectively to encourage learners to develop their responses and to help them develop new skills. As a result, learners increase in confidence and resilience and they become more willing to complete new tasks and activities.
- Teachers develop learners' English and mathematical skills in functional-skills lessons competently and also through the successful integration of English and mathematics in the majority of lessons. However, teachers do not use individual learning targets effectively to improve specific English and mathematical skills or to ensure that all learners develop and reinforce these skills.
- The checking and recording of learners' progress requires improvement. The benefits of the recently implemented electronic tracking and monitoring system cannot yet be seen. Targets set for learners in classes are not always clear and are often not broken down into easily identifiable steps.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

- Learners make good progress in developing their personal and social skills. They develop high levels of self-confidence as they complete tasks and activities. They also enjoy working independently and with their peers. Learners benefit from a wide range of practical activities that develop their personal and social skills. For example, they work in

the Knowsley centre's tuck shop and kitchens, where they develop and improve their independent living skills.

- Support for learners' physical and emotional needs is good. Staff work closely with parents, carers and therapists to ensure that hydrotherapy, physiotherapy, and speech and language therapy are used appropriately to improve learners' physical, social, emotional and communication skills.
- Staff manage learners' behaviour very competently. They use behaviour-management strategies skilfully to minimise learners' anxieties. For example, staff use music to provide learners with sensory stimulation to reduce their anxiety and to keep them calm.
- Learners develop the confidence and ability, with reducing levels of support from staff, to plan their own day. For example, learners who are unable to read plan their day and describe what they need to do using a pictorial daily timetable.
- Learners' attendance at lessons is good. They feel safe and have confidence in talking to their teachers if they have any concerns or anxieties.
- Learners benefit from regular short-term placements with a range of employers. These ensure that learners carry out valuable work activities that provide good preparation for moving on from the centres. Highly effective and appropriate centre-based work-related activities, including animal care and horticulture, prepare learners for external work placements. They also enable them to develop very useful skills such as those needed for caring for a range of domestic animals, farm animals and reptiles. Learners also grow and nurture vegetables and plants.
- Sensory development sessions at the beginning of each day help to prepare learners for learning. They also help to meet learners' physical and emotional needs very successfully. Activities include physical education in the gym and calming sessions in the sensory and music rooms.
- Risk assessments for activities both on- and off-site are thorough. Staff have received training and understand the 'Prevent' duty. However, learners do not have a sufficient understanding of the 'Prevent' duty and how it may affect them when they are not in the centres.

Outcomes for learners

Good

- Approximately half of the learners have complex and/or multiple learning disabilities and/or difficulties. These learners are on the 'choices' programme. The remaining learners are on the 'futures' programme. Learners on both programmes enjoy coming to the centres and most make good progress from their starting points.
- Almost all learners who take accredited qualifications, including a few learners on the 'choices' programme, achieve them by the planned end date. Accredited qualifications, mainly at entry level, include functional skills in English and mathematics, the award in personal progression, preparing for employment, and preparation for life and work.
- Most learners on the 'futures' programme make good progress in developing their skills in mathematics, and speaking, listening, reading and writing. Most achieve functional skills qualifications in mathematics and English and many make such good progress that they quickly move to a higher level.

- Although fewer learners achieved their individual learning objectives in 2016/17, this is because the learning objectives set were far more challenging. In previous years, learners were set learning objectives that they could achieve easily or had already achieved.
- A few learners on the 'choices' programme make swift and sustained progress. They are able to move to the 'futures' programme and ultimately to courses at local further education colleges.
- There are no significant differences in progress for different groups of learners. Programmes are highly personalised to meet the individual needs of each learner.
- The standard of learners' work in classes and work experience settings is good. For example, learners produce high-quality and unique pieces of artwork when participating in a community project with a prestigious art gallery in Liverpool.
- Staff prepare learners thoroughly for leaving the centres and progressing to their next steps. All learners leaving the centres in 2016/17 progressed successfully to courses at local further education colleges, supported employment, volunteering or community work.

Provider details

Unique reference number	59144
Type of provider	Independent specialist college
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	60
CEO	Jane Young
Telephone number	0151 545 1279
Website	www.activatearts.com

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	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
	–	59	–	–	–	–	–	–
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	–	–	–	–	–	–		
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
	–		–		–			
Number of learners aged 14 to 16	–							
Number of learners for which the provider receives high-needs funding	59							
At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	–							

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the chief executive officer, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report, their development plans and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews 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

Anita Pyrkotsch-Jones, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Susan Gay	Ofsted Inspector
Maggie Thompson	Ofsted Inspector

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