

Inspection of Hertfordshire County Council (known as Step2Skills)

Inspection dates:

28 November to 1 December 2023

Overall effectiveness

Good

The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Adult learning programmes	Good
Apprenticeships	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Information about this provider

Hertfordshire County Council's education provision, known as Step2Skills, is part of the Adult Care Services Directorate. At the time of the inspection, there were approximately 511 adult learners and 70 apprentices in learning.

Adults study a broad range of courses from entry level to level 2 that are either accredited or non-accredited. Most courses are in key areas such as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), English, mathematics, digital skills, employability and well-being. All apprentices are adults and study the level 3 operational firefighter apprenticeships. There are no learners in receipt of high needs funding.

Leaders work with 12 subcontractors, who provide most of the courses through community venues across the region.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Teachers create a calm and inclusive environment that motivates adults and apprentices to study and complete their courses.

Learners appreciate the small class sizes and value the support they receive from teachers and their peers. They work well together and enjoy developing suitable social connections with other people on their courses. This gives them a sense of belonging to a community and improves their self-worth.

Apprentices enjoy their challenging and interesting course. They value the many opportunities for practical skills development using technical equipment in scenario-based exercises to reinforce their theoretical learning. This enables them to quickly become confident using equipment such as breathing cylinders when encountering smoke in buildings.

Adults and apprentices achieve their personal goals and qualifications because teachers support them well in building their skills and knowledge over time. Around half the adults progress into employment or further study. Adults develop their personal and social skills and prepare for work effectively.

Staff provide effective support and, as a result, adults and apprentices feel safe. Adults and apprentices are confident to contact staff if they have safeguarding or welfare concerns. They have a good understanding of fundamental British values and are respectful to their peers regardless of their different backgrounds or beliefs.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders and managers have a strong focus on widening participation. They are very aware of the social disadvantage in the communities they serve. They have well-designed courses that meet the needs of the community. For example, they have responded well to the high demand for ESOL courses as a result of the increase in refugees. They have also provided flexible teaching models using online and face-to-face pathways so that residents can access training.

Leaders have developed a broad and rich curriculum that allows adults and apprentices to achieve well. The ambitious apprenticeship curriculum meets the needs of the fire services very well. Teachers have very high aspirations for apprentices, who develop substantial new knowledge, skills and professional behaviours from a carefully planned curriculum. For example, operational firefighter apprentices can competently carry out risk assessments in road traffic collisions and conduct effective fire scene search procedures and decontamination methods. They develop a high level of confidence to respond to incidents quickly and calmly. Most apprentices achieve high grades in their final assessments. Adults benefit from well-planned digital skills courses, where they develop key skills needed for life, work and further study.

Teachers plan the curriculum in a logical way. This enables adults and apprentices to develop fundamental knowledge and skills before moving on to more complex concepts. For example, ESOL learners practise their verbal skills through daily living tasks before moving on to related reading and writing activities. This enables learners to build on skills and apply them fluently to a range of situations.

Apprentices first learn about basic firefighting equipment and how to use this to safely set up the environment in the case of an emergency. They are then taught how to skilfully apply this knowledge in scenario-based exercises using more complex equipment. They then go on to administer immediate trauma care.

Most adults and apprentices develop their English skills sufficiently well throughout their course. Teachers frequently correct spelling and grammar errors so that learners develop their writing skills over time. However, teachers do not embed and teach enough mathematics as part of their planned adult course. As a result, too few learners further develop their mathematics skills consistently well. Leaders are aware of this issue and are taking effective steps to improve the adult curriculum so that it includes more focus on mathematics. It is too early to see the impact of this work.

Most teachers are highly qualified and experienced. They use their subject knowledge effectively to enhance the learning experience of apprentices and adults. Apprentices receive expert support from highly trained teachers, who ensure that lessons include important operational considerations in an emergency, such as preserving the integrity of evidence samples recovered from incidents. Teachers have specialist ESOL teaching qualifications and considerable experience of teaching ESOL, which they use well to plan lessons tailored to their target group of learners.

Most teachers design lessons and activities that encourage adults and apprentices to actively participate in learning and improve the quality of their work. They present information clearly in online and face-to-face sessions. For example, teachers of the lino cutting course provide useful demonstrations on how to avoid smudging the image they print by using the appropriate mechanisms to hold the lino tile in place. Operational firefighter apprentices benefit from expertly taught and well-planned presentations on, for example, how to operate a vehicle-mounted water pump. As such, adults and apprentices receive up-to-date and relevant training to develop their skills quickly.

In most cases, teachers use a wide variety of effective assessment strategies to support learners and apprentices to practise what they have learned. For example, teachers use effective questioning techniques, online quizzes, and mnemonics to reinforce learning of key content. This helps adults and apprentices to remember important information.

Teachers do not consistently identify and take account of adults' existing knowledge and skills to plan courses. As a result, a few adult courses do not meet learners' needs. These learners do not make the progress of which they are capable.

Apprentices have high attendance and are motivated to learn. However, leaders do not have sufficient oversight of attendance across the full range of adult courses they offer. At the time of the inspection, the attendance of adults in too many lessons was low. Leaders are taking steps to improve their analysis of their attendance data. However, it is too early to see the impact of this.

Leaders and managers are ambitious for adults and apprentices with learning difficulties and/or special educational needs. They provide useful information to staff on the wide variety of needs learners have to ensure that effective support is put in place. These learners achieve very well on their courses and in line with their peers.

Apprentices have a good understanding of the risks of extremism and radicalisation. Their training ensures that they have a good awareness of county lines and ongoing risks in accordance with the community risk management plan. However, adults' understanding of local risks is underdeveloped. Leaders are taking appropriate steps to resolve this issue, but it is too early to evidence the impact of these actions.

Most learners receive appropriate careers information, advice and guidance to prepare them for their next steps. Staff provide good support for adults to prepare for interviews and apply for jobs. Apprentices receive a thorough career session as part of their induction that covers job roles in the fire service. In a few cases, learners do not receive sufficient careers advice to help them prepare for the wide range of job opportunities available to them on completion of their course.

Leaders and managers provide staff with a wide range of effective training to keep up to date with industry trends and develop their teaching practice. Teachers benefit from an effective annual training programme to develop their pedagogical skills. This includes how to teach effective online lessons. Teachers are provided with valuable opportunities to share good practice.

Leaders and managers have effective quality assurance mechanisms in place to evaluate the quality of education and training adults and apprentices receive. They accurately carry out a self-assessment and produce suitable quality improvement plans. This enables them to quickly identify issues and provide swift actions to drive improvement.

Leaders have high expectations of their subcontractors. They carefully select and monitor them through effective assurance visits. As a result, subcontractors provide high-quality training to adults and apprentices. Leaders quickly intervene to manage and support subcontractors who underperform.

Governors understand the strengths and weaknesses of the provision. They have the relevant skills and experience to undertake their specific roles. Governors receive suitable information from leaders, know where further improvement is needed and use their skills well to challenge and hold leaders to account.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Leaders should ensure that staff continue to support adults to improve their attendance, particularly in ESOL and mathematics courses.
- Teachers should consistently plan the curriculum to take into account learners' starting points so that they can make even better progress.
- Teachers must ensure that adults benefit from sufficient opportunities to develop their mathematics skills.
- Leaders should ensure that adults benefit from receiving useful information about local risks.

Provider details

Unique reference number	50133
Address	Room 325 County Hall Pegs Lane Hertford Hertfordshire SG13 8DF
Contact number	01992 588719
Website	www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/microsites/adult-learning/
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Chantal Lommel
Provider type	Community Learning and Skills – Local Authority
Date of previous inspection	11 and 12 February 2020
Main subcontractors	Adult Training Network Bedfordshire Combined Fire and Rescue Authority Community Action Dacorum Community Learning Partnership SPS Training Watford Women's Centre

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the quality assurance manager, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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