

The Pre-school Learning Alliance

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made on www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of the inspection, inspectors take account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body. Where appropriate, inspectors also consider the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk), reports from the inspectorates' quality monitoring or annual assessment visits, and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.

In addition to reporting on overall effectiveness of the organisation, its capacity to improve further, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management, this inspection focused on specialist provision in a pre-selected sample of regions.

- Early years and play work

Description of the provider

1. The Pre-school Learning Alliance (the Alliance) is a national voluntary organisation established in 1961. It is a registered company limited by guarantee with charitable status.
2. The company holds an adult and community learning contract with Leicestershire Learning and Skills Council (LSC), but delivers mostly adult vocational training in early years and play work vocational related qualifications (VRQs) at levels 1-3 and national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3. The provision is offered nationally. The company also provides national non-LSC funded provision including teacher training at level 4, funded by the Alliance, non-accredited training funded by local authorities and a small amount of family learning funded by the European Social Fund. Currently, 2573 LSC funded learners are attending courses at the Alliance, 3541 in 2005-06. LSC provision constitutes 40% of the total provision offered nationally. Typically, in any year up to 500 accredited courses are delivered by over 200 trainers.
3. The training programmes are delivered from seven regional centres each managed by a regional training and quality assurance manager. The managers for each regional centre are responsible to the national director of training and quality who is accountable to the chief executive. The Alliance's national administrative centre is located in London.
4. The Alliance is a membership organisation and provides a range of services in addition to training. The company directly manages approximately 130 early years settings including over 30 children's centres which provide nursery education and childcare to more than 500,000 children as well as learning and personal development to their parents. The company supports 15,000 neighbourhood-based community pre-schools.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Good: Grade 2
Achievement and standards	Good: Grade 2
Quality of provision	Good: Grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: Grade 2
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

Sector subject area

Early Years and Play work	Good: Grade 2
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Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

5. The overall effectiveness of provision is good. Achievement and standards are good as are the quality of provision and leadership and management. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory. Early years and play work provision is good.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

6. The Alliance has demonstrated a good capacity to improve. Leadership and management are good; success rates have improved and are high. The provider continues to maintain very productive partnerships with local authorities, other providers and a range of national and regional organisations. The Alliance has made good progress in tackling the key challenges identified at the previous inspection and most of the weaknesses have been resolved. The Alliance now has extensive management information and uses this well to monitor and evaluate performance. It has made good progress implementing a satisfactory literacy and language strategy. The arrangements for quality assurance have improved but the observation of teaching and learning remain unsatisfactory.
7. The self-assessment process is thorough and accurate. It has been developed since the previous inspection to include a six monthly review. Trainers and managers are involved fully in the process but there is insufficient involvement of external partners. The most recent report is sufficiently critical and judgements are generally well supported by evidence. Inspection grades match those of the self-assessment report. The Alliance implements action plans well.

Key strengths

- High success rates
- Good teaching and learning linking theory and practice
- Well designed and flexible training programmes
- Effective support for learners
- Good strategic leadership and planning
- Particularly effective partnership working
- Good operational management

Key areas for improvement

- Insufficient use of information and communication technology
- Observation of teaching and learning

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

- Achievement and standards are good. Provider data indicates that overall success rates on all courses, both regionally and nationally, are high. Learners on VRQ programmes, most of the vocational provision, make good progress. It is too early to make a judgement on the progress and attainment of learners on NVQ programmes as the programme started recently. The attainment of those learners taking literacy qualifications is satisfactory. Success rates for learners who had no prior qualifications are high. Standards of work are good. Learners are developing useful skills which they use in the workplace. The self-assessment report reflected inspection findings well.

Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

- Teaching and learning are good. Most of the teaching and learning observed by inspectors is good. The best lessons are characterised by exciting, practical activities which bring learning topics to life. For example, in one lesson a wide range of food was used effectively to plan menus and cook meals to support a healthy eating project. In the weaker lessons, tutors do not sufficiently engage learners. Resources to support teaching and learning are satisfactory overall. However, trainers and learners in some regions do not use ICT enough to support learning effectively.
- Assessment arrangements and internal verification is very good. Internal verification is detailed and thorough. The chief internal verifier samples work from across all regions to effectively monitor the overall quality.
- Additional support is satisfactory. Learners' additional learning and support needs are identified through initial assessment at the start of their programme and appropriate support put in place.
- The Alliance is outstanding at meeting the vocational needs and interests of learners. The range of programmes is extensive and flexible, provided to meet the times, days and locations convenient for learners. Partners remark on the extremely useful and valuable service that the Alliance provides. The Alliance matches the learners' prior attainment and aspirations extremely well. Subcommittees comprised of elected representatives respond effectively to local needs. Employers are well served by all the services provided by the Alliance.
- Guidance and support for learners is good. Care is taken to ensure that learners are placed on the right course at the right level. Learners receive very effective pastoral and academic support from their trainers and learners appreciate the time taken to support them in their studies.
- Literacy, numeracy and language support is satisfactory. Good resources have been developed enabling trainers to embed literacy support into the programmes. Support for numeracy is less well developed.

15. The self-assessment report reflected well those judgements made by inspectors in teaching and learning and guidance and support. It did not reflect positively enough those inspection judgements made on the interest and needs of learners.

Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

16. Leadership and management is good. The Alliance continues to demonstrate strong leadership and good strategic planning. This is identified as a key strength in the self-assessment report. The trustees set a clear strategic direction and, with senior managers, plan, prioritise and implement strategies for the development of the charity well. The organisation has carefully aligned its priorities for development with national and local childcare strategies. These priorities include expanding the range of training programmes to support the development of a better qualified and more flexible childcare workforce equipped to work in a range of settings. Management of organisational change to enable the Alliance to meet these new challenges has been purposeful and effective.
17. Senior managers work closely with other childcare organisations to influence national childcare policy. The Alliance also works very effectively in partnership with other organisations nationally and locally to improve the quality and extend the range of provision and to make best use of resources. Partnership arrangements with local authorities, colleges and voluntary organisations provide good progression opportunities for learners and avoid duplication of provision. There are successful partnership initiatives to widen participation of under-represented groups. For example, courses are provided to meet the needs of women from specific minority ethnic groups and for learners with no formal qualifications.
18. Operational management is good. Challenging but realistic annual targets are set in operational plans. Timescales and responsibilities are identified clearly. Internal communications are effective. The Alliance continues to have effective procedures to manage the day-to-day running of its learning programmes. Staff roles and reporting responsibilities are clear. Training officers and trainers feel well supported through regular informal email and telephone contact. Priorities for staff development are clear and good staff development opportunities exist, although the take up by part-time trainers is sometimes poor.
19. Good progress has been made since the previous inspection in the accuracy and use of management information. The Alliance now collects detailed and accurate data. This is used effectively by the trustees and senior managers to make informed choices between competing priorities. Data is also used appropriately by managers regionally and nationally to monitor performance, to identify trends and to plan and improve the provision. However, only 2004-05 success rate data exists from the system implemented after the previous inspection. Many learners are still in training in 2005-06 and 2006-07.
20. The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Provision is planned carefully to be responsive to the needs of learners. The equality and diversity policy is well understood by staff and they are clear about how they contribute to its implementation. The recruitment and achievement of particular groups of learners is now analysed well to

monitor the success of widening participation initiatives and to compare performance. The promotion of equality within the subject sector area is satisfactory.

21. The Alliance's implementation of its skills for life strategy is now satisfactory. There is strong support for skills for life from the trustees and senior managers. Literacy support has been integrated with courses and skills for life specialist staff provide advice and guidance to regional training staff and learners. However, there is no systematic approach to the identification of learners' numeracy needs and no evaluation of the impact of support on learners' achievement.
22. The provider's self-assessment report broadly reflects inspection findings in leadership and management. It identifies areas for improvement well but does not reflect completely the strengths found by inspectors.
23. There is insufficient focus on learning in the observation of teaching and learning. The observation process is now well established with appropriate targets. However, the observations and the reports focus on the tutor's performance and not on the quality of learning. There is little evaluation of the quality of the learning taking place during the lesson or of learners' attainment.

What learners like:

- Good breakdown of work into manageable chunks
- Good group support to build confidence
- Flexibility to suit individuals
- Closeness of venues to home
- Help with assignments
- Learning the theory behind the practice
- Support from tutors and other learners

What learners think could improve:

- The workload on courses
- State of the venue
- Pre course information

Sector subject areas

Early years and play work

Good: Grade 2

Context

24. Currently, 2,573 learners are attending programmes in seven national regions. Approximately 11% are learners on NVQs at levels 2 and 3 and the rest are on VRQs at levels 1-3. All NVQs are run from the midlands region. All other qualifications are offered in all the regions. A small proportion of learners take additional qualifications in literacy. All learners on programmes at level 2 or above are either employed in the sector or undertaking voluntary work. Learners attend a range of community venues and have the option of distance learning on some programmes. The provision is delivered by full time and part time trainers.
25. Learners can join the programmes at any time of year. However, if learners join at the end of a year they do not complete their programme until the next contract year. Not all of the provider's success rates are included in the data returns at the end of a contract year. Success rates therefore, are calculated from the total who achieved against the total who started.

Strengths

- High success rates
- Good teaching and learning linking theory and practice
- Well designed and flexible training programmes
- Effective support for learners
- Good programme management

Areas for improvement

- Insufficient use of information and communication technology to promote learning with children

Achievement and standards

26. Achievement and standards are good. Success rates are high. The overall success rate for 2004-05, the only complete year of data, is 84%, with 83% success rates on short level 1 courses, 87% on long level 2 and 82% on level 3 courses. Success rates for 2005-06 are currently 82%, but there are still many learners in training. The success rates of learners taking literacy tests in 2005-06 are satisfactory at 74%. In 2005-06 overall success rates of learners who had no prior qualification are currently 83%. Learners and employers report significant improvements in their practice at work. Many learners take on extra responsibilities at work reflecting their improved knowledge, for example in family education and health and safety.

Quality of provision

27. Teaching and learning is good. Trainers link theory and practice well. Trainers use different strategies including one-to-one teaching, group work, practical demonstrations and role-play to very good effect. Small group work is used to identify needs effectively and challenge ways of working. In one lesson, learners successfully role-played different types of story telling. Very effective discussion explored key points from the story. Most teaching is well planned to meet the needs of individual learners. Trainers have excellent working relationships and understanding of learners and are skilled in using effective strategies to develop knowledge and understanding. Learners on more advanced programmes develop good evaluative and analytical skills. Examples of practice from learners' workplaces are used well to develop the theory behind actions or behaviours they have witnessed.
28. The Alliance's response to the needs and interests of learners is outstanding. Many learners have progressed from working as a parent volunteer through to level 3 or 4 programmes. Short level 1 courses enable many learners with no previous formal childcare experience and who may not have undertaken study for some time to re-enter education. A number of learners have progressed to programmes outside the Alliance including early years foundation degrees. Good succession planning enables volunteers to progress to qualified pre-school tutor status with the Alliance.
29. The organisation works innovatively with local authorities and other organisations to meet the needs of learners from disadvantaged communities and learners without qualifications. The Alliance works successfully with Bangladeshi learners combining language support with the childcare programme.
30. Guidance and support is good. Trainers provide effective support for learners, many of whom have not studied for some time. Teaching is well planned to introduce concepts and assessments effectively. Distance learning is used well to meet changing circumstances enabling learners who move to a new location to continue their studies. Good support for learners completing assignments includes help with the structure and layout of work. Additional one-to-one support for learners with additional support needs is satisfactory. Good personal support includes telephone, email and personal contact. Regular tutorials are used to monitor progress and identify and resolve barriers to learning and progress. However, a small number of learners did not receive timely information about the programme or the benefits of membership of the Alliance.
31. Initial assessment is satisfactory. All learners take an initial assessment in literacy, however, these are all paper based and there is no use of electronic assessments. The assessments are vocationally relevant and appropriate to different levels.
32. Induction is satisfactory. Pre-course introductory meetings are effective in preparing learners for the start of their programme. Induction covers health and safety, equal opportunities, and the content and requirement of the programme. A code of conduct of behaviour and expectations is drawn up and agreed by learners. Trainers develop detailed and useful notes about each learner based on initial assessments and first tutorials.
33. There is insufficient use of ICT by staff and learners to promote learning with children. Not all staff use laptops. Many teaching venues have insufficient access to ICT for learners and staff. In some regions trainers have insufficient use of laptops.

Leadership and management

34. Leadership and management are good. All courses are well structured and planned. Learners receive detailed information about their training programmes and are clear about their progress. All full-time staff attend frequent staff development sessions to gain information on the changes in childcare practice. Part-time staff are kept updated through newsletters and emails if they are unable to attend. Good support exists for regional training officers and trainers from the training and quality managers. Regional training officers monitor trainers and programmes well and use their findings to identify areas for improvement. There are planned monthly meetings for the regional training officers and minutes of meetings are emailed to trainers.
35. Resources are satisfactory. Trainers provide a good range of books, journals and internet resources for learners. Courses are taught in a range of suitable and accessible community venues. However, some venues do not have satisfactory teaching aids such as whiteboards. Trainers are well qualified, all either have or are working towards recognised teaching qualifications and many are still active early years practitioners. The provider's self-assessment report broadly reflects findings in the inspection report.
36. The understanding of equal opportunities by learners is satisfactory and vocationally appropriate. Trainers include references to equality and inclusion in their teaching. However, there are some cases where learners are not sufficiently challenged on their use of stereotypes.

