

Learning Curve

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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' monitoring 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:

- Health, public services and care
- Preparation for life and work
- Business, administration and law

Description of the provider

1. Learning Curve (LC), formerly JAA Associates, was established in 2004 as a limited company. It is based in Bishop Auckland and holds contracts with the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, North West and Greater London Regional LSCs. These contracts account for approximately 36% of the company's business. Currently, 330 learners are on Train to Gain programmes. Of these, 115 learners are in health, public services and care, 46 are in preparation for life and work and 169 are in business, administration and law. Learners are either completing National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 or 3 or national tests in literacy or numeracy at levels 1 or 2. Of the 284 learners in health, public services and care and business, administration and law, eight are also working towards a qualification in literacy or numeracy. In addition, a very small number of learners are in leisure, travel and tourism which was not inspected.
2. LC employs 37 staff to manage, deliver and administer the programmes. LC acts as a subcontractor to other training providers and colleges of further education, although no learners are currently enrolled. The company subcontracts a large amount of its literacy and numeracy provision to Derwentside Training (DT).
3. Bishop Auckland is situated in the county of Durham. Compared with other parts of the country, the working age population is under-qualified and under-skilled. Just 21% of the working age population has qualifications at level 4 compared with 27% nationally. More people in Durham have no qualifications than elsewhere. Durham has high rates of unemployment with specific areas of deprivation. More than 30% of Durham residents live in one of the most deprived wards in England and 39% are economically inactive. Less than 2% of the population are from minority ethnic groups.

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	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Leadership and management	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

Sector subject areas

Health, public services and care	Good: Grade 2
Preparation for life and work	Good: Grade 2
Business, administration and law	Good: Grade 2

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

4. The overall effectiveness of the provision is good. Capacity to improve, achievement and standards and all sector subject areas are good overall. The quality of provision is satisfactory, as are leadership and management and equality of opportunity.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

5. LC has a good capacity to improve. The company has restructured appropriately in a short space of time and invested in a number of new staff who are committed to achieving sustainable improvements. Practices have been analysed and effective changes introduced to resolve some of the identified shortcomings. These are accurately highlighted in the self-assessment report. Examples of good practice are promoted and shared within the company and externally with other collaborative partners.
6. Achievement and standards are good. Recent actions are already having a positive affect on achievement and retention. Managers set challenging targets and pursue them persistently to ensure high overall and timely success rates. Monitoring and management of staff and learners' performance is effective and linked closely to good use of the management information system.
7. The self-assessment process is thorough and inclusive and the report is accurate. The quality improvement plan is the key tool in driving forward continuous improvement. It is used as a working document by all staff and progress against the plan is monitored closely. Key actions leading to further improvements are prioritised. These include recruiting and retaining assessors, building capacity to match the planned growth effectively, embedding a more systematic approach to the collection and analysis of feedback and the revised observation of teaching and learning process. Some initiatives have yet to become established and their affect evaluated, for example, improvements in the quality of provision which, at present, is satisfactory overall with some good aspects.

Key strengths

- Good overall and timely success rates for most learners
- Good development of workplace skills
- Good arrangements to manage the subcontractor
- Particularly effective partnerships

Key areas for improvement

- Insufficient initiatives to raise the profile of equality of opportunity

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

8. Achievement and standards are good. Overall and timely success rates in cleaning are very good. In social care, overall success rates have been below national figures but current learners are now making good progress and timely success rates have increased significantly. For learners completing literacy and numeracy qualifications, overall and timely success rates are outstanding over a two-year period. For customer service, overall success rates are good, but for management and team leading they are poor. In business, administration and law, learners in the current year are making good progress and some have already completed before their end date. Learners in all three sector subject areas are developing good workplace knowledge, skills and confidence.

Quality of provision

Satisfactory: Grade 3

9. The quality of provision is satisfactory overall. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Induction is structured well and provides a useful foundation for learners' understanding of their programmes. Initial and diagnostic assessments effectively identify additional support needs, and the support provided for literacy and numeracy in business, administration and law is good. Assessment practices are satisfactory overall but good in health, public services and care. They are planned well, holistic and learners receive good feedback. However, the range of assessment practices in business, administration and law is limited. Progress reviews are satisfactory, although target-setting is not always sufficient and specific in health, public services and care and preparation for life and work.
10. Provision to meet learners' and employers' needs and interests is good. Programme delivery is highly flexible to meet a broad range of needs. LC works very effectively with local employers and other training providers to deliver well planned programmes.
11. Support and guidance for learners is satisfactory. They receive satisfactory support from assessors and employers. Learners are well informed about programme requirements and progression opportunities. Employers effectively support learners to carry out relevant work tasks so they can complete their NVQ.

Leadership and management

Satisfactory: Grade 3

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

12. Leadership and management are satisfactory overall. Arrangements to monitor the subcontracted provision are good. The subcontractor, DT, has a clear focus on improving learners' skill levels and is constantly looking to maximise

opportunities for learners. Data and information are shared at the regular and meaningful review and performance meetings. Very positive relationships promote sharing good practice and inclusion in cross-company tasks, for example, LC staff's involvement in observations of DT staff and DT staff's access to LC's resources. DT staff are providing training for some LC staff and contribute effectively to LC's self-assessment report.

13. Partnership working with local colleges and training providers is particularly effective. One member of staff is currently seconded from a local college and is providing expertise around internal verification and standardisation practices. LC staff have collaborative links with staff from other colleges to share best practice and training. A local college has arranged to provide equal opportunities training for some LC staff. The business development unit promotes the company well through good quality marketing materials and engages effectively with a wide range of employers. Networking between LC and other training providers encourages innovative initiatives. LC and one training provider jointly bid for funding and are now working together very productively in developing a learning portal to promote information learning technology.
14. Strategic direction and objectives are realistic and shared with all staff. Staff are committed, appropriately qualified and clear about their role within the company, especially following a recent restructure. Several staff at both senior management and assessor level are very new. The new bonus scheme is a supportive tool to motivate all staff within LC. Appraisal, staff development and training are set up to support each other. They ensure staff are prepared and informed to carry out allocated roles, complete most challenging tasks and achieve more realistic targets. However, staff development does not include all the needs identified during the observation process. The performance of staff and learners is managed and monitored very closely and is supported well with good quality data and information produced by the management information system. Reports are timely, accurate and helpful in guiding decisions and actions. Communication internally and externally is informative. A range of meetings take place to discuss various aspects of the company's business, however, minutes do not always specify clear actions or note how previous actions have been dealt with. Resources to support learning and delivery are satisfactory, however, a number of assessors still have to be appointed.
15. The procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements. Appropriate policies and procedures are in place, and LC works closely with a local college to promote safer working practices and environments. To date no safeguarding issues have been raised. All current learners are aged over 19 and not regarded as vulnerable adults.
16. Arrangements to assure and improve quality are satisfactory. Many quality assurance actions have been introduced very recently and some of these have not had sufficient time to make a full impact. Internal verification and standardisation ensures current practices meet awarding body standards. New internal quality audits are now being used effectively to identify where improvements can be made or best practice shared. A quality improvement calendar clearly maps out how quality is planned to be monitored throughout the

year. Feedback is collected from learners and employers but is not yet analysed systematically and used for improvement purposes. The observation process has been reviewed recently and a number of key changes introduced. However, the affect of this revised process has not been evaluated. The self-assessment process and report are inclusive, critical and accurately identify many strengths and areas for improvement. The subcontractor contributes effectively to the self-assessment report produced by LC.

17. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory and covered appropriately through up-to-date policies and procedures. Learners and staff have a satisfactory awareness of equality of opportunity which is promoted through inductions, subject training materials and reviews. An equality and diversity handbook is distributed to further promote understanding of discrimination, harassment and stereotyping. LC's marketing materials reflect an inclusive approach. Team meetings are used appropriately to raise some equality and diversity topics such as training opportunities and inclusion with employers. LC provides some free places for learners who are not eligible for funding. Plans are in place for some LC staff to be updated through a local college's training programme. This will be delivered to other LC staff through in-house training. Data from the management information system is used particularly well to analyse success rates in relation to different groups of learners. However, initiatives to further raise the profile of equality of opportunity are insufficient. No action plan or strategy is in place to guide developments.

What learners like:

- 'I can do the qualification in the workplace as part of my job'
- 'The qualification will help me to get promotion'
- 'Gaining confidence and qualifications'
- 'It makes me think more about my job'
- 'I am much better dealing with my team'
- 'Very good support from the assessor'
- 'I have a much better understanding of how the company works'
- 'Support from my employer'
- 'Learning new things'

What learners think could improve:

- 'More regular visits from assessors'
- 'Work sometimes gets in the way of getting on with the NVQ'
- 'I lost interest while I waited for a new assessor'

Sector subject areas

Health, public services and care

Good: Grade 2

Context

18. LC offers training and assessment in health, public services and care awards. Currently 115 learners are on Train to Gain, of whom 77 learners are working towards level 2 programmes in cleaning. Of the 38 learners completing NVQs in social care, 22 are working towards level 2 and 16 are working towards level 3. Of the 115 learners, six are also working towards a literacy or numeracy NVQ. Learners are referred mainly through LC's own promotional activity and work with the sector's local employers. Progress reviews take place every 10 to 12 weeks or more frequently if a learner has individual support needs. The NVQ is delivered flexibly in the workplace through workshops or individual sessions.

Strengths

- Very good overall success rates in cleaning
- Improved timely success rates for current learners
- Good acquisition of workplace knowledge and skills for current learners
- Good assessment practices

Areas for improvement

- Unsatisfactory overall success rates in social care programmes
- Insufficient target-setting

Achievement and standards

19. Overall, achievement and standards are good as identified in the self-assessment report. Overall success rates in cleaning programmes are very good at 100%. Timely success rates have improved significantly from 13% in 2007/08 to 100% in 2008/09. Similarly, timely success rates for social care programmes have increased to 70% in 2008/09. Overall success rates for NVQs in social care are unsatisfactory. In 2007/08 they were 53% at level 2 and 50% at level 3.

20. Learners gain good workplace knowledge and skills, as identified in the self-assessment report. Learners' grow in self-confidence, take responsibility for a wide range of tasks in the workplace and work to good professional standards. They produce a good standard of evidence in their well maintained portfolios.

Quality of provision

21. Overall, the quality of provision is satisfactory. Teaching and learning are satisfactory, as identified in the self-assessment report. Assessment practices are good for both cleaning and social care programmes. They are planned well and

outline the activity and methods needed to complete assessments. Assessments are holistic and thorough. Direct observations are recorded well and referenced to the NVQs. Learners receive positive and constructive verbal and written feedback. Assessors are confident in their role, knowledgeable about the subject area and have a good range of current occupational experience and skills.

22. Induction is satisfactory as identified in the self-assessment report. It is structured well and provides a solid foundation for learners' programmes. Learners are made aware of equal opportunities and the appeals and complaints procedure. All learners take a literacy and numeracy test to identify support needs. A skills scan is used to effectively identify the most appropriate NVQ units and training required. Induction gives learners more confidence and a greater understanding of their training at the start of the programme. Sufficient information is provided to learners throughout their course to ensure the knowledge requirements for the NVQ are met. Effective questions consolidate and confirm learning and assessors help learners to make meaningful links between theory and practice.
23. Progress reviews are satisfactory and carried out regularly. Learners understand what they are required to do, although employers are not always involved in the discussions. Equal opportunities and health and safety are reviewed and monitored satisfactorily during progress reviews. Individual learning plans are updated routinely with completed dates of reviews, learners' progress towards their qualification, details of what they have achieved and changes in circumstances. Learning plans are tailored to individual needs and used as the basis for reviews. However, learners' progress reviews have few clear targets set that will help to improve their progress and achievement. Actions are vague and describe the discussion or activity rather than identify what the learner realistically needs to complete to progress through their award.
24. Programmes are managed well and inclusive. They are responsive in meeting learners' and employers' needs. Some employers are supporting learners' progression and are encouraging learners to take NVQs at level 3 once they have completed the qualification at level 2.
25. Support for learners is satisfactory. Learners identify their career goals and personal aims at the start of the programme and these are recorded on their individual learning plans. Assessors are readily available and visit learners at least once every two to three weeks, and more often if needed. Employers repeatedly nominate and support more learners to complete training, provide in-house training, supervision and guidance. Learners are given the appropriate range of workplace experience to develop competence and prepare for assessment.

Leadership and management

26. Leadership and management overall are satisfactory, but with some good aspects. LC has a clear management structure that supports individual staff to develop and improve the provision in their subject area. New staff appointments have been made at management and assessor level. These staff are well experienced and qualified and work effectively as a team to review the area and

incorporate changes that are required. Managers and assessors have a good overview of the provision and know the learners well. Learners' progress is closely monitored. Staff use effective communication channels on a daily basis, through monthly monitoring meetings and an annual staff appraisal process. LC has a strong focus on quality improvement and on raising overall and timely success rates. Regular monitoring of the quality of the provision takes place through audits and checks although some are new and not yet fully established. Resources are satisfactory. All staff use a satisfactory range of learning materials. Internal verification processes are thorough. Qualified internal verifiers regularly sample assessment activities. Standardisation meetings are used appropriately to identify further improvements and share good practice. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory and promoted adequately across the provision. Staff understand the learners' diverse backgrounds and needs. The self-assessment process is inclusive and identifies many of the strengths and areas for improvement. LC identifies that self-assessment is an important tool for improving quality.

Preparation for life and work

Good: Grade 2

Context

27. Currently 46 learners are on literacy and numeracy programmes at levels 1 and 2. Of these 32 learners are with DT via a partnership agreement and 14 learners are staff from LC working on an online training programme being developed in partnership with another training provider. Twelve learners are on literacy programmes and 34 on numeracy programmes. Literacy and numeracy provision takes place at ten employers' and providers' sites and is delivered by four staff from DT and one member of staff from LC.

Strengths

- Outstanding overall and timely success rates
- Good development of learners' skills and confidence
- Good programme delivery to meet learners' and employers' needs
- Particularly effective partnership working

Areas for improvement

- None identified

Achievement and standards

28. Overall success rates for 2007/08 are outstanding at 89%, with literacy level 2 at 95% and numeracy level 2 at 93%. Overall success rates for literacy level 1 are low at 57% but this programme had only four learners. Overall timely success rates for 2007/08 are good at 77%. Timely success rates to date for 2008/09 are outstanding at 98%. In literacy and numeracy, 46% of learners with a declared learning need and/or a learning disability achieved their qualification at the first attempt.

29. The development of learners' skills and confidence is good. Learners demonstrate increased levels of competence and are better prepared to take on additional work related tasks. Learners show increased confidence and morale in the workplace. For many learners these are their first qualifications since leaving school and, for some, necessary for their careers. Learners appreciate how they can use these new skills in their job role, carry out voluntary work or help their own children with school work. They are now more confident in calculating discounts, writing letters and working out holiday entitlements.

Quality of provision

30. The quality of provision is satisfactory overall. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Effective initial and diagnostic assessment is used to identify skill gaps and learning targets which then contribute to individual learning plans. Initial targets are insufficiently specific for a few learners but this is rectified in the

better reviews of learners' progress. Most learners attend workshop sessions and receive individual support from tutors using a range of paper-based materials or online resources, including practise test papers. In the better workshops, contextualised materials are used as well as computer-based activity. Learners determine the pace at which they work and prefer to work individually rather than in groups. They appreciate the supportive approach and the progress they are making towards the national tests. Good use is made of mobile test centres for literacy and numeracy tests.

31. Programme delivery to meet learners' and employers' needs is good. Progression opportunities are clearly explained at the end of the course by the tutor. Employers encourage participation and progression by advertising internally or by encouraging participation through the review process.
32. Guidance and support are satisfactory. Tutors outline the course requirements and, as part of induction, assess individual needs and learners' additional support requirements. Sessions are available in the daytime, evenings, weekends and at night to suit learners' life and working patterns. Additional sessions, often for one or two learners, are provided. The environment is supportive with tutors working with individuals or small groups. The Skills for Life pilot programme is online and learners are able to participate at work or at home with online tutor support provided by the project partner's staff.

Leadership and management

33. Leadership and management are satisfactory overall with some good aspects. Partnership working with the subcontractor and other partners is particularly effective. The subcontracting arrangement with DT is effectively managed with regular monthly reviews, joint marketing to employers and joint observations of staff. Communication between LC and DT is good. Employers, including schools, are involved and supportive of the learning opportunities available, often providing resources, including accommodation, computers and time. LC has a clear strategic objective to develop quality improvement, build capacity and increase retention and achievement rates using different delivery methods. The joint project between LC and another training provider involves sharing online materials and staff and is encouraging some innovative approaches to delivery which will help to expand the provision on offer both locally and nationally. Accommodation is good with easy access to computers and laptops. Parking and refreshment facilities are adequate at DT. Staff are well qualified and all tutors have teaching and Skills for Life qualifications. The promotion of equal opportunities is satisfactory. Appropriate policies are in place and learners receive information through an LSC handbook. Equality and diversity issues are discussed at induction and reviews.
34. Quality assurance is satisfactory. Attendance is monitored and action taken. Paperwork for initial assessment, individual learning plans and review logs are all standard and appropriate, although some inconsistency exists in how they are used. A comprehensive checklist is used to ensure appropriate procedures and practices are in place and reviewed regularly. Learners and their progress are monitored closely. Staff are observed on a regular basis and issues raised are

discussed and acted upon. This includes attending specific staff development activities or producing additional materials. The observation process is currently being refined. Feedback from learners and employers is collected but is limited in scope. Inspection findings broadly reflect the strengths noted in the self-assessment report. The one area for improvement highlighted in the report is now being developed.

Business, administration and law

Good: Grade 2

Context

35. LC provides level 2 training programmes in administration, customer service and team leading as well as level 3 training programmes in administration and management. Currently 85 learners are on customer service, 67 are on team leading, 10 are on management and seven are on administration programmes. All 169 learners are on Train to Gain. Of these, two learners are also working towards either literacy or numeracy qualifications. They are employed in a range of businesses across the North East and North West. Three assessors regularly carry out training and assessment in the workplace. Two internal verifiers assure compliance with monitoring body standards.

Strengths

- High success rates on customer service programmes
- Good development of workplace knowledge and skills
- Highly flexible programmes to meet employers' and learners' needs
- Good support for literacy and numeracy development

Areas for improvement

- Poor overall success rates on management and team leading programmes

Achievement and standards

36. Overall, achievement and standards are good. Overall success rates on customer service programmes in 2007/08 are good at 78% and show a steady improvement. This strength was identified in the self-assessment report. Although timely success rates in 2007/08 are low, recent initiatives show that current learners are making good progress towards completing their programmes within the planned end dates. Of the learners who have completed in 2008/09, 66% have completed within their target dates. Overall success rates in management and team leading programmes in 2007/08 are poor at 33%. The self-assessment report identifies this area for improvement. Current learners' progress on these programmes is good. In customer service, overall success rates for both men and women are high.

37. Learners develop good workplace knowledge and skills. Customer service learners gain a much improved awareness of legislation and appropriate working principles and practices such as understanding body language when dealing with customers. Team leaders are better able to deal with work related problems such as staff lateness. All learners demonstrate increased levels of competence. Employers value the improved contribution learners make to their workplaces. Learners gain in confidence and increase their self-esteem. They are confident that the qualifications will improve their employment prospects and opportunities for promotion. The standard of work in portfolios is satisfactory.

Quality of provision

38. The quality of provision is satisfactory. Learners benefit from individual support and effective coaching and training. Current assessors regularly visit learners at their place of work, and more frequently if learners need extra support. They visit the workplace to support knowledge development, guidance and assessment. The visits are generally well focused and purposeful. Learners and their assessors develop very good working relationships and communicate well. Assessment processes and methods are satisfactory. However, the range of assessment methods is limited. Information and communication technology is used insufficiently in training and assessment. Most individual learning plans identify learners' long-term targets and training needs effectively. Planning for individualised learning is satisfactory and the team has recently introduced a schedule with target dates. Some employers have insufficient knowledge of the NVQs to support learners effectively in identifying workplace evidence. Learners' reviews are satisfactory. They are completed regularly and line managers are included in the process. However, some reviews are insufficiently detailed with too much focus on recording the units of the NVQ. Individual learning plans are updated routinely following each review and line managers are made aware of learners' progress.
39. Programmes are highly flexible to meet employers' and learners' needs. LC works well with a large number of employers across both regions to identify their training needs. Programmes are carefully planned with employers and learners to minimise disruption to work patterns. This includes early morning, evening and weekend meetings. Employers are proactive in promoting the provision and encourage staff to become involved. They see improvements in performance which benefit their companies. Learning programmes are appropriate for the learners. NVQs are matched well to the learners' work roles and their development needs. Many learners are keen to progress to the next level of the qualification. LC has identified this strength in its self-assessment report.
40. Support for literacy and numeracy is good. All learners have timely initial assessments of their literacy and numeracy needs which are used appropriately to identify support needs. Learners are encouraged to improve their skills and work towards the national tests. LC staff work very well with DT staff to provide support. Learners benefit from individual training delivered in the workplace. They quickly make progress and improve their skills and confidence, for example, in using mathematics. Learners for whom English is a second language have extra visits and support from the assessors to help them better understand the standards of the NVQs.
41. Advice and guidance for learners are satisfactory. Learners benefit from a thorough induction. The process is appropriate, clarifies qualification requirements and focuses sufficiently on equality of opportunity and health and safety issues. Some induction sessions are insufficiently interactive. Handouts and documentation are of a good quality.

Leadership and management

42. Leadership and management are satisfactory overall. Staff are experienced, appropriately qualified and work well together. The team of assessors has been appointed recently and LC provides good induction and support. Some good initiatives for quality improvement have been introduced recently. Staff are set targets on learners' achievement and these are reviewed individually with the performance manager each month. Managers have set a clear direction on improving success rates. The management information system contributes to programme development satisfactorily. Internal verification processes are satisfactory. Employer engagement is good. Communication is effective and LC staff work very well with employers. However, the provider does not routinely survey employers to obtain and evaluate feedback. The process to obtain learners' views has recently improved and all learners are provided with a questionnaire at the end of their programme. Health and safety compliance is good with comprehensive assessment carried out on all employers' premises before any training and assessment takes place. This is checked with learners during reviews. Learners' awareness of equality of opportunity is satisfactory. It is checked at the induction stage, during reviews and through some learning materials. The self-assessment report is accurately graded. LC has identified the strengths and area for improvement accurately.