

learndirect Ltd

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates

20–23 March 2017

Overall effectiveness		Inadequate	
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement	Adult learning programmes	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement	Apprenticeships	Inadequate
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Requires improvement	Traineeships	Requires improvement
Outcomes for learners	Inadequate		
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection		Good	

Summary of key findings

This is an inadequate provider

- Directors and senior managers failed to take swift and decisive action to stem the decline in performance over the past three years.
- Not enough learners and apprentices achieve their qualifications and develop the skills to enable them to progress at work or into further education and training.
- The performance of subcontractors is not managed rigorously enough, with the result that apprentices taking qualifications with subcontractors achieve significantly less well than apprentices trained directly by learndirect.
- Too many 16- to 19-year-old learners on traineeships do not complete their programmes.
- Too few adult learners secure employment when they leave learndirect.
- Too many apprentices receive insufficient training to develop new skills, and they do not receive enough off-the-job training.
- Small and medium-size employers are not involved routinely in planning the programmes of their apprentices or reviewing their progress.
- Arrangements for monitoring and tracking apprentices' progress are insufficiently robust to provide managers with a secure view of how many current apprentices are likely to achieve their qualifications on time.
- Managers do not manage the performance of tutors and assessors well; as a result, they have been unable to raise the quality of teaching, learning and assessment consistently across different subcontractors and learndirect centres.
- Tutors and assessors do not develop learners' and apprentices' English and mathematical skills well enough.
- Tutors and assessors do not use the results of assessments of learners' prior skills to plan learning effectively, and they do not provide helpful feedback at reviews to enable them to improve their work and skills.

The provider has the following strengths

- The new senior management team has begun to tackle the main weaknesses; early signs of improvement indicate that their actions are beginning to have an impact.
- Managers work effectively with major employers to prepare for the introduction of the apprenticeship levy.
- Tutors provide good support for adult learners.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Learndirect was created in 2000 and has since become the largest single provider of further education and skills training in the United Kingdom. In 2016, the directors of learndirect Ltd took the decision to set up two separate companies with their own management and delivery teams; these companies are learndirect Ltd for adult learning, and learndirect Apprenticeships Ltd for apprenticeship and traineeship provision. Both companies are overseen by the board of directors of a holding company, Pimco. The formal transfer of funding contracts for apprenticeships and traineeships to learndirect Apprenticeships Ltd is planned for the future, but at the time of inspection, this transfer had not taken place.
- Learndirect delivers provision both directly and through 54 subcontractors; 24 of the subcontractors provide apprenticeships and traineeships, and 30 provide adult learning programmes.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Directors need to intensify their scrutiny and challenge of senior leaders to ensure that planned actions to tackle the decline in achievement rates of learners and apprentices, and to raise the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, are implemented swiftly and effectively.
- Managers who oversee subcontractors should provide intensive support to improve provision at their poorest performing providers; they should act robustly to remove contracts if subcontractors fail to respond positively to this support.
- Managers of adult learning programmes should collect more regular and better quality data on the destinations of their learners so that they can identify more effectively which courses increase learners' chances of progressing into employment or further training.
- Managers and tutors need to improve the levels of support given to 16- to 19-year-old learners on traineeship programmes so that learners' attendance increases, and their progress on work placements is reviewed more regularly.
- Directors and senior leaders should work with all employers, irrespective of the size of company, to ensure that all apprentices receive their full entitlement to off-the-job training, and that all employers are involved in the planning of programmes and reviews of progress of their apprentices.
- Directors should ensure that managers and assessors are equipped to use an effective system to accurately monitor and report on the progress of apprentices.
- Managers should identify and implement clear actions for all tutors and assessors to improve the quality of their teaching, learning and assessment, and they should ensure that subcontractors follow the same practice.
- Directors and senior leaders should ensure that tutors and assessors are trained to an appropriate level and are confident enough to develop the English and mathematical skills of learners and apprentices. Assessors, in particular, need to provide all their apprentices, regardless of their prior attainment, with activities to extend their English and

mathematical skills.

- Tutors and assessors should use the results of learners' and apprentices' starting points to identify accurately the skills and knowledge that learners and apprentices need to develop, and then use the results to plan learning programmes that meet differing individual needs.
- Tutors and assessors should provide meaningful feedback to learners and apprentices so that they know how to improve their work and skills, and achieve the standards of which they are capable.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Until very recently, company directors and senior leaders presided over a sustained decline in performance across all programmes. The proportion of learners and apprentices achieving their qualifications and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment had deteriorated significantly. Leaders and managers at all levels of the organisation failed to oversee and challenge the particularly poor provision delivered by apprenticeship subcontractors.
- Since the appointment of a new chief executive officer and the restructure of the business into two divisions with their own recently established, separate senior management teams, extensive steps have been taken to stem the decline. Early signs of improvement indicate that these actions are beginning to have an impact, but significant aspects of the provision remain weak, particularly on the large apprenticeship programme.
- Directors and senior managers now have a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each area of the provision. They have established clear reporting structures to hold managers to account for their performance, and they scrutinise reports on performance very regularly to monitor the impact of managers' actions. However, managers still do not have timely and accurate data with which to monitor all areas of performance. For example, information used to measure the current progress of apprentices is weak and generates unrealistic predictions for end-of-year results.
- Managers do not set sufficiently clear actions for teachers and assessors through performance management to support them to improve the quality of their teaching, learning and assessment. Managers have begun to remove underperforming staff from the organisation if they fail to respond positively and quickly to developmental support. However, too much teaching, learning and assessment remains weak.
- Directors' and senior managers' self-assessment of the provision has not been sufficiently critical and did not identify the full extent of weaknesses across all programmes. The self-assessment reports for 2015/16 were overly positive about learner outcomes and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Managers' recent in-year assessments are more evaluative and accurately identify the areas that need improvement.
- The management of apprenticeship subcontractors has been very weak until recently. Managers' failure to identify the financial and quality risks posed by four large subcontractors in 2015/16 resulted in significant disruption to the training of 3,300 apprentices when these providers went into liquidation. Managers are now more rigorous in their monitoring of performance and no longer subcontract with the poorest performing providers. However, it is still too early to measure the impact of this new approach.
- The management of adult learning subcontractors is more effective. Managers set clear and demanding targets for subcontractors to meet, and provide good support and training for their staff. As a result, the proportion of adult learners achieving their qualifications at subcontractors has started to increase. Managers have been less successful, however, in removing the wide variations in the performance of different centres across the country.
- Directors and senior leaders have been adept at positioning the provider for the introduction of the new apprenticeship company. They have established effective

partnerships with a number of high profile national companies, and are already delivering standards-based apprenticeships to their employees in the retail and financial services sectors. Managers are less successful at aligning their adult provision to local and regional priorities, with the result that job outcomes for learners on these courses are low.

- Managers' recent interventions to tackle poor achievement rates and the quality of provision in English and mathematics have not yet been effective. The introduction of GCSEs for apprentices on advanced-level early years educators' programmes has been rewarded by a high proportion achieving high grades, but the overall proportion of learners achieving their functional skills qualifications has not improved in the current year.

The governance of the provider

- Company directors acknowledge that they were slow to take decisive action to arrest the decline in the performance of all programmes over the past three years. In the current academic year, they have been more effective in creating a stable structure and a leadership team to take the organisation forward, although it is still too early to see the full impact of these new arrangements.
- Directors now have a better understanding of how programmes perform, and they regularly monitor managers' actions to tackle the identified areas for improvement. They challenge managers effectively and support the leadership team well.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Managers carry out thorough checks on the qualifications and references of all staff on recruitment. They ensure that appropriate safeguarding arrangements are in place for staff in the subcontracted provision. Staff and company directors complete mandatory training to the right level in all aspects of safeguarding and in their responsibilities to implement the 'Prevent' duty. Managers respond effectively to incidents, although some records do not have sufficient detail on the final actions taken.
- Most learners feel safe and know how to stay safe in training centres, at work and on-line. However, most adult learners and apprentices who spoke with inspectors have an incomplete understanding of the risks posed by radicalisation and extremism.
- Staff promote British values well, particularly in adult provision, and help learners to prepare for life in modern Britain.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment for too many apprentices and learners is not good enough. Too often, apprentices do not develop new skills because assessors set activities that are too easy for them. Too many tutors and assessors do not take account of learners' and apprentices' prior knowledge and skills when planning group and individual learning sessions.
- Too many apprentices, mainly those in small and medium-sized employers, do not receive

their entitlement for training. These apprentices receive insufficient training to develop new skills and, as a result, they make slow progress towards achieving their qualifications.

- Tutors and assessors do not use the results of assessments of English, mathematics and learning styles to inform their planning effectively. Few trainers take account of apprentices' practical skills to establish their starting points, with the result that too many apprentices do not learn new skills but, instead, are assessed only for what they already know and can do.
- A minority of tutors are not sufficiently skilled to support the development of learners' English and mathematical skills. Staff do not ensure that learners understand the strategies that they need to use to improve their spoken English and written work.
- Tutors and assessors do not give sufficient guidance to enable learners and apprentices to understand what they need to do to improve their written work. They offer encouragement through their written feedback but fail to identify specific areas for improvement.
- Too often, tutors do not give sufficient attention to the skills that adult learners need to develop. The targets set for learners, both in class and during progress reviews, often focus predominately on completing a unit of study or a test. Tutors do not identify the skills that learners need to develop to complete the task successfully.
- Staff plan induction well, particularly on courses in English for speakers of other languages, information and communication technology (ICT), and customer service. This ensures that learners are on the correct level of programme.
- The majority of adult learners make at least the progress expected of them in classroom-based sessions. Tutors use a wide range of resources to maintain learners' interest and ensure that they participate fully. They use good questioning techniques in classroom-based sessions to help adult learners understand what they have learned.
- Tutors deliver interesting online sessions to prepare early years' educator apprentices for GCSE English and mathematics examinations. This group of learners makes very good progress and achieves at a higher rate than learners nationally, particularly in English.
- Apprentices employed by large national companies benefit greatly from the training and supervision provided by their employer. They make good progress towards achieving their learning goals. The effective skills that they develop support their career goals and aspirations particularly well.
- Tutors provide effective personal support for adult learners to help them to overcome barriers to learning and participate fully. Learners are signposted to a range of support services when needed, such as help with housing. Learners recovering from substance misuse and those with long-term health issues make good progress.
- Tutors and assessors are skilled at getting learners to apply their understanding of equality and diversity in their workplaces and wider communities. Apprentices know how to prevent colleagues in the workplace from being bullied and can identify when discrimination takes place, such as against transgender employees. However, for a minority of learners, these concepts remain too abstract to be useful.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Requires improvement

- Tutors and assessors do not develop learners' written English and mathematical skills well enough. They do not correct learners' work sufficiently, with the result that learners repeat the same spelling and grammatical errors. Assessors do not develop apprentices' English and mathematical skills further when they already hold the prerequisite level of qualification required for their apprenticeship.
- Tutors do not challenge the poor attendance of adult learners and trainees robustly. As a result of poor attendance, many learners and trainees do not develop the work-related skills that they will need to sustain employment.
- Tutors do not provide sufficient support for trainees on work placements. They do not ensure that trainees develop appropriate work-related skills and experience that will prepare them for their next steps in further learning or work.
- The information, advice and guidance that learners receive during and at the end of their programmes are weak. As a result, too few adult learners secure employment or progress onto a further qualification after they leave their course.
- Too many apprentices and learners have a narrow understanding of radicalisation and extremism. While assessors raise apprentices' awareness of the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism, there is an over emphasis on terrorism and a lack of attention to the different types of extremist groups and the threats that they pose.
- Most learners and apprentices are motivated and ready to participate in sessions. They develop good levels of confidence during learning sessions through completion of their qualifications and, where appropriate, when at work. Apprentices and learners behave well and show respect for their peers in the workplace and in learning sessions.
- Tutors plan programmes sensitively to fit around the domestic lives and work patterns of their adult learners. Good arrangements are in place to enable learners to catch up if they fall behind in their studies due to work commitments.
- Learners benefit from additional activities that enhance their learning and promote their health and well-being. Learners on traineeships achieve additional occupational and health and safety qualifications that enhance their opportunities to gain employment at ports or on construction sites.
- Most learners and trainees develop confidence, time management skills, and team-working skills. Learners recovering from alcohol or substance misuse and those managing long-term health conditions are supported to remain on programmes and continue to progress.
- Learners and apprentices feel safe and have an appropriate understanding of how to keep themselves safe at work, in class and online. They know to whom they need to report any concerns should they arise.

Outcomes for learners

Inadequate

- Not enough learners and apprentices achieve their qualifications and develop the skills to enable them to progress at work or into further education and training.

- The proportion of apprentices who complete their programmes successfully and the proportion who achieve within their planned timescale have declined over the past three years and are very low. Seventy per cent of apprentices in 2015/16 fell below the minimum standards for overall achievement. Six out of ten apprentices did not achieve their apprenticeship within their planned timescale.
- The proportion of adult learners who achieve their qualifications has declined over the last three years. Recent improvements to the delivery of adult learning programmes enable a higher proportion of current learners to achieve their qualifications, but the proportion who achieve remains below the national rate.
- Too few adult learners achieve English and mathematics qualifications. Despite a significant investment in the training and qualifications of teaching staff, there has not yet been an improvement in the current progress of adult learners taking these subjects.
- The lack of an effective system to monitor the progress of current apprentices means that managers' predictions of an improvement in achievement rates lack credibility.
- A high proportion of early educator apprentices on advanced-level programmes achieve high grades in English and mathematics GCSEs.
- The proportion of young people on traineeship programmes who achieve their qualifications is low. Only slightly more than half of current trainees complete their programmes. A very small minority achieve an English or mathematics qualification.
- There are persistent gaps in the attainment of different groups of learners. A lower proportion of learners from some Black and minority ethnic groups achieve their qualifications compared with White British learners. There are wide variations across subcontractors and learndirect centres in the proportion of adult learners and apprentices who achieve their qualifications.
- Too few adult learners secure employment when they leave learndirect. Managers do not collect sufficient information on the other types of destinations of their learners, such as those who progress into further education or training.

Types of provision

Adult learning programmes

Requires improvement

- Learndirect provides adult learning programmes from entry level to level 2. Subjects include training to prepare learners for employment, English, mathematics, and vocational training programmes in ICT, hair and beauty, business administration and management, retail and commercial enterprises. The majority of the provision is delivered by 30 subcontractors. There are just over 10,000 current learners, the majority of whom are on programmes at entry level and level 1. Over 200 learners receive adult learning loans.
- Too many tutors make insufficient use of the results of assessments of learners' starting points when planning learning. Although learners complete English, mathematics, and learning style assessments at the start of their course, tutors do not use these effectively to plan to meet the different needs of learners, with the result that there is insufficient challenge for the most-able learners.
- Tutors supporting online training provide insufficient coaching to help learners progress

well. A minority of tutors do not provide sufficient additional guidance and explanation to learners if they do not understand concepts covered in online training resources. As a result, these learners make slow progress.

- Tutors provide insufficiently helpful feedback following assessment to help learners understand what they have to do to improve the quality of their work. Written feedback often contains encouraging comments, but fails to identify specific areas for improvement.
- Tutors' reviews of learners' achievements are ineffective in accelerating learners' progress. Tutors' recording of learners' achievements between reviews is insufficient and progress reviews rarely lead to the identification of specific, measurable learning targets that drive good progress. Too many tutors do not challenge instances of poor attendance, punctuality and behaviour.
- Records of learners' progress contain insufficient detail as to how learners will improve their personal and employment-related skills, including English and mathematics. Tutors do not develop individual plans that identify how they will improve learners' skills. In group discussions, tutors use questions well to develop learners' speaking and listening skills.
- Tutors plan the majority of classroom-based sessions well. In these sessions, tutors make good use of high-quality learning resources to enliven learning for learners of all abilities. Where effective individual learning targets are agreed and then reviewed during group sessions, the majority of learners make good progress.
- Tutors provide high quality personal support to help most learners overcome barriers to their learning and make the progress expected of them. For example, learners from a Traveller community received very good individual coaching, which enabled them to achieve qualifications in English, mathematics and ICT. Socially isolated learners are successfully encouraged and supported to participate in learning.
- Tutors ensure that learners have a good understanding of health and safety, and of how to keep themselves safe online. Tutors strongly promote the well-being and safety of learners so that they come to understand the importance of safe working practices at work as well as while using social networks.
- Tutors promote British values consistently throughout their training, mainly by using classroom ground rules to reinforce the values of respect and tolerance of other people's viewpoints in debates and discussions.

Apprenticeships

Inadequate

- There are almost 23,000 apprentices currently on programmes with learndirect. The great majority of apprentices are the employees of small to medium-sized enterprises. The majority of apprentices are adults, spread evenly between intermediate- and advanced-level qualifications. Learndirect trains the majority of apprentices directly, with the remaining apprentices trained by 24 subcontractors.
- The management of apprenticeships is ineffective. The structure and delivery of a significant number of apprenticeships do not meet the requirements of the apprenticeship programme. Around a third of all apprentices do not receive their entitlement to off-the-job learning. Consequently, these apprentices do not develop the skills that they require

to progress to the next steps in their career.

- Leaders and managers have allowed standards to slide since the previous inspection. The proportion of apprentices who do not complete their apprenticeships on time has increased steadily over the past three years and is very low.
- Leaders' and managers' oversight of the progress that apprentices make on their programmes is weak. While leaders identify this weakness in their most recent improvement plans, they have not acted swiftly to improve matters. They have not intervened quickly enough to support apprentices to make good progress towards the achievement of their qualifications within the planned timescales.
- Leaders and managers fail to ensure that their assessors are sufficiently rigorous and skilled in the identification of apprentices' existing abilities at the start of their programme. Assessors' use of vocational skills assessments focuses too much on matching apprentices' existing skills onto the units of qualifications rather than as a means of identifying new skills that need developing. Assessors often set activities that are too easy and do not challenge apprentices sufficiently.
- Assessors do not use the results of assessments of apprentices' starting points to support them to develop their skills in English and mathematics. Apprentices who are exempt from functional skills qualifications do not receive support to extend their English and mathematical skills, even when assessments have identified clearly that they need to develop these skills further.
- Assessors do not involve routinely the employers of small and medium-sized companies in the selection of topics that apprentices study, nor are they involved in reviews about the progress that apprentices make on their apprenticeships. As a result, too many apprentices do not make the desired contribution to their employers' businesses.
- Too many assessors do not provide feedback to apprentices to identify what they need to do to improve their skills. Assessors mainly focus on meeting the minimum standards of the awarding organisations' requirements rather than extending and broadening apprentices' skills and knowledge. As a result, too many apprentices do not improve the quality of their work or develop their skills sufficiently. This is particularly prevalent among apprentices in health and social care, business, and marketing and sales.
- Most assessors are well-qualified and have recent relevant industry experience. As a result, they are able to identify appropriate activities and evidence to support apprentices to complete their qualifications.
- Leaders and managers develop very effective partnerships with a range of high profile corporate clients. Managers work very closely with these organisations to develop new standards to meet their specific skills requirements. Apprentices at these employers make good progress, develop new skills and enjoy their learning.

Traineeships

Requires improvement

- Six learndirect centres and two subcontractors offer traineeship programmes to just over 200 learners, the vast majority of whom are 16 to 18 years old. During the inspection, around a third of learners were attending sessions in English, mathematics and work preparation training, and were waiting to start work placements. Half of learners were on work placements. The remaining learners were between placements or preparing for

progression to their next steps.

- Too many learners leave the traineeship programme early and their destinations are unknown. Progression into full-time employment, apprenticeships or full-time education is starting to improve in three centres, although the proportion of learners that progress onto apprenticeship programmes remains too low.
- Managers do not use sufficient data and management information to monitor the overall performance of the traineeship programmes across different centres and subcontractors. Attendance rates are not routinely analysed and the progress of current learners is not summarised at a national level. Attendance rates are low in three of the six learndirect centres that offer traineeships.
- Many staff are not sufficiently skilled in supporting learners' development of English and mathematical skills. Staff do not ensure that learners develop strategies to improve their spoken and written work. Learners are often unaware of their progress or when they are due to take their English and mathematics tests. Too few learners achieve qualifications in English and mathematics.
- Staff do not place sufficient emphasis on developing learners' skills on work placements. Targets for improvement are often too generic and staff do not routinely reviews learners' progress with employers to agree what skills learners still need to develop to achieve further progression.
- Too many reviews of learners' progress are not effective. Learners are not encouraged to reflect sufficiently on whether they are improving their skills or to explore what skills they still need to develop further. A few reviews are rushed and staff do not fully explore learners' abilities to develop key work-related skills, such as punctuality and effective communications.
- Learners are very positive about the traineeship programmes and have high aspirations for employment and apprenticeships. Learners are motivated and enjoy participating in the work skills sessions.
- Trainers run well-planned and lively induction sessions to ensure that trainees have a good understanding of the programme. Training staff have high expectations and learners respond well to this.
- Staff make good use of practical activities to develop learners' confidence and self-esteem so they feel ready for interviews with employers. Feedback from staff helps learners to develop their employment-related skills and improve their understanding of what employers expect. Learners grow in confidence and develop good skills to prepare them for employment, such as time management and team-working skills.
- The vast majority of learners take part in relevant, well-planned work experience placements. Engagement advisers provide good advice and guidance to learners on possible opportunities for employment locally. Advisers carefully manage learners' expectations to ensure that, where possible, work placements match learners' career goals and aspirations.
- Managers make good use of a wide range of local, national and international employers to ensure that work placements match learners' abilities and ambitions. One subcontractor provides specialist training to encourage young people to seek employment in ports and logistics on the Humber. Another subcontractor provides effective community-based

opportunities for young people.

- Leaders and managers have made positive changes to the staffing and locations of the programme in the last year, as well as the structure of the programme. It is too early to judge the full impact of these changes, although the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and the progress that learners make are showing some signs of improvement from a low base.

Provider details

Unique reference number	55141
Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	79,457
Principal/CEO	Andy Palmer
Telephone number	01142 915000
Website	www.learndirect.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	
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
	123	6,236	82	4,226	-	259	-	13
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	2,317	9,384	1,413	9,167	33	367		
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
	205		-		205			
Number of learners aged 14 to 16	-							
Number of learners for which the provider receives high-needs funding	-							
Funding received from:	Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	ACT Business Advice Direct Cardiff and Vale Cmt Services Encompass GLP Training Go Train Plus another 47 subcontractors							

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the director of learning, policy and strategy, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls 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

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