



Rhagoriaeth i bawb – Excellence for all

Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg
a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru

Her Majesty's Inspectorate
for Education and Training in Wales

A report on

**Associated Community Training Ltd
Imperial House
12-14 Trade Street
Cardiff
CF10 5DT**

Date of inspection: June 2012

by

**Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education
and Training in Wales**



During each inspection, inspectors aim to answer three key questions:

Key Question 1: How good are the outcomes?

Key Question 2: How good is provision?

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?

Inspectors also provide an overall judgement on the provider's current performance and on its prospects for improvement.

In these evaluations, inspectors use a four-point scale:

Judgement	What the judgement means
Excellent	Many strengths, including significant examples of sector-leading practice
Good	Many strengths and no important areas requiring significant improvement
Adequate	Strengths outweigh areas for improvement
Unsatisfactory	Important areas for improvement outweigh strengths

The report was produced in accordance with section 77 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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Context

Associated Community Training (ACT) is a privately owned training company based in Cardiff. In August 2011 it became the largest work-based training provider in Wales through its award of a new Welsh Government contract. As a result, there has been rapid growth in learner numbers, partners and sub-contractors. The provider now delivers work-based learning provision across Wales.

ACT has a particular focus on the harder to reach learner. This includes working with schools with the 14-16 years age group. ACT delivers the following programmes across 19 local authority areas in Wales:

- Traineeships Engagement, level 1 and bridge to employment
- Steps to employment route ways to work and work focussed learning
- Foundation Apprenticeships
- Modern Apprenticeships
- Higher Apprenticeships
- Flexible Learning

It specialises in the following training routes:

- Business Administration
- Children's Care, Learning and Development
- Engineering
- Hairdressing
- Health and Social Care
- Management
- Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools

At the time of the inspection there were approximately 5,600 learners on Welsh Government funded training programmes.

Summary

The provider's current performance	Good
The provider's prospects for improvement	Good

Current performance

The provider has made significant progress in taking on around 5,000 additional learners and additional sub-contractors during the past 10 months. Despite these changes, unverified data is showing an upward trend in the rates that learners are achieving their qualifications. The provider has good strategies in place for integrating literacy, numeracy, and Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) into training programmes. However, this work is on-going and currently not all tutors are effectively using these in their work with learners. A minority of learners do not benefit from constructive feedback on their written work.

The planning for the engagement of additional staff, learners and sub-contractors, by the senior management team is good. The learner remains the clear focus for all that the provider does. Quality assurance processes are in place but need further developing across all sub-contractors.

The provider works well with its partners and sub-contractors. There is good communication between all participants, which has significantly helped the provider in expanding its provision and, in the process, given wider opportunities for learners to progress.

Whilst the judgement for Key Question1: Standards are adequate given the good progress made by the provider in taking on a significant new contract and the consistent upward trend of improving outcomes for learners, the judgement for overall performance is good.

Prospects for improvement

The provider's capacity for improvement is good because:

- the Managing Director has a clear vision and strategy to understand what it takes to work towards becoming an excellent deliverer of training;
- good strategies for improving the quality and delivery of training have been put in place; and
- the learner remains the clear focus for everything that the provider does.

Recommendations

In order to improve, the provider must:

- R1 ensure that literacy, numeracy, ESDGC and Welsh language and culture strategies are consistently applied across all provision including sub-contractors;
- R2 implement the literacy marking scheme across the provision;
- R3 improve teaching and learning through tutors reflecting the differing needs of learners in their lesson plans;
- R4 ensure that quality systems and procedures are inclusive and consistent across all sub-contractors; and
- R5 address the recommendations outstanding from the previous inspection report.

What happens next?

Estyn requires the provider to address the recommendations from the inspection and to integrate their proposed actions into their improvement plan to DfES. The Estyn link inspector will monitor the progress the provider is making against the recommendations.

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes?

Adequate

Standards: Adequate

Overall, the rates at which learners attain their full framework qualification are adequate. In 2009 to 2010, attainment rates on all apprenticeship programmes were slightly above the national average. The latest unverified data shows an upward trend across almost all training programmes.

Most learners complete their training programme to time, with a few exceptions in Management, Business Administration and Teaching and Learning.

Between 2008 and 2010, a significant number of learners on Skill Build programmes progressed into employment or entered higher level training.

Nearly all current learners make good progress. They participate well in off-the-job training sessions, are engaged and motivated, and work well together. Almost all learners gain valuable practical and work related skills. Most learners demonstrate appropriate practical skills and theory knowledge on and off-the-job. Many learners achieve a range of additional certificates and qualifications, including project management, food hygiene, manual handling and dementia awareness. Overall, learners' knowledge of ESDGC is varied. Many do not benefit from routine reinforcement of issues from tutors during practical and theory sessions.

The standard of work in learners' NVQ portfolios is generally of a good quality, neat and well presented. However, the standard of learners' literacy and numeracy skills is too variable. All learners undertake initial assessment and have an individual learning plan that identifies their basic skill needs. However, a majority of learners do not benefit from detailed written feedback from assessors that will enable them to improve their future performance. Tutors and assessors do not routinely correct mistakes in spelling, punctuation and grammar. Many learners express themselves well and work well with their peers, employers and trainers. A few learners across all programmes are working towards a higher level essential skill than their programme requires.

The provider uses a wide range of strategies and initiatives to promote learners' knowledge of Welsh language and culture. However, training staff do not always use these well enough to encourage learning through the medium of Welsh and as a result very few learners undertake teaching or assessment through the medium of Welsh.

Wellbeing: Good

All learners feel safe, in both their on and off-the-job training, from any physical or verbal abuse. Learners have a positive attitude towards keeping healthy through initiatives such as men's health workshops and breakfast clubs.

The provider supports learners at risk of self-harm through specialist workshops and by their engagement in a successful mentoring process. The provider has a very effective counselling service. Learners using the service subsequently progress well in their training programmes.

Learners, employers, training staff and assessors show respect for each other. There are good relationships between staff and learners. In almost all observed sessions learners' behaviour was good. Training staff managed learners with the potential for disruption effectively. Learners participated well, and enjoyed their learning. However, a few learners were not fully engaged in the session.

Overall, attendance on all programmes is good. The provider has good systems in place to monitor attendance. Training staff effectively challenge learners' late attendance.

The provider has good learner voice strategies in place, which include learner forums and displays action taken on 'you said we did' boards.

Learners who participate in out-of-centre and residential activities including the recently opened ACT Outward Bound centre Ynyws Hwyl develop good communication and personal confidence. Learners participate effectively in training sessions on human rights, citizenship and employment related skills. This prepares them well for entering the world of work. The provider runs a series of workshops that help to develop learners' everyday living skills. These include community activities such as knitting clubs to make items for the 'Helping Hands' Charity and preparing food for community centres.

Key Question 2: How good is provision?	Good
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Learning experiences: Good

The provider meets the needs of learners, community and employers well. It provides a good range of pre and post-16 programmes. The provider has a specific focus on learners who are disengaged with learning. These learners are a major issue for the provider and its partners, particularly in South East Wales. As a result, programmes have been devised to allow for early intervention with potential Not in Employment Education or Training (NEETS) learners.

The provider works closely with the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service to provide good bilingual support for those on its teaching assistant programme.

Overall, the provision for basic skills and Essential Skills Wales (ESW) is good. However, there is little evidence to show that lesson plans systematically reflect the results of initial assessment and diagnostic tests. Learners have the opportunity to attain ESW at levels higher than required by their framework. However, opportunities for learners to attain the wider skills are not fully developed.

A new literacy policy is in place supported by a newly appointed literacy champion. This is beginning to show results at the provider but has yet to become fully operational in all of its sub-contractors.

The understanding of Welsh language and culture is good within the provider but needs further development in its sub-contractors. The provider has appointed a Welsh Champion (Pencampwr Cymraeg), to progress this work.

The provider has yet to issue its new ESDGC induction booklet but it has put in place a good ESDGC generic lesson plan for all of its programmes. However, in a few sessions there are inconsistencies in delivery with some missed opportunities to further develop learners' understanding of ESDGC during the session. The provider's ESDGC champion has run a number of effective ESDGC awareness sessions for sub-contractors. The provider and sub-contractors are currently piloting the Green Impact (a National Union of Students accredited programme).

Teaching: Good

Tutors and assessors have good subject and technical knowledge. They support and meet the needs of learners and employers well. The majority of staff deliver well planned and structured sessions which have clear aims and objectives. A wide range of teaching and training methods including video clips, oral presentation, paper exercises and information technology are effectively used. But in a minority of sessions there is not enough challenge for the more able learners and not enough support for less able learners.

Tutors and assessors develop vocational skills and competencies of learners' effectively. In a few cases, tutors delivering ESW in application of number skilfully integrate literacy development and subjects related to wellbeing into their lesson plans. However, there are some missed opportunities to further develop the literacy and numeracy skills of learners.

Generally, planning of assessments is good and they actively encourage learner development. Assessors provide good opportunities for learners to present and display a sound knowledge and understanding of their subject. However, in a very few cases written feedback on learners' work is not detailed enough and there are inconsistencies in the marking of literacy.

Assessors conduct good structured reviews that involve the majority of learners in setting their own learning targets. Assessors use reviews well to make learners aware of how well they are progressing and what they need to do to improve. Records are mainly detailed and learners welcome the comments from their employers. However, in too many cases, whilst employers give written feedback and sign review documents, they do not fully participate in the review meeting. The majority of learner portfolios are of a good standard.

Care, support and guidance: Good

The provider interviews all learners prior to joining their programme. Where appropriate and with the focus on the best way forward for the learner, the provider refers learners to other partners, sub-contractors or providers.

The good learners' induction process includes a comprehensive explanation of the provider's various policies and procedures. Each learner receives a good learner 'welcome pack'. This contains a useful reference booklet for learners on topics such as equality and diversity, confidentiality, safeguarding and dealing with bullying. It

also contains details of the provider's staff who are able to further support learners; for example in reporting bullying or harassment. Details of external organisations that can provide further additional guidance and support are also in the pack.

The provider has good arrangements for promoting health and wellbeing of all of its learners. It arranges a programme of health related topics for learners that include sexual health and drug awareness. The provider has its own outdoor centre where learners participate in various activities that support their wellbeing and personal and social development.

All staff work well together to support learners with personal and social difficulties. Many of the learners are particularly vulnerable or disengaged. The provider's counsellor service offers learners professional support and where appropriate refers them to the wide range of partner organisations to provide specialist help.

Learners with additional learning needs generally receive appropriate support. However, in a very few cases learners' support needs are not followed up and acted upon. In a very few instances, tutors are not aware of learners' individual difficulties or disabilities or their additional support needs.

The provider has suitable procedures in place to identify and support the basic skill needs of those learners working at or below entry level 3. However, the provider is less aware of learners' specific support needs when they are working at level 1 or above.

The provider has an appropriate policy and has procedures for safeguarding.

Learning environment: Good

The provider has an appropriate equality and diversity policy. It is proactive in promoting and encouraging participation in learning by under-represented groups of learners including those from disadvantaged backgrounds and ethnic minorities. Its effective data analysis of learners from these groups, including gender stereotyping, enables the provider to target areas for future recruitment or to address any areas of underachievement by these learners.

All learners value the provider's culture of respect for each other, staff and employers. The regular reviews of learners, by assessors, adequately addresses equality of opportunity and diversity issues. However, during training sessions tutors frequently miss opportunities to further re-enforce equality and diversity issues with learners.

The learning environments in the majority of the provider's and sub-contractors are good. Resources are sufficient and they meet the needs of learners well. The provider's Skills Academies provide very good resources for a wide range of vocational options. These are particularly beneficial for those from schools and those not yet ready for training to sample different training routes under one roof. Most premises are fit for purpose and are bright and welcoming. Many have very good wall displays, frequently both in Welsh and English. They provide supportive environments to encourage learning. In a very few cases, in practical sessions, there are not enough hand washing facilities and tutors do not pay sufficient attention to good housekeeping in the training environment.

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?
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Good

Leadership: Good

The Managing Director provides clear leadership and has a clear vision and strategy for the company. He and the senior management team ensure that all staff are clear about the role that they play in helping the provider to meet its strategic objectives. This has been key in enabling the provider to make good progress in making the significant changes to its organisation following the award of a major increase in the company's contract value by Welsh Government in August 2011.

Communication is good between all managers and staff including with sub-contractors. The provider has put in place 'focus' groups, which are inclusive of its sub-contractors, to undertake development of its key strategies relating to learners' standards, outcomes and quality of provision. The opportunity to identify and share best practice is a part of this work. The provider has also taken the opportunity to identify and share best practice across all of the provision. However, it is too early for the provider to effectively evaluate the full impact of this work.

Overall, the performance management of staff is good. Managers effectively link individual staff performance targets to their job roles. Managers give staff, at all levels, good personal support to help them to improve their performance. The provider has the Investors in People (IiP) gold standard (2010). Earlier this year, the company came 74th in The Sunday Times best 100 Small to Medium Sized (SME) companies to work for.

The provider is introducing an innovative Governing Board to provide challenge and support to the senior management team. However, full recruitment to the board has not been finalised. Therefore it is too early to judge the impact of this development.

The provider is actively involved in a comprehensive range of national and local strategic priorities. The provider works effectively with its strategic partners to ensure that the level of NEETs is low in the geographical regions where it delivers training. The company delivers a comprehensive range of pre and full training programmes. Its Skills Academies play a major role in this by offering the opportunity to sample a number of different training routes under one roof.

Improving quality: Adequate

Following new contracting arrangements in August 2011, the provider is now working with a significantly increased number of sub-contractors. The provider has reviewed its self-assessment (SAR) and other procedures. However, the provider is still continuing to develop and improve procedures to ensure consistency across all sub-contractors.

The SAR is comprehensive but very descriptive and not evaluative enough. The judgements made by the provider in the SAR are not a close match with those made by the inspection team.

The provider uses data dashboard reports well to monitor key performance indicators, which align to national benchmarks, and to improve its performance. However, the SAR contains data relating to on-time completion rates for learners that is inaccurate.

When planning for improvements, the provider collects and uses a wide range of information from partners, key stakeholders, learners and employers. It collects feedback through surveys, focus groups, and classroom representatives from most learning areas.

The provider has recently engaged an information technology (IT) specialist to help improve its data and performance monitoring systems. However, it is too early to judge the impact the system will have.

Overall, the provider shares staff development activity well with sub-contractors and this provides good opportunities for the provider and its sub-contractor staff to develop a wide range of skills. Focus groups provide a good opportunity for staff to identify and share best practice. The providers' staffs are involved in and contribute well to a range of networks. The MD is actively involved in NTfW forums and committees. He represents the provider on other forums alongside other managers from ACT.

Due to the increase in provision and the work with a larger number of sub-contractors, many of the recommendations from the previous inspection have not been fully met yet.

Partnership working: Good

The provider plays a proactive role in working with an appropriate range of partners, sub-contractors and other work-based learning providers. Learners are the clear focus for its partnership working. The provider is open, transparent, supportive and flexible in all aspects of its work with others. This approach ensures a wide choice of provision for learners in helping them choose and prepare, with the appropriate guidance and support, for their future employment or further education aspirations. The provider and its partners work well together in working with 14 to 16-year-olds to provide them with vocational options alongside their academic school work. This has been very successful, with over 300 pupils now involved. The schools report a reduction in absenteeism and improved behaviour of pupils as a result. The overall aim of this work is also to identify and to prevent these pupils from becoming future NEETS.

The provider has made good progress in taking on its additional sub-contractors. Sub-contractors feel treated as partners and have welcomed the support provided by the provider. This has enabled them to start improving their own quality and performance.

To identify the level of support required by their sub-contractors, the provider initially risk assessed all sub-contractors. Evaluation of the effectiveness of that support is shortly to be undertaken. The provider has put additional support into all sub-contractors in the form of focus groups on issues such as literacy, ESDGC, Welsh language and culture and, very recently, community involvement. This is to ensure consistency of approach across its provision. It has involved the sub-contractors in its planning and development strategies, including the SAR process, although not all sub-contractors are fully on board yet. On-going work with sub-contractors includes plans to re-introduce peer assessment and to carry out mini inspections.

Resource management: Good

Overall, the provider manages its resources effectively.

The provider places a strong focus on the training and development of its staff. All ACT and sub-contractor staff access good opportunities to gain appropriate training to help improve their performance. The provider has clear priorities for staff development and has a clear organisational staff development plan that identifies company objectives and methods of delivery to meet these objectives.

Staff at all levels are appropriately experienced and demonstrate good knowledge of their respective industries and the requirements of the learners' training frameworks. To make sure they undertake their roles effectively, training staff are well equipped with the resources they need.

Staff ratio to learners is good in most training routes and there are many examples of team teaching with specialist basic skills support for learners included.

Most learners have access to good quality resources when attending off-the-job training. These resources include good access to workshop equipment and information and communication technology (ICT). In most cases the standard of information technology (IT) equipment for learning is good. However, in a very few cases there is limited access to IT facilities.

The standard of employer accommodation and resources is mostly good. The provider monitors this effectively. These resources benefit learners by giving them good workplace experiences and assessment opportunities.

The provider manages its finances well through regular financial performance meetings. The provider gives good consideration to plans for improving the quality of its accommodation and resources, with a clear focus on the benefit to the learner.

Overall, learner outcomes are adequate and the provider offers adequate value for money.

Appendix 1

Learner Satisfaction

Overall, learners were very positive about their experience during their time with the provider. They received good initial guidance and good support throughout their training. Just one notable exception was that 20% of the learners completing the questionnaire did not feel that their time with the provider improved their involvement in the local community. Overall, nearly 100% of learners would recommend this provider to others.

Appendix 2

The inspection team

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