



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

**Merthyr Tydfil Adult Community Learning Partnership
Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council
Civic Centre
Castle Street
Merthyr Tydfil
CF47 8AN**

Date of inspection: November 2013

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.

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Context

General background

A fifth of the county borough of Merthyr Tydfil lies within the Brecon Beacons National Park. The county borough is divided into eleven electoral wards and the main town is Merthyr Tydfil with a population of around 30,000.

As at December 2012 the percentage of the population who say they can speak Welsh was 16.8%. This is significantly lower than the Welsh average of 25.8%. Approximately 98% of the population are white British and 2% come from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Educational achievement

Statistics for Wales data, December 2012, shows that the county borough has 13% of working age adults with no qualifications. This is two percentage points higher than the Welsh national average of 11%. However, this is a significant improvement from 2011 when the percentage was 18.8% and 2009 when it was 21.4%. There has been an improving trend for the last four years.

In 2012, the percentage of the population with qualifications below level 2 was 17.7% and this is also higher than the Welsh national average of 15.1%. However, trends for the last four years show that the percentage number is improving year on year from 19.3% in 2009.

The number of higher qualified adults in the county borough for 2012 was significantly lower than the Welsh average, with 26.5% qualified to level 4 against the Welsh average of 31.5%. However, this is another consistently improving trend from 19.3% in 2009 to 22.2% in 2011.

Economic activity

The statistics for Wales, for March 2013, show that 62.8% of the population are in employment. This is lower than the Wales average of 67.6%. Overall there is an equal spread of people employed across occupational areas with no dominant industry. Of those in employment, 29% are employed in manual occupations such as process plant and machinery operatives, whilst 20% are employed in personal services or sales. Around 25% are employed in managerial or professional positions. The county has fewer people commuting out to other areas for employment than most other counties in Wales, with 65% of the working population working in Merthyr Tydfil itself.

Data for Wales, 2013, shows that economic inactivity in the county has remained constant at around 26% for the last four years. This is higher than the Welsh average of 22.3%. The number of residents claiming benefits as at February 2013 was 20.7% of the population. This is the second highest number of claimants in Wales. Of these 12.1% were incapacity claimants and 6.2% jobseekers claimants.

Prosperity

The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation 2011 shows that Merthyr Tydfil is ranked the most deprived local authority in Wales. Twenty-five per cent of Merthyr's neighbourhoods are in the 10% most deprived areas in Wales and 44% are in the top 20%. Merthyr Tydfil has three Community First cluster areas across the county.

Merthyr Tydfil Community Learning Partnership

There are four main providers in the Merthyr Tydfil Community Learning Partnership:

- Merthyr County Borough Council
- Merthyr College
- Merthyr Welsh for Adults Centre
- The Workers' Educational Association (WEA)

Merthyr County Borough Council delivers around 15% of the provision. Franchise provision is around 32%, including ABE and ESOL. WEA delivers around 53% of the provision, including core provision and learn direct.

Summary

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

Current performance

The partnership's current performance is judged as excellent because:

- the number of learners successfully completing their course in 2012 is one of the best in the sector;
- learners from areas of deprivation achieve better than similar learners in other areas of Wales;
- the partnership delivers a wide range of programmes that meet the learning and wellbeing needs of learners, employers and the community very effectively;
- the curriculum is planned effectively to take very good account of national and local priorities and addresses the Welsh government's anti-poverty agenda exceptionally well; and
- the partnership gives a high priority to courses that improve learners' literacy, numeracy and employability skills.

Prospects for improvement

The partnership's prospects for improvement are judged as excellent because:

- the partnership is based on equality, honesty and a shared vision for Merthyr Tydfil;
- partners share a high level of trust and mutual respect that allows them to support one another and to challenge outcomes and standards robustly;
- responsibility for priority areas of delivery is shared between the partners;
- strategic planning in the Merthyr Tydfil community learning partnership is very strong;
- there is a strong strategic direction to provide an all-encompassing service that promotes health and wellbeing alongside relevant learning; and
- curriculum and delivery of provision are planned very thoughtfully and there is an exceptional cohesion between the format and priorities in the single integrated plan, the corporate plan and the community learning strategy.

Recommendations

- R1 Review ESOL provision to make sure that it meets the demand in Merthyr Tydfil
- R2 Undertake a full audit of partnership venues to make sure that the condition of buildings meets learner requirements
- R3 Further promote and improve use of the Welsh language

What happens next?

The partnership will include the Estyn recommendations in the Quality Development Plan provided for the Welsh Government. Estyn will invite the partnership to prepare a written case study, describing the excellent practice identified during the inspection.

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes?

Excellent

Standards: Excellent

Adult learner achievement in Merthyr Tydfil is outstanding. In 2011-2012, the success rates achieved by adult learners in Merthyr Tydfil were among the best in the sector at 86.5%. Success rates were above the national comparator between 2010 and 2012 and improved by almost three percentage points in that period.

Half of all adult learners in Merthyr Tydfil come from the most deprived areas in the county borough and Wales. This is double the national average. These learners succeed better at all levels in comparison to learners from similar areas across Wales, and they succeed as well as other learners in Merthyr Tydfil.

Both male and female learners achieve at some of the best success rates in the sector. A higher percentage of men take part in learning in Merthyr Tydfil than in other areas of Wales. Male learners improved their success rates by just over eight percentage points between 2010 and 2012 to 89%. They achieved better success rates in 2011-2012 than male learners in other areas and better than female learners in Merthyr Tydfil. However, at 85% in 2011-2012, female learners in Merthyr Tydfil also achieved success rates higher than the national comparator of 81%.

Adult learners progress well to further education, employment, and training. Many learners from the North Merthyr Tydfil Women's Gateway programme make good progress to further education and take up courses in business studies, access to HE, and childcare. A few learners on this programme also take part in other learning with different providers at the same time. A few learners take on volunteer roles as mentors, or train as tutors and deliver learning to others.

The majority of learners in family programmes improve their basic skills and achieve relevant qualifications. Many of these learners also progress to further education, training, and volunteering opportunities.

Most learners in the classes observed make good progress in their learning. They work confidently and contribute well to discussion. Learners in many classes set themselves aspirational short term targets and have a clear view of their future learning goals.

Many learners in adult basic education classes, and across the provision, improve their skills in literacy well. They apply these skills effectively to other areas of learning and life. Learners in the wide variety of family programmes use their skills very well to support their children's learning. Learners on employability programmes develop a range of life skills and use these well to seek employment. A few English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) learners progress into full time further education courses including childcare, business studies, GCSE courses and higher education. Learners in many classes across the provision use information and

communication technology (ICT) skills confidently and undertake research and further their learning.

Learners in a few classes develop their understanding of Welsh language and aspects of Welsh life appropriately. However, generally learners do not improve their understanding of the Welsh language or relate their learning to Wales well enough.

Adult learners of working age have worked very well to improve their qualification levels quicker than the national trend. Learner success rates within the partnership have improved in line with the reduction of those adults in the county borough without qualifications and the increasing number of those qualified to level 2.

Wellbeing: Good

Nearly all learners are highly motivated and enthusiastic, and enjoy their learning. Many learners support each other well, and this has a positive impact on learner attendance. Nearly all learners complete their courses and most attain a useful qualification. Learners feel safe and valued in their classes and activities.

Most learners improve their understanding of healthy lifestyles and wellbeing appropriately. They gain in self-esteem and confidence through using the skills they learn in their family life and in the community. Many learners improve their life skills and develop very effectively important skills that help them to become more independent.

A majority of learners on courses for employment obtain valuable volunteering opportunities in a wide range of community settings that make good use of the skills they have learnt. These include the Greenhouses project for horticulture, MIND support groups and the Venture Out programme. This has a positive impact on their confidence in social and learning settings.

Learners contribute effectively to curriculum planning through the learner fora and learner questionnaires. A majority of learners appreciate the partnership response to the learner voice and the wide learning opportunities available to them.

Many learners have developed a passion for learning and are gaining valuable personal, social and employability skills, leading to greater social inclusion. They improve their confidence, parenting skills and independent learning skills very effectively.

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

The partnership delivers a wide range of programmes that meet the needs of learners, employers and the community very effectively. It takes very good account of national and local priorities in planning its programmes and addresses the Welsh government's anti-poverty agenda exceptionally well. The partnership gives a high priority to courses that improve learners' literacy, numeracy and employability skills. This targeted provision supports learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and those

who have additional learning needs very well. The partnership provides an extensive range of learning and training opportunities, including taster courses, pre-entry courses, community courses and entry level courses in further education.

The partnership has developed very productive working relationships with a wide range of key partners, including health, voluntary and community organisations, to offer a wide range of courses. This makes sure that learners have good opportunities to develop their skills and their self-confidence. Communities First, for example, delivers a good range of taster courses where learners try what is on offer before formally joining a course. There are clear progression routes for learners from these initial courses. Progression between courses is seamless both within and between the various providers.

The partnership makes very effective provision for learners to develop their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. Staff include these skills well in a range of courses, such as the Language and Play programme, which helps parents to support their children's early learning. The partnership develops close links with local ethnic minority associations which help recent migrants to settle into the community. Provision for ESOL is generally good, but due to increasing demand not all learners can access these courses.

The newly drafted Welsh language plan is an exciting initiative, which seeks to develop Welsh medium classes within Merthyr Tydfil. A range of enthusiastic partners work well together to provide valuable opportunities for Welsh learners and Welsh speakers to develop their Welsh skills further. Canolfan Soar, the local Welsh language centre, runs all the Welsh medium and bilingual classes. The partnership has gradually increased the number of Welsh and bilingual taster and full courses, but there is scope for further development. Many courses embed the Welsh dimension effectively, for example in a range of activities within the Venture Out programmes. A minority of classes also use incidental Welsh phrases appropriately.

A few courses introduce learners to education for sustainable development and global citizenship well. The Greenhouse Project at Cyfarthfa Park, for instance, helps learners with additional needs to develop their gardening skills. However, not all classes give enough opportunities for learners to develop their understanding of sustainable development through the context of their learning. The Global Village and Heritage Week projects develop global citizenship well.

Teaching: Good

Teaching is consistently good or better across the partnership.

Tutors have very good subject knowledge, which they use well to plan clear, focused and effective sessions. In practical sessions, tutors provide comprehensive demonstrations of how to use materials and equipment, while in theoretical sessions they provide good whole class teaching as a starting point to enable learners to reflect and recall prior learning. Nearly all tutors use effective questioning techniques. They have a very good understanding of learners' confidence levels and they pitch questions and organise class activities sensitively to ensure that all learners can participate fully.

Tutors pay very good attention to learners' individual needs and they ensure that learners can further their learning through their personal interests and projects. Tutors use a wide range of stimulating resources related to their subject. Nearly all tutors make good use of the internet to provide examples related to the subject, to support learners with their learning or to encourage learners to complete their course. Where learners miss a session, most tutors email them a personal note and the work undertaken to encourage their continued participation. This has a positive impact on learner retention and learner outcomes.

In nearly all cases, tutors pay good attention to literacy and numeracy skills where they arise in sessions. In courses designed to help learners apply for jobs, tutors help learners to understand how to write applications in standard language and use appropriate language in interviews.

Tutors use individual learning plans well to provide good opportunities for learners to assess and record their own learning at the beginning of, during and at the end of the course. Nearly all tutors provide learners with regular verbal feedback that focuses well on what they have achieved and the next steps they need to take. Many tutors are making increasingly good use of ICT, such as tablet devices, to record learners' progress through video and photographs. These records help to develop learners' confidence as they can see the progress they have made in their learning over time. On courses that require written outcomes, tutors mark work on a regular basis. They provide learners with useful comments to help them improve.

Care, support and guidance: Good

The partnership offers a wide range of programmes aimed specifically at promoting wellbeing and healthy living. These include courses on healthy eating on a budget, weight management classes, first aid and exercise classes. In addition to these courses, tutors across the partnership consistently act to promote the development of the health and wellbeing of the whole person throughout their involvement with community learning. For example, outreach centres in particularly deprived areas offer advice and guidance on managing debt and reducing energy bills. Programmes for young people and adults with learning disabilities use a large greenhouse complex to allow learners to work with volunteers to grow food, to stay active and healthy, to develop skills for independent living, and to remain engaged in learning.

The partnership uses a range of effective methods to publicise its courses, including a brochure designed by a group of learners. It communicates well with learners through newsletters and council publications, a website and social media. It works effectively with external organisations to promote events such as the Merthyr Tydfil Learning Festival, and to celebrate the success of its learners.

Tutors know their learners well and use information from initial assessments and other sources consistently to ensure that learners are studying the right course at the right level. Tutors give impartial and effective advice on how to move on to further and higher level courses, within the partnership and with providers outside the partnership. Partners collaborate very well to make sure that learners progress to other courses or employment.

The partnership plans very well to meet the needs of learners with additional learning needs. There is a strong emphasis, particularly within family learning programmes, to make sure parents have the skills to support children with additional learning needs effectively.

The partnership's arrangements for safeguarding meet requirements and give no cause for concern.

Learning environment: Good

The partnership has a positive ethos of equality and diversity that it promotes well with learners and staff. It has a high priority for inclusivity, which it shares in its extensive links with agencies and organisations in the area. The partnership has relevant and effective systems and procedures in place to ensure that staff and learners understand, and comply with, the equality and diversity policies. This includes a useful brochure, 'Stronger Together', that explains the policies clearly and succinctly. Tutors use this brochure well in their work with learners. All partnership staff have undertaken equality and diversity training.

Many venues used for partnership learning are easily accessible for learners in their local area. Most are well equipped and provide an appropriate learning environment. Where required, the partnership adapts premises for those learners with disabilities. However, a few premises need modernising and re-equipping. The partnership has identified this and there are plans in place for a full audit of learning facilities.

Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?	Excellent
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Leadership: Excellent

Strategic planning in the Merthyr Tydfil community learning partnership is very strong and this contributes very effectively to the exceptional outcomes and achievements of all learners.

The community learning strategic plan recognises and acknowledges the relationship between poverty and underachievement very clearly. The strategic aim to provide an all-encompassing service that promotes health and wellbeing alongside relevant learning is evident in all aspects of planning and is unique in the sector. This has contributed very effectively to the very high number of learners who successfully complete their courses.

Providing learners with skills for employment is a very high priority and the strategic plan has a strong focus on reducing economic inactivity within the county borough and in reducing the number of younger people not in employment, education or training. All partners have a clear focus on the priority areas of the national Adult Community Learning Strategy.

The community learning strategic plan reflects the local service board's 'Learning for Life' vision for Merthyr Tydfil effectively. There is an exceptional cohesion between the format and priorities in the single integrated plan, the corporate plan and the

community learning strategy. This has a very positive impact on providing a consistent and focused service to the community.

The community learning strategic plan identifies a number of key priority areas for adult learning. The partnership allocates these areas to partners thoughtfully according to their strengths and areas of expertise so that every partner takes responsibility for a specific area. Roles, responsibility and accountability within the partnership are very clear. This creates a high level of trust and mutual respect within the partnership that allows partners to challenge outcomes and standards robustly.

The priority areas of the community learning strategy drive all aspects of the partnership's work very coherently. Classes and provision are planned and recorded under the priority areas in the strategic plan rather than by learning provider. This is sector leading practice. It allows the partnership to measure easily the effectiveness of planning to meet the strategic priorities. The strong strategic focus on outcomes against priority areas has contributed well to learner achievement and standards.

The partnership has a clear structure of committees and sub groups that report into the Adult Community Learning Partnership Board. This ensures that there is relevant expertise where it is needed and contributes very well to including the wider range of agencies and services such as Adult Social Care, Communities First, Families First and Bridges into Work within the operational planning.

The partnership reports through the Local Service Board and presents relevant documents to the local authority's scrutiny committee. This reinforces monitoring, tracking and accountability effectively.

Improving quality: Good

The Adult and Community Learning Partnership in Merthyr Tydfil has made very good progress in improving the quality of learners' outcomes as well as the quality of provision in recent years. The strong working relationships and mutual understanding between the members of the partnership have resulted in systematic management action to bring about improvement.

All partners contribute well to the process of self-assessment and this is linked closely to operational and strategic development as well as quality improvement plans. These plans are cohesive and well co-ordinated. Partners are well aware of the challenges they face to improve the quality of provision further.

Overall, the partnership's self-assessment report is a comprehensive account of the current position. It provides useful evaluative comments and links closely with the partnership's development plan. However, in a very few parts it is too descriptive. The plan makes good use of first-hand evidence on standards and the quality of provision.

The development plan is suitably succinct and focuses closely on the key priorities to bring about improvement. The plan is prioritised and responsibility for action is clear. Targets for outcomes are measureable and realistic. The plan recognises

shortcomings in the current arrangements for reporting to the local service board and aims to make these more formal.

Listening to learners' views is an important aspect of the partnership's strategy for improvement. The partnership uses questionnaires and learner fora to consult well with learners and to find out what they would like to see improved. The partnership takes action on learners' views whenever appropriate, for example to improve learners' access to information about courses and their location. The partnership makes effective use of the results of the learner voice survey.

Overall, the partnership has responded well to the recommendations in the last inspection report in 2009.

Partnership working: Excellent

All partners within the Merthyr Tydfil Community Learning Partnership work exceptionally well together as a team. They have developed high levels of trust, respect and mutual support. The local authority and Merthyr College senior management team provide effective strategic support for the partnership. However, it is the unique and sector leading partnership approach, with shared responsibility for priority areas of delivery, that allows the partners to support and challenge each other to provide the best possible service for learners.

The partnership works very effectively with a wide range of agencies, employers and support services including youth projects and mental health charities. It carried out a comprehensive survey of need across Merthyr Tydfil. Analysis of this need has resulted in the bold step of aligning adult community learning with a wider range of programmes to support families and learners from deprived communities. As a result, all partners focus on employability, skills and wellbeing, and there is a shared vision to improve outcomes in these priority areas. For example, the adult community learning service works well in collaboration with Parenting and the Family Support Services to provide early engagement and referrals for families identified as needing wellbeing or educational support.

The wrap-around support provided by these agencies allows parents to progress into other areas of learning at an appropriate time and with the effective support in place. Best practice is shared freely across the learning, Social Services and health sectors, with all partners focusing on the best outcome for the family and the community.

Resource management: Excellent

The partnership manages its resources exceptionally well to provide a broad range of courses relevant to the needs of Merthyr Tydfil residents and with a clear focus on the learner.

The partnership takes every opportunity to maximise its use of funding, including the use of external funding, and resources to improve its provision for learners. For example, effective use of external funding allowed the partnership to support learners with low skills from deprived areas to undergo learning and training leading to employment.

The partnership has recently undertaken a gap analysis of its provision to identify areas for improvement. This resulted in the partnership investing resources to train more staff to deliver ESOL and adult basic education (ABE). The partnership shares best practice in staff development willingly and confidently both internally and externally.

Each of the partnership's six priorities clearly identifies the costs and resources to achieve the outcomes. The partnership monitors these closely. For example, it has carried out a useful exercise to evaluate its cost effectiveness against other local partnerships. It also regularly reviews the unit cost for its delivery of outcomes for its learners. This provides managers with useful information for planning future provision.

Outcomes for learners are excellent and the provider provides excellent value for money for its learners.

Appendix 1

Commentary on Performance data

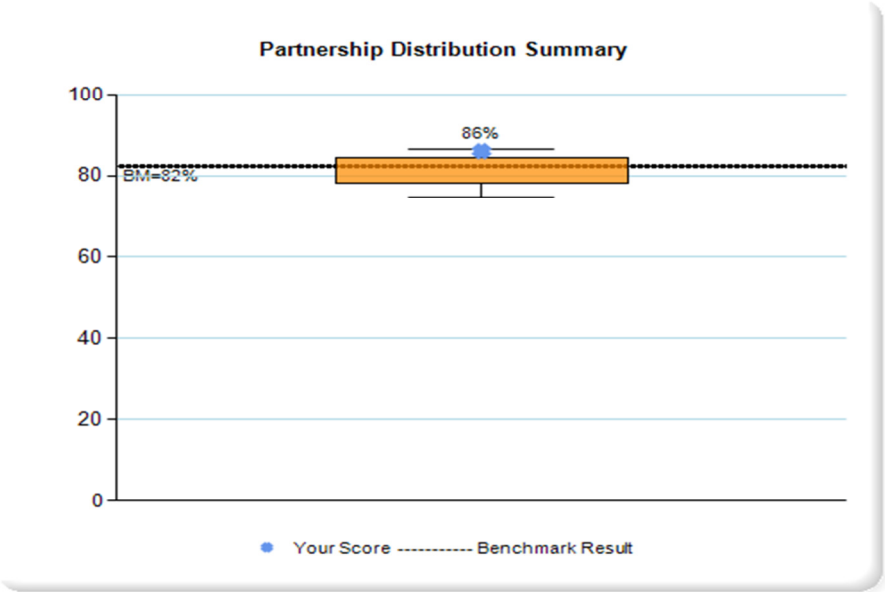
In 2011-2012, the standards achieved by adult community learners in Merthyr Tydfil were amongst the best in the sector at 86.5%. Success rates were just above the national comparator in both 2010- 2011 and 2011-2012. Overall success rates improved by 2.7 percentage points between those two years.

Learners in ABE, foundation for work and ESOL achieved success rates that compared well to those of the sector in 2011-2012. Most entry level and level 1 learners in ABE successfully complete their course, which is well above success rates in other areas. Entry level learners of ESOL improved their success rates by just over 30 percentage points between 2010 and 2012 and results were well above those of the rest of the sector. However, the very few ESOL learners at levels 1 and 2 achieved success rates well below those of the rest of the sector. Learners in arts, media and publishing also succeed well in comparison to the sector average and improved their outcomes between 2010 and 2012.

However, ICT learners achieved slightly less well than other learners in the sector, and their success rates declined by just over eight percentage points between 2010 and 2012. In 2011-2012, a very few learners achieved success rates that were unsatisfactory in comparison to those in the rest of the sector.

Half of all learners in Merthyr Tydfil come from the most deprived areas in the county borough. This is double the national comparator. These learners succeed well at most levels in comparison to learners from similar areas across Wales, and they succeed as well as other learners in Merthyr Tydfil. Nearly 40% of learners in Merthyr Tydfil are men. This is a higher percentage than in other areas. Male learners in Merthyr Tydfil achieved better success rates in 2011-2012 than male learners in other areas and improved their success rates by just over eight percentage points from 2010-2011. Male learners in Merthyr Tydfil achieved better success rates than female learners in 2011-2012.

Figure 1. Overall success rates in Merthyr Tydfil compared to sector



Appendix 2

Learner satisfaction

We use the outcomes of the Welsh Government Learner Voice survey to inform all our inspections of post 16 education and training. Learner Voice is a learner satisfaction survey conducted by the Welsh Government.

The survey asks learners a range of questions about the following key themes:

- the information, advice and support provided to them;
- provider responsiveness, learning environment and student wellbeing;
- the quality of teaching and training; and
- overall satisfaction.

Each theme contains a range of questions requiring learners to rate their providers' performance.

One hundred and seventy-three adult learners in Merthyr Tydfil completed the survey. The survey sample compares well to the provider's learner population.

Sixty-three per cent of respondents rated the partnership as very good overall. This is higher than the sector average of 60%. A further 18% rated the partnership as good overall. Ninety-five per cent of respondents thought that their course was better than they expected. This is the same as the sector average.

Overall, many learners think that the partnership's performance is 'very good' across all the key themes. The partnership achieved higher scores than the sector average in all five themes. Between a further 17% and 20% of respondents feel that the partnership is 'good'.

The partnership achieves scores for 'very good' that are amongst the highest in the sector across most of the questions. Scores for 'very good' are slightly lower in response to a few of the questions in the teaching and training theme, but overall nearly all respondents considered teaching and training to be 'very good' or 'good'.

The survey also analyses learners' responses by demographic information – gender, age, ethnicity and disability. In general the partnership achieves higher 'very good' scores than the sector average across all key demographics for each question. However, learners aged 65+ give lower scores than the sector average in many of the questions, and ethnic minority learners also give lower scores in a few of the questions. This is particularly so in teaching and training. However, this represents the views of 32 learners -- 19% of the overall sample.

Appendix 3

The inspection team

Gill Sims	Reporting Inspector
Liam Kealy	Team Inspector
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