



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

A report on

**Vocational Skills Partnership
Ty Cynon
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CF45 4SN**

Date of inspection: January 2016

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

Vocational Skills Partnership (Wales) Ltd (VSP) is a training consortium, established in 2010 in response to the Welsh Government's transformation agenda. As a formal organisation in its own right, VSP is a joint venture owned equally by the following four organisations:

- Aspiration Training (Wales)Ltd
- Educ8 Ltd
- Network Training Services Ltd
- TSW Training Ltd

VSP works with over 2,200 learners and delivers apprenticeship qualifications at level 2 to level 5 in a wide range of sectors for learners and employers across South East, South and South West Wales:

- Advice and Guidance
- Accountancy
- Business Administration
- Butchery
- Childcare
- Cleaning
- Customer Service
- Dental Nursing
- Engineering
- Food
- Glass Processing/Fabrication/Fenestration
- Health and Social Care
- Leadership and Management
- Manufacturing
- Retail Operations
- Support Teaching and Learning
- Warehousing

Summary

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

Current performance

Overall, learners achieve their apprenticeship frameworks successfully at rates better than the national average. Most learners make good progress on their training programme and nearly all learners complete their frameworks on time. Learners develop their literacy and numeracy skills well and many have good communication skills. Most learners are well motivated and fully engaged, and enjoy their learning.

Overall, the standard of teaching, training and assessment is good, and in a few cases excellent. Assessors and tutors have good subject knowledge and up-to-date occupational skills and industry knowledge. Most assessors and tutors have high expectations for learners and use effective questioning techniques to support learning and check learners' understanding. Assessors and tutors have very good relationships with a wide range of local and national employers.

The consortium has appropriate procedures in place to ensure that learners receive good care, support and guidance. The consortium has an effective system in place to track and monitor the welfare of all learners. There are appropriate safeguarding arrangements in place that effectively support all consortium members.

The consortium senior management team have made significant progress in setting and establishing a clear strategic direction for the delivery of their work-based learning contract. The consortium uses well-established values, aims and strategic goals to support the delivery of its training programmes.

Prospects for improvement

The consortium's prospects for improvement are excellent because:

- Learners' achievement rates are improving consistently across all partners
- Senior management have made significant progress in setting and establishing a clear strategic direction for the delivery of their work-based learning contract
- The consortium has a clear management structure with equal representation from the four partners on each management group
- The consortium's leadership team have developed a clear ethos of trust, openness and transparency across all members
- Robust systems ensure that the performance of all partners is monitored closely and challenged as required
- Policies and procedures for quality improvement are detailed and robust
- The consortium has excellent partnership arrangements, working with a wide range of partners, employers and stakeholders
- Partners have a clear agreement about how to manage the partnership's

resources

- The consortium makes excellent use of the best practice task and finish groups to identify and share good practice across the organisation

Recommendations

R1 Improve the rates at which learners attain their qualifications and Frameworks, particularly learners on apprenticeship programmes and those under 25

R2 Ensure that all assessors stretch and challenge all learners of all abilities

R3 Ensure that quality systems are focused on improving standards

What happens next?

Estyn will invite the provider to prepare written case studies, describing the excellent practice identified during the inspection.

Main findings

Key Question 1: How good are outcomes?	Good
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Standards: Good

Overall, learners successfully achieve their apprenticeship frameworks at rates better than the national average. This pattern is consistent over the last three years and across all four partners.

Learners in the majority of programme areas achieve at rates better than the national averages. However, learners in a few programme areas, such as engineering and hospitality and catering, and learners aged less than 25 years succeed at rates at or below the national averages.

The provider's own unpublished data for 2014-2015 is robust and indicates that success rates are steady or showing a small increase in most programme areas. Success rates for learners aged less than 25 years are also improving. However, a very few programme areas show a small decline in success rates.

Nearly all learners complete their frameworks on time. A minority of learners also complete additional qualifications, or qualifications at a higher level than those required by their Framework.

Most learners develop a good understanding of the theoretical aspects of their programme and develop sound practical and technical skills. Learners are able to describe clearly how their studies help them in their day to day work. For example, a mechanical engineering apprentice can explain how the correct choice of cutting tip in a lathe improves the quality of his work, reduces waste and keeps costs down.

Many learners have good awareness of how well they are progressing through their programme and know what they need to do to complete their programmes. However, a few learners rely too much on their training advisers to set them short term goals and do not take an active enough role in planning their own learning.

Most learners have good communication skills and are able to express their ideas well in discussions with their training advisers. Learners' written work is well structured and presented, with generally good spelling, punctuation and grammar appropriate to the level, and which meets the requirements of the awarding organisations. Most learners show improvements in the quality of their written work as they progress through their apprenticeship. Learners develop their numeracy skills well through their programmes and through completing Essential Skills Wales (ESW) qualifications. However, a few learners are unaware of their short term targets for developing their literacy or numeracy skills.

Many learners use and develop their information and communication technology (ICT) skills competently, using computers and tablets in their workplace or on their course. Many use ICT to access their electronic portfolio and use this well to help plan their learning with their assessor. However, a few have limited ICT skills and do not develop their skills well enough.

Many learners have a good awareness of how their studies and work practices link with the themes of education for sustainable development and global citizenship.

Most of the consortium's learners do not have well developed Welsh second language skills. Most learners are aware of the ways in which they can use Welsh in their workplaces. Most learners practise or use simple Welsh words and phrases with their training advisers. A very few Welsh speaking learners choose to have some of their assessment carried out through the medium of Welsh and a very few learners use and develop their Welsh skills as part of their employment.

Wellbeing: Good

All learners feel safe in their workplaces and learning environments. All learners participate in a thorough induction programme and are aware of the support and guidance available from the provider. All learners are aware of reporting procedures.

Learners demonstrate a good understanding of health and safety within their workplace. Learners routinely discuss any health and safety issues during their reviews. Learners adhere well to health and safety requirements on both employers' and consortium's premises. The consortium and employers work well together to ensure that learners are kept safe and have the appropriate training.

Many learners are aware of the benefits of having a healthy lifestyle. Assessors actively encourage learners to adopt a healthy lifestyle. During reviews, assessors remind learners of the benefits of healthy eating and lifestyle.

Many learners make worthwhile use of the bespoke wellbeing website that actively and usefully promotes health and wellbeing. Most learners enjoy their training programme, and are highly motivated and enthusiastic about their training. They participate well in their learning and develop beneficial and strong working relationships with their assessors.

All learners are involved in setting and agreeing assessment targets and most contribute effectively to this process. Many develop the skills required to improve and make consistent progress in their learning.

Most learners participate well in their learning sessions. Learners are highly focused and keen to learn, and they behave in a professional manner. They tackle practical tasks with enthusiasm and support each other to achieve.

Many learners improve their verbal communication skills when answering questions and interacting with assessors and colleagues. They show worthwhile awareness of work and life skills such as timekeeping and being dressed correctly. Most learners improve their employability successfully and make a valuable contribution to their workplace.

Most learners show respect to their peers, work colleagues, assessors and employers.

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

Overall, the consortium delivers a good range of training programmes that effectively meet the needs of learners, employers and the community. It offers good progression opportunities to the next level of training in many learning areas.

Assessors have a very good understanding of learners' roles and responsibilities within their workplace, and they make good use of this information to develop well-matched programmes for learners, for example when choosing optional units.

Employers speak highly of the consortium and the way it offers good quality training tailored to their and the learners' needs. Where partners offer similar programmes, learners and employers are able to choose the most effective form of delivery to suit their particular needs.

The consortium has an effective strategy for developing the literacy and numeracy skills of its learners. Partners ensure that all learners undertake initial and diagnostic assessments at the beginning of their programme to identify their literacy and numeracy levels and needs. These assessments inform learners' improvement targets well.

The consortium has recently introduced an electronic skills tracker that identifies gaps in learners' literacy and numeracy skills. As a result, a few learners have benefited from the resulting individual learning plan (ILP), which contains prioritised literacy and numeracy targets.

Many assessors contextualise literacy and numeracy well, and learners are encouraged to select projects relevant to their job. For example, a learner employed in the care sector used data very well, from a new report on dementia in Wales, to fulfil the requirements of an application of number project. Assessors make good use of recognition of prior achievement to accredit ESW qualifications to higher levels as learners progress.

The consortium has reviewed and revised its Welsh language and Welsh culture policy, introducing measurable targets to improve learners' Welsh speaking skills and their knowledge and understanding of the culture of Wales. The consortium encourages Welsh speaking learners to undertake all or at least part of their learning in Welsh. Overall, the partnership has a consistent approach to the integration of the Welsh language and the Welsh dimension into the learning provision. However, there are a very few missed opportunities to signpost learners to other resources to further their language skills.

The consortium has produced a good range of teaching and learning resources to help assessors to develop learners' knowledge and understanding of education for sustainable development and global citizenship.

Teaching: Good

Assessors and tutors have good subject knowledge and up-to-date occupational skills and industry knowledge. They use these skills well to plan their one-to-one and group training and assessment sessions.

Assessors work well with learners to give them effective support and encouragement to achieve their potential. Most tutors have high expectations of their learners and challenge them well. However, a few assessors do not stretch and challenge learners enough.

Most assessors and tutors use a wide range of training and assessment methods to challenge learners. For example, one learner working towards a level 5 qualification in Health and Social Care Adult Management was supported to deliver a taught session about Welsh culture to residents in a supported living day centre. The residents had a variety of vastly differing needs and the learner was challenged in many ways to keep them all engaged and involved in the training session.

In taught sessions, tutors have detailed and comprehensive lesson plans. They deliver on and off-the-job training sessions that provide learners with knowledge and skills suitable for their job role. Assessors and tutors use effective questioning techniques to support learning and check learners understanding. Teaching and training resources are of a good quality and utilised well. ES tutors deliver well-planned one-to-one and group sessions that develop learners' literacy and numeracy skills and link well to the learners' main qualification framework.

Assessors carry out regular progress reviews with their learners. They set realistic targets to help learners progress towards their qualification aim.

Assessors plan assessment tasks well. Learners understand what is expected of them during their assessment and how they will be assessed. Almost all learners know what progress they have made and what they need to do to complete their qualification. Generally, assessors give effective and constructive oral and written feedback. They correct spelling and grammatical errors in learners' written work.

The majority of learners use an e-portfolio system that allows them to take ownership for their learning. Through the system, learners can upload assignments and other work, track their own progress and communicate electronically with their assessor. Assessors access the system to track learner progress and to give timely feedback to the learner when work has been submitted.

The consortium has an overall tracking system to monitor learners' progress and ensure that they are on target to achieve their qualification. Assessors and internal quality assurers (IQAs) attend regular standardisation meetings to ensure a consistent approach and to share best practice.

Care, support and guidance: Good

The consortium promotes the health and wellbeing of learners well. It provides all learners with useful and detailed information at the start of their programme on the

support and guidance available to them from staff within the consortium and external agencies. Nearly all assessors promote the 'My Wellbeing Hub', a project developed by the consortium and funded via the Welsh Government's Quality Improvement Fund, to learners, which is the consortium's online central wellbeing information point. Learners, employers and employees can access this online facility, which contains up-to-date information and advice on how to improve their wellbeing.

Assessors deliver a comprehensive induction programme, which helps learners to understand their programme, their responsibilities and the support the consortium can provide for them. All learners receive a useful learner handbook during induction, which contains information on policies and procedures such as those on equality and diversity, safeguarding, bullying and harassment and safe use of social media. During induction assessors also present learners with the VSP learner charter, which clearly sets out what the partnership and employer expects from them whilst they are on the programme.

The consortium's arrangements for dealing with harassment and bullying is appropriate and learners know whom to approach if they have a concern.

The consortium has effective systems and procedures in place to support learners with additional learning needs. Assessors identify vulnerable learners at an early stage, and they signpost them quickly to specialist advice and support to ensure that they receive the help they require.

There are clear safeguarding policies and procedures in place, and staff understand these well. All staff receive safeguarding training as part of their induction, and all staff reinforce and update their knowledge of safeguarding issues annually. The consortium has a designated safeguarding officer, and each partner also has a nominated safeguarding officer. Incident data is recorded appropriately and is reported to the VSP Board. All staff have recently received radicalisation awareness training.

Consortium staff arrange that learners receive good individual and flexible support from the ESW assessors to enable them to achieve their qualification. A minority of assessors have achieved the level 3 Certificate for Essential Skills Practitioners. A few assessors within the consortium have also been trained as learning coaches, and these work effectively in supporting learners with additional learning needs.

Learning environment: Good

The consortium has a clear and effective equality and diversity strategy that promotes an ethos of inclusivity and respect.

The partnership's equality and diversity champion takes responsibility for the strategy supported by the other champions within the partner organisations.

The consortium's policies and procedures effectively promote the prevention and elimination of oppressive behaviours and create an atmosphere conducive to learning. Staff embed equality and diversity well into schemes of work, learner induction and review processes. Staff encourage learners to discuss current affairs

regularly through use of 'hot topics' at reviews. Information from internal questionnaires and Learner Voice questionnaires confirm that learners feel safe and free from harassment in the workplace.

The consortium uses equality data well to identify how groups of learners, including those from minority groups, are progressing and how their attainment compares to that of their peers. Analysis of data assists the provider to identify improvements and share best practice across the partners.

The consortium has an effective complaints procedure in place to address any issues or complaints related to equality and diversity should they arise.

Accommodation across all partners within the consortium is well maintained, modern and equipped with sufficient resources to meet the needs of learners. Partners make good use of noticeboards, corridors and training facilities to promote health and safety, equality and diversity, Welsh language and culture and literacy and numeracy. The displays are well designed, informative and up to date. However, very few displays are bilingual or in Welsh.

Learners have good access in the workplace to tools and equipment needed to support their learning. Employers are supportive and are actively involved in the learning process. On a few occasions, privacy for assessment in the work place can be difficult and the inability to access the internet can cause disruption to 'on the job' learning sessions. The consortium has overcome this by making good use of one-to-one learning sessions in all partners' premises and the use of 'off line applications' to access e-portfolio and other learning resources.

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

The consortium's four equal partner training providers work together coherently as the Vocational Skills Partnership. They have been highly effective in making sure that there is equality between partners, with the result that they share a common ethos of trust, transparency and support. The four partners have equal status and representation on the partnership's strategic board and operational management group. They have made significant progress in setting and establishing a clear strategic direction for the delivery of their work-based learning contract. The consortium uses well-established values, aims and strategic goals to support the delivery of its training programmes. Strategic and business planning is comprehensive and robust. The consortium charges partners a particularly low management fee that is used very effectively to support central purchases and activities. These include the purchase of a management information system and on-going continual professional development activities.

The consortium has a clear management structure with representation from the four partners on each management group. Across the consortium management roles, responsibilities and accountability are very well defined. Managers and staff understand their roles and responsibilities well.

The consortium strategic board contains senior management representation from each partner. The board works effectively together to give the consortium clear strategic direction in the delivery of its work-based learning contract. A non-executive chair who does not work for any of the partners chairs meetings of the strategic board. This role gives objective challenge and support to the strategic board. The strategic board sets clear objectives for the operational group and the board monitors progress towards these objectives effectively.

Managers demonstrate a clear understanding of the consortium's performance and what they need to do to secure improvement. They manage information and data well to measure and challenge all aspects of performance against key performance indicators. Managers collect, analyse and share performance data regularly and know how well they are performing in comparison to their targets.

Each partner uses appropriate staff performance management procedures to review the performance of its training staff. Assessors receive high levels of challenge and support from managers to help them improve their performance. Performance reviews are linked well to continual professional development activities.

Communication across the consortium is effective in sharing a wide range of information. Managers and staff use regular meetings well to share data and information across partners. Staff at all levels across the consortium access further information by electronic newsletter and regular updates relating to the provider's performance and progress against targets.

The consortium has responded particularly well to local and national priorities for education and training in Wales. It contributes to a wide range of Welsh Government initiatives at local and national level. Managers across the consortium are involved in local and national bodies that include the local 14-19 network and the National Training Federation for Wales.

Improving quality: Good

The provider has a clear strategy in place to monitor performance and improve the quality of provision and outcomes for its learners. Policies and procedures for quality improvement are detailed and robust. Performance is monitored systematically by the strategic board, operational group and quality improvement group. Monthly meetings review performance at consortium and member level and a clearly defined intervention strategy provides appropriate challenge to under-performance. However, quality systems are not always focused well enough to improve standards across all areas.

The strategic board have convened a number of task and finish groups with clear terms of reference to improve the quality of specific aspects of delivery. These have helped to improve provision and outcomes. For example, they have introduced a peer observation group with the aim of improving the peer observation process and implementing a triangulated approach to peer observations.

The provider has a comprehensive and inclusive process in place to produce a single self-assessment report across all members. Its strategies to engage staff at all levels

across the consortium in producing the self-assessment are effective. For example, a 10-month cycle of thematic reviews evaluates performance and informs improvement planning.

The self-assessment report is comprehensive and evaluative and uses data well to inform judgements. It reflects the findings of inspectors accurately in most cases and links well to the quality development plan. The provider makes good use of national benchmarks and key performance indicators to evaluate its performance.

The quality development plan identifies areas requiring improvement well and results in actions that are specific, measurable and time bound. Consortium members have their own quality development plans. Partners' actions are prioritised effectively and monitored on a monthly basis by the operations board and quality manager.

The provider has developed its own quality effectiveness framework. This document is comprehensive and uses numerical targets well to assess performance against outcomes, provision, responsiveness, leadership and management. The targets form key performance indicators and these provide a good focus for quality improvement across the consortium and its members.

The provider uses feedback from learners and employers well to identify strengths and weaknesses. Results from the Learner Voice Wales survey are used to good effect to analyse feedback at consortium, member and sector level.

The provider has a robust lesson observation process, which makes good use of graded and non-graded peer observations. Peer observers are well trained and standardisation processes ensure consistent grading. There are effective processes in place to identify and support under-performing assessors. Results from lesson observations are used well to identify common themes for professional development and the development of personal improvement plans where appropriate.

Partnership working: Excellent

Overall, the consortium has excellent partnership arrangements. The consortium works with a wide range of key partners, employers and stakeholders to meet the needs of learners well.

The consortium has an ethos of openness and transparency in working with its consortia members, partners and employers. It treats all members as equals. All of the consortium partners have high levels of mutual respect for each other and close working relationships. Examples include working with Remploy in developing a mutually beneficial relationship to support disabled learners into work-based learning and working with Cardiff Metropolitan University in developing progression routes for Management learners.

The consortium has excellent working relationships with external agencies that include Careers Wales, Job Centre Plus, Communities First, third sector organisations, charities and higher education institutions. For example, the consortium works with Job Centre Plus to support over 200 learners to break down the barriers to employment.

Close working with Communities First and the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) has resulted in projects that include a 'Dads and Lads' project. This project was delivered with the primary aim of developing the relationships between fathers and their sons. Working on practical tasks and activities, the project required fathers and sons to work together, leading to improved relationships.

Consortium members have very good and effective partnerships with sector skills councils. Training programmes provide excellent opportunities for employment, particularly in health and social care and engineering.

The consortium has developed excellent strategic partnerships with two national bodies representing childcare in Wales. As a result, the consortium is the recommended provider of training across Wales for both these organisations. These partnerships are effective in shaping and influencing future training programmes and raising the standards of training and development within the sector.

Consortium members contribute significantly to 14-19 learning networks and are proactive in promoting, developing and supporting apprenticeship programmes in around 25 secondary schools in Monmouthshire, Torfaen, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent, Merthyr Tydfil, Bridgend, Cardiff and Neath Port Talbot. For example, they deliver a vocational training programme for 19 secondary schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf for pupils identified as potentially becoming disengaged. The programme provides pupils with a stronger understanding of the work setting, prepares them for work, increases their confidence and motivation and provides a wide variety of generic qualifications that pupils can use to find employment on leaving school.

Many consortium staff represent the organisation on the National Training Federation for Wales. They chair the South Wales Region and a number of groups that include the quality Working Group and the Essential Skills working group. This enables the consortium to share, learn from and shape best practice for the benefit of consortium learners and partners.

The consortium works extremely well with a wide range of local and national employers to provide learners with excellent opportunities to develop their practical skills and improve employability opportunities. For example, they have developed a bespoke apprenticeship programme for a national baking and retail company. The consortium evaluates the effectiveness of these relationships well through annual employer surveys, quality visits and key account managers.

Resource management: Good

Overall, the consortium manages its resources very well. It has established an ethos of openness, trust and collaboration. The partnership directly employs only two staff, who fulfil useful management and co-ordinating roles.

Nearly all staff are well qualified for their roles and receive an effective annual appraisal. All partners hold a professional development matrix for their staff that identifies the required qualifications and records the training undertaken by each employee. Appropriate information is shared between partners to inform planning for future training events.

The consortium uses information from training records, appraisals, course performance data and teaching and learning observations to inform its professional development strategy well. Each partner produces a calendar of professional development events, which staff from across the partnership are able to access. Where there is a more widespread training need, for example in safeguarding training, partners agree a training schedule across all partners and each partner contributes fairly to the cost of training. Evaluation of the impact of training is effective and an annual report is produced for the board. Provision for professional development is a particularly strong feature of the partnership.

The consortium makes very effective use of best practice task and finish groups to analyse aspects of its practice and provision, identify good practice and share it across the organisation. This has led, for example, to the development of shared professional development, the effective use of labour market intelligence and the introduction of a single electronic portfolio system across the partnership.

Partners have a clear agreement about how to manage the partnership's resources. This includes arrangements for distributing the partnership's core contract and allocating any increases or decreases to the contract's value fairly between partners. The board monitors financial and quality outcomes effectively, and reallocates resources between partners if necessary.

The partnership's resource management strategy has ten useful strategic aims. These are monitored by the board periodically. The strategy has a strong focus on the sharing of resources between partners, including the use of collective purchasing initiatives. The effect of this is that the consortium has been able to invest in a range of significant infrastructure and services at reduced cost.

Overall, the standards that learners achieve are good and the partnership provides good value for money.

Appendix 1

Learner satisfaction

We use the outcomes of the Welsh Government Learner Voice survey to inform all of our inspections of post 16 education and training. Learner Voice is a learner satisfaction survey conducted by the Welsh Government between January and February 2014.

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
- overall satisfaction

Each theme contains a range of questions requiring learners to rate their provider's performance. There are 28 questions overall.

Eight hundred and thirty-four learners completed the survey.

Sixty-eight per cent of respondents rated the provider as very good overall. This is six percentage points higher than the sector average of 62%. A further 27% rated the provider as good overall. Ninety-one per cent of respondents thought that their course was better than they expected. This is above the sector average.

The provider achieved higher scores than the sector average for very good ratings in all five themes of the survey. In relation to the theme of health and wellbeing learners rated the provider to be six percentage points above the sector average of 56%.

The provider achieves scores for 'very good' that are above the sector average across most of the 28 questions in the survey. Overall, 92% of 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 provider achieves higher 'very good' scores than the sector average across all but one key demographics for each question.

Appendix 2

The inspection team

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Steve Bell	Team Inspector
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