

FIRST4SKILLS Limited

Independent learning provider

Inspection dates

7–10 February 2017

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

Summary of key findings

This is an inadequate provider

- Safeguarding is ineffective. Managers and staff take insufficient action to support learners about whom they have serious safety concerns.
- The management of apprenticeships is inadequate.
- The majority of current learners make slow progress on their apprenticeships, which results in their personal and professional development being hindered.
- Leaders and managers have failed to implement appropriate systems to monitor accurately the progress that learners make on their apprenticeships.
- Leaders and managers place insufficient focus on their strategic planning to ensure that learners benefit from high-quality education and training and make good progress in their studies.
- Trainers do not set sufficiently challenging targets for learners to achieve. The majority of learners make slow progress on their apprenticeships.
- The actions that leaders and managers take to improve standards, including self-assessment, are not rigorous enough, and have resulted in a decline in standards since the previous inspection.
- Managers' monitoring of subcontractors is poor. As a result, too many learners do not make the progress on their apprenticeship programme that they should.
- Leaders do not ensure that learning and skill development are planned well enough to meet the needs of all employers, particularly for small- and medium-sized enterprises.
- Managers do not ensure that there are appropriate assessments in place at the start of learners' programmes to allow trainers to plan learning effectively.
- Learners have insufficient awareness of the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism.

The provider has the following strengths

- This provider has no strengths.

Full report

Information about the provider

- The City of Liverpool College (CoLC) and the Sysco Group jointly own First4Skills Limited (F4S). The Sysco Group purchased a 40% share in the provider from CoLC in July 2016. Prior to this date F4S was a wholly owned subsidiary of CoLC. F4S is a national training provider that provides education and training across England. The operational management and delivery is divided into three geographical regions: North, Midlands and South. Approximately three quarters of the provision is provided directly by F4S, while the remainder is provided by 14 subcontractor organisations, geographically dispersed across England. The company provides apprenticeship training and work-related training to young people and adults in small- and medium-sized and large businesses. F4S provide apprenticeships in a wide range of sectors including retail enterprise and business, administration and law, which account for the majority of all current learners.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- As a matter of utmost urgency, leaders and managers should review safeguarding policies and procedures to ensure that all learners are kept safe. They should do this by:
 - ensuring that managers provide staff with clear guidelines of what actions they must follow when serious safeguarding concerns are disclosed; and managers should monitor these concerns to their conclusion rigorously
 - initiating effective links with external agencies in the regions that F4S and their subcontractors provide education and training, to support learners, and share vital information to protect learners who may be at risk
 - ensuring that apprentices improve their awareness of the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism and that they know the identity of the responsible manager to whom they should report their concerns.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment at F4S and their subcontractors by ensuring that:
 - leaders and managers place the improvement of teaching, learning and assessment at the centre of all strategic plans, to reverse the decline in standards since the previous inspection
 - assessments for the different elements of the apprenticeship are completed at the commencement of the programme for every learner; trainers should use these results to plan learning to meet learners' specific requirements meticulously
 - learners receive their entitlement of well-planned, off-the-job learning to aid them in developing new skills and to assist them in becoming more productive and effective members of their employers' workforce
 - trainers motivate learners to improve their skills development over the length of their apprenticeship compared to their starting points
 - trainers monitor the progress that learners make on their qualifications accurately, supporting those who are not making the expected progress and challenging the most able learners to achieve higher standards of work

- a much higher proportion of learners are making the expected progress on their qualifications.
- Implement appropriate arrangements to ensure that leaders and managers can accurately monitor the progress that learners make on their qualifications; trainers should use these to provide learners and employers with accurate information on learners' progress and intervene appropriately, where learners do not make the expected progress.
- Managers should ensure that they evaluate the impact of actions in improvement plans, rather than simply monitoring their completion, and avoid over-optimistic reporting of improvements to senior leaders and the governing body.
- Improve curriculum planning to ensure that small- and medium-sized enterprises benefit from the same bespoke service to develop apprentices' learning and skill development that large employers receive. Managers should evaluate the curriculum's effectiveness in meeting the specific needs of employers and local enterprise partnerships.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Inadequate

- Senior leaders and board members have failed to tackle the significant weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. Outcomes for learners and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment have declined further and are now inadequate. Strategic priorities focus disproportionately on maximising the company's income at the expense of providing high standards of education and training for learners.
- Senior leaders do not focus sufficiently on their strategic planning to ensure that learners benefit from high-quality training and make good progress on their qualifications. They do not ensure that managers with operational responsibilities, such as quality improvement and managing subcontractors' performance, carry out their roles effectively in order to improve outcomes for learners.
- The actions that leaders and managers take to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and the performance of trainers have insufficient impact. Managers carry out observations of training and assessment but, too often, their evaluations fail to identify key strengths, areas for improvement or the impact of training on learners' progress. Actions for improvement identified following observations are often vague and not helpful enough to enable trainers to improve their practice. The progress that trainers make in improving their practice is not monitored rigorously or reviewed consistently.
- Too often, targets set for trainers, following annual appraisal of their performance, focus on recruiting more learners and increasing their caseload, and not on the aspects of training and assessment that they need to improve. Trainers have insufficient opportunity to improve their practice through professional development. They carry out basic training to improve their understanding in areas that managers identify as priorities, such as safeguarding, but do not receive training to improve the specific weaknesses in their own practice.
- Self-assessment is not rigorous and does not lead to rapid enough improvements or ensure good outcomes for learners. Leaders and managers use too narrow a range of evidence to evaluate performance. For example, they rely solely on views gathered from a very small proportion of learners to evaluate how safe learners feel and how well they understand British values. Leaders and managers do not monitor the impact of actions that they identify following self-assessment, but only evaluate whether the actions are being carried out within planned timescales. As a result, their assessment of the progress that they are making to improve quality is over-optimistic.
- Managers gather insufficient information about the progress that learners make on their qualifications, and too much of the information they gather is inaccurate. As a result, they are unable to act quickly or decisively enough to improve learners' progress and achievement in the areas where they are weak.
- Leaders and managers do not take effective enough action to improve the performance of subcontractors. They have ceased working with a number of the worst-performing partners; nevertheless, learners' achievement in a significant proportion of the remaining subcontractors is still too low.

- Monitoring of the performance of subcontractors is not rigorous enough. Managers carry out regular visits to check that subcontractors meet their contractual requirements and their funding targets, and to monitor the proportion of learners who achieve. However, performance monitoring of subcontractors is poor, and focuses on the processes that they have in place rather than the quality of training.
- Managers do not plan the apprenticeship offer well enough to meet the needs of many of the employers that First4Skills works with. Apprenticeship programmes adequately meet the needs of large employers, but fail to meet the specific needs of small- and medium-sized enterprises. Leaders and managers liaise with local enterprise partnerships in many of the areas where they offer apprenticeships to gather information about local needs and priorities, but they do not use this information well enough to plan the programmes.
- The careers guidance that learners receive does not help them to make informed choices about future career options. Trainers and careers advisers provide guidance to most learners about the range of apprenticeships available and related career routes. However, too many learners join programmes that are not suitable for their aspirations and, as a result, many leave before completing their apprenticeship. Too many apprentices do not maintain employment in their chosen career on completion of their apprenticeship.
- Strategies to promote equality, celebrate diversity and ensure that learners gain a good understanding of British values are not effective. Leaders and managers ensure that appropriate policies and procedures are in place and provide basic training for staff. However, trainers do not prepare learners well enough for working in a diverse society.

The governance of the provider

- First4Skills has a board of directors, which is made up of senior leaders from the two organisations that own the company. The information that governors on the board receive about learners' progress is not accurate enough and often provides an over-optimistic picture of the company's performance. This limits the ability of the board members to identify all weaknesses and monitor improvements. Senior leaders and operational managers have failed to take sufficient action to improve the performance of F4S since the previous inspection.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective.
- Managers and staff take insufficient action to support learners about whom they have serious safety concerns. Reports of referrals and disclosures lack sufficient information about interventions that are identified and actions taken to ensure the safety of learners who have made disclosures. Managers' records show that, in a number of instances, learners left their programme immediately after disclosing information that raised very serious concerns about their safety and well-being. Managers and staff took no further action once the apprentice had left and did not alert any other agencies.
- All staff carry out appropriate training on safeguarding, including on the 'Prevent' duty. However, they do not use their understanding to ensure that all learners gain a good understanding of the risks of radicalisation and extremism.

- Leaders and managers ensure safe recruitment of staff, including those working for subcontracting partners.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Inadequate

- Managers do not ensure that the principles and requirements of an apprenticeship are met. Too many learners do not receive their education and training entitlement, including planned, off-the-job learning, to support their skill development.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment at the provider and within their subcontractors is poor. Trainers place too much focus on assessing skills that learners already possess as opposed to developing new ones. This was identified particularly by learners completing intermediate apprenticeships in warehousing and distribution, who have worked in the sector for many years.
- While managers ensure that assessments take place for English and mathematics at the start of a learner's apprenticeship, trainers do not use the results of these assessments sufficiently well to plan learning. Consequently, too many learners do not improve their English and mathematical skills throughout their apprenticeship. Additionally, learners who work towards achieving English and mathematics functional skills qualifications, as part of their apprenticeship, do not make the progress that they should, due to weak planning of learning.
- Leaders and managers have failed to ensure that there are appropriate arrangements in place for staff to measure learners' vocational starting points at the beginning of their apprenticeship. As a result, trainers do not have a good understanding of what skills learners already possess and what aspects they need to improve. This means that learners' skill development is inhibited, their progress is slow, and they become disengaged due to dull, repetitive sessions, predominantly focused on assessing existing abilities.
- Learners receive insufficient off-the-job learning to allow them to develop their occupational skills and knowledge swiftly. On the rare occasions when off-the-job training does take place, trainers do not challenge the most able learners sufficiently to produce work of a higher standard. Trainers have low expectations of learners and are content for them to achieve the minimum standards set by the awarding organisation, rather than attaining higher levels of skill development and improved standards of work.
- Trainers do not set learners clear and specific actions to ensure that they make good progress during their apprenticeship. While learners receive regular visits from trainers, too many of these sessions are ineffective in developing learners' skills and enhancing their knowledge. Too many trainers arrive at sessions where their main purpose is to observe learners completing their daily activities at work. Actions set in progress reviews are cursory, imprecise and do not support effective learning. For example, actions are generic and focus on the completion of workbooks or units rather than on setting individual targets to support apprentices' learning and skill development.
- Trainers do not provide sufficiently detailed, accurate and helpful feedback to learners on their work. Trainers' feedback on work submitted and the progress that learners make is overly positive and inaccurate. They do not provide learners with clear and concise feedback on what they need to improve or support them to improve the quality of their

work. Consequently, too many learners feel that they are making good progress on their qualifications when they are not making the progress that they should. For example, learners completing advanced apprenticeships in business administration are advised that they are making good progress on their progress record, while their electronic portfolio identifies that they are not making the expected progress. Therefore, it is very unlikely that they will achieve their apprenticeship by their planned completion date.

- While leaders and managers have set policies and procedures to promote equality and celebrate diversity, trainers do not promote these values within sessions and progress reviews. Learners have a superficial understanding of what it means to be a citizen in Britain today due to weak reinforcement in progress reviews across the apprenticeship programmes.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Inadequate

- Too many learners do not make the expected progress on their qualifications because of inadequate teaching, learning and assessment. Learners do not develop their skills sufficiently to be effective in the workplace, particularly in English and mathematics, due to weak prioritisation by trainers. For example, learners create and distribute business documents to internal customers with significant spelling and grammatical errors. Trainers do not identify these mistakes or provide support to learners to improve their presentation skills.
- Learners do not receive advice and guidance about their apprenticeships that focuses sufficiently on their career paths or starting points. Staff enrol learners on inappropriate apprenticeships because of marketing promotions by managers or decisions made by the employer to accredit the skills of their workforce. Learners do not receive appropriate initial and ongoing careers advice to help them plan their next steps in education and employment. Consequently, only a small proportion of learners progress from intermediate to advanced apprenticeships and very few progress to higher-level programmes.
- Learners have a very limited understanding of how to protect themselves from the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism. They are not sufficiently aware of how to keep themselves safe in their communities, or online, and could not identify who they should contact at F4S or their partner organisations should they have any concerns.
- Too many learners and employers cancel assessment and progress reviews at short notice. Learners do not request or receive any additional work following the cancellation of these visits, nor is there any consequence for cancelling them. This results in learners not making the progress that they should.
- Learners have positive attitudes towards their learning and careers. They are enthusiastic and display high levels of professional behaviour. They grow in confidence and are able to recognise the value of effective personal and social skills in the workplace.
- Learners demonstrate an appropriate understanding of health and safety in the workplace, demonstrating safe working practices in their job roles. The knowledge that they acquire from their employers is invaluable in ensuring that they keep themselves, their colleagues and the public safe. For example, warehousing learners complete checks on the safe storage of medicines and the monitoring of secure storage racking to prevent accidents to others.

- Supportive employers plan on-the-job training well; most learners demonstrate effective industrial skills and complete tasks within expected, commercial timescales. For example, catering learners cope well with busy lunchtimes, front of house and in the kitchen, to reduce customers' waiting time and enhance customer service.

Outcomes for learners

Inadequate

- Leaders and managers have failed to implement appropriate arrangements to monitor accurately the progress that learners make on their programmes. Managers do not ensure that staff administer vocational assessments for learners at the start of their programme, resulting in skill development not being planned and progress not being monitored effectively.
- Staff at F4S, and at subcontractors, assess learners' starting points for English and mathematics at the start of their apprenticeship programmes. However, trainers fail to use the results of these assessments to plan accurate learning to support meeting learners' specific requirements. Consequently, learners do not develop their English and mathematical skills throughout the course of their apprenticeship, resulting in learners producing work of a poor standard.
- Managers have presided over a decline in standards since the previous inspection. Too many learners do not complete their apprenticeships within their planned timescales. More than a third of learners in 2015/16 failed to achieve their qualification and just over half achieved their qualification within the planned timescales. Current learners are not making the progress that they should. More than half of all learners are making slow progress and are not on target to achieve their qualification within their planned timescales for 2016/17.
- Managers acknowledge that there are significant gaps in achievement between different groups of learners, for learners on both apprenticeships delivered directly by F4S and those delivered by their subcontractors. There are particularly noticeable gaps in achievement between learners aged 24+ and other learners. Achievement is particularly poor in hospitality, management and marketing apprenticeships.
- Managers have not completed the monitoring of learner destinations for 2015/16. The most recent information for 2014/15 indicates that a very small minority of learners responded to this survey. Fewer than one in five learners who complete intermediate apprenticeships progress on to higher-level qualifications and almost no learners progress beyond advanced apprenticeships, which is not good enough.

Provider details

Unique reference number	59142
Type of provider	Independent learning provider
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	5,684
Executive director	Mr Ian Smith
Telephone number	0151 243 8327
Website	www.first4skills.com/

Provider information at the time of the inspection

Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 or above	
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
	0	17	0	11	0	0	0	0
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	599	1,681	348	1,095	6	159		
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
			6		6			
Number of learners aged 14 to 16	N/A							
Number of learners for which the provider receives high-needs funding	N/A							
Funding received from:	Skills Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	Apprentice Team Ltd Enabling Development Opportunities FW Solutions Parenta Training Skills for Careers Lionheart in the Community The Challenge Network International School of Beauty							

	Fleetmaster Training Fresh Training Northwest Education and Training Taylor Made Training Training Strategies Woodspeen Training
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Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the director of quality, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

Inspection team

Paul Cocker, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Gillian Forrester	Her Majesty's Inspector
Steve Hailstone	Her Majesty's Inspector
Tracey Mace-Akroyd	Her Majesty's Inspector
Marinette Bazin	Ofsted Inspector
Stella Owen	Ofsted Inspector
Andrew Stittle	Ofsted Inspector
Sarah McGrath	Ofsted Inspector
Tracey Baron	Ofsted Inspector

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