

Commercial in Confidence



Assessment Report
For
ALLIANCE LEARNING LTD

On behalf of



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1. Key Information

Assessment Type	ACCREDITATION REVIEW
Assessor's Decision	STANDARD MET
Assessor's Name	JOHN P G SMITH
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2. Organisation – Information, Introduction and Overview

Alliance Learning Ltd is a private company limited by guarantee and a registered charity managed by a group of member companies. It was formed in April 2001 from the merger of Bolton Training Group and CLEEA Training. Prior to this, the company has traded for over 40 years as Bolton Training Group. The company has a training centre in Leigh, delivering Learner Responsive courses through Learndirect provision, and an engineering multi-disciplinary training centre, incorporating the head office in Horwich.

Alliance Learning holds a contract with the Skills Funding Agency for Apprenticeships and Non-Apprenticeship provision. Programmes delivered include Intermediate and Advanced Apprenticeships in Business Administration, Customer Service, Childcare and Health and Social Care and Engineering. Alliance Learning also offer Higher Apprenticeships in Engineering. The company is also growing its commercial business operation, providing a range of training to local companies.

Alliance Learning sub-contracts to local colleges for a small number of learners to complete BTEC qualifications as part of their framework in Engineering and has formed a sub-contracting partnership with Dentrain Professionals Ltd to deliver Dental Nursing Apprenticeships.

Company Vision

Alliance Learning will be the natural first choice for the workforce of the future. By delivering outstanding teaching and learning, we will meet the needs and expectations of the local economy.

The company, which has recently undergone a re-organisation, is run by the Chief Executive, supported by the Operations and Quality Improvement Executive and a team of managers responsible for finance, marketing, commercial/recruitment, curriculum development, engineering business improvement and funding/projects. These managers are responsible for teams of staff delivering the range of services and support functions.

Information, advice and guidance (IAG) are integral to all programmes; prospective learners receive full explanations of the provision available and its linkage to the current job role or future progression options, along with eligibility criteria if appropriate. Where provision is unsuitable to meet the individual's needs or preferences, they are referred to other Alliance provision or to alternative providers. Having decided to access Alliance provision, learners undergo an initial assessment to ascertain appropriate level of award and to identify any additional needs.

This is followed by sign-up, when the required documentation is completed, eligibility confirmed and start dates agreed. The induction follows, when learners receive detailed explanations of the programme content, support available, respective roles and responsibilities and projected end-date. Learners go on to complete individual learning plans and begin to consider any optional units in relation to current and potential future job roles and evidence opportunities, and to longer term progression/career goals.

Throughout the programme learners, their employers and Alliance staff complete progress reviews, update the ILP and agree targets and goals for completion by the next review. Toward the end of the programme reviews focus on progression options and opportunities, and are supported in locating and accessing these, whether by progression to the next level or to further, additional provision at other providers.

Learndirect learners additionally access a range of programmes and modules to enhance employability skills, including short courses, workshop sessions and volunteering or work placements.

3. Areas of Particular Strength

A number of strengths were identified during the assessment. These are detailed below. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

- Alliance Learning has, since the re-organisation referred to, grown and developed, and enjoys excellent cross-team communication, universal involvement of staff at all levels in planning and review, that has increased their commitment to company aims and vision, encouraged and supported them in taking on additional responsibilities, empowered them to take their own decisions and encouraged innovation. (1.2)
- This has been supported by a deep commitment on the part of the organisation to staff development – growing from within – and the Review revealed many examples of how staff had progressed from being learners, to full time employees; had been able to switch job roles and take on extra duties, and helped to acquire the appropriate competences to enable this; and highlighted the long term commitment that this has engendered in staff who have been employed for considerable numbers of years and who have returned after prolonged breaks, for example for childcare. (2.4)
- The quality review and improvement systems and processes in place are highly effective in monitoring performance and devising improvements, again, participated in by all staff; the company is fully open to feedback and suggestions from all quarters, prompting innovation, good practice sharing and continuous searching for ways to improve. (4.1, 4.5, 4.8)
- The systems referred to are supported by a comprehensive and expanding use of information technology, that enables micro-monitoring of performance across all activities, provides a wide range of analyses and reports to aid evaluation, gives access to learners to a range of support materials and facilities, and renders assessment more efficient and cost effective. (4.7)
- At the heart of the Alliance offer is the highly effective information, advice and guidance provided to learners, prospective learners and their employers, which has supported the impressive achievement of targets and KPIs and enhanced the personal skills development of learners. (3.2)
- Extensive networking and partnership work, through a wide range of external associations, key contacts and like minded providers has produced many benefits to

Alliance, including access to joint staff development opportunities, collaborative development of provision, in line with future skills needs, and through its membership scheme, access to large number of companies that enables Alliance to 'keep its finger on the pulse' of skills development and labour market intelligence, enabling offerings to be entirely relevant to identified needs and priorities. (1.8)

4. Areas for Continuous Improvement

A number of areas for continuous improvement were identified during the assessment which could enhance the service delivered. These are detailed below. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard. These will form the basis for discussion at the Continuous Improvement Checks (CIC) conducted twelve and twenty four months from the date of this assessment.

- As mentioned, Alliance's use of technology is a particular strength, with all learner activities and achievements recorded and analysed; Alliance may wish to consider enhancing the range of analytical options available on the One-File system to include the aggregation of achievements of the personal learning and thinking skills by cohort, whether gender, post code, ethnic group, age of programme cohort, as an additional means of identifying and addressing impacting factors, and thus providing an additional selling point to prospective customers by demonstrating the added value Alliance gives to its learners and their employers. (4.2, 4.7)
- In the same vein, the company may wish to explore the possibility and value of aggregating learner progress in Functional Skills/Skills for Life, again as an additional improvement tool and to act as a unique selling point for prospective customers and learners. (4.2)
- The client centred nature of Alliance support is referred to above, and the company may wish to expand this added value offer by providing optional 'add-ons', such as driving lessons or extra certification of skills, that will enhance learners' employability/employment chances. (1.5, 3.2)
- The Board of directors is drawn from a range of relevant backgrounds and provide support to the company in a number of ways, in particular by the innovation of Board Member sub-groups; however, Alliance may now wish to consider defining members' required skill sets and job roles, that will help to ensure they are able to contribute as effectively, and in line with their knowledge and experience, as possible, adding an additional source of input to the ongoing development of the company. (1.2, 2.3, 2.4)
- As mentioned, the learner support in place is highly effective in supporting company objectives and learner success; Alliance may wish to consider the efficacy of capitalising on this by promoting more actively not just the support on offer within programmes but also its purpose and desired outcomes, to enhance the USP of the company. (1.6)
- Alliance may wish to consider the use of the Outcomes Star or Rickter Scale as a means of recorded and measuring learner achievements in the Employability Programme; these, and others available are highly effective at helping learners to track the starting point of their journey and the distance they have travelled while on programme, and offer visual illustrations that act as encouragement to continue to achieve and progress. (4.2)

5. Methodology

The following methods were used to gather evidence against the **matrix** Standard during the assessment process.

- Interviews with the Chief Executive, the Operations Executive, four managers, four members of staff
- Telephone interviews with five partners, two clients, five learners
- Group interviews with a total of twenty two managers and staff, fourteen learners
- Review of key documentation, including the One File client database, business plan, self assessment review, various policies and learner documentation, minutes of meetings, performance analyses; the OneFile client database; and the Alliance Learning website

Feedback was provided to the Executive team at the end of the first two days, and to the Senior Management Team at the end of the Review.

6. Findings Against the matrix Standard

1. Leadership and Management

The way in which the organisation is led and managed to develop an effective service

Alliance Learning's aims for the current year are to:

- *Deliver outstanding teaching and learning, which ensures the highest levels of success for our learners.*
- *To maintain and develop new partnerships in order to extend provision and meet the needs of the local economy to drive growth.*
- *Promote an ethos of inclusivity, equality and diversity, ensuring appropriate support is available for all learners.*
- *Provide a curriculum relevant for today and the future, which equips learners with excellent work and life skills.*
- *Ensure that staff and learners are highly engaged and enthusiastic about work.*
- *Develop our reputation through outstanding learner achievement, successful communication and promotion of Alliance Learning's brand.*
- *Improve financial performance and diversify income sources through partnership and collaboration.*
- *Introduce Board Member Sub-Groups to effectively stretch and challenge all aspects of the business.*
- *Produce a sales and marketing strategy to support the activities to achieve the financial targets set within this plan and for the future.*
- *Increase our current Ofsted Grade 2 and implement strategies to be an 'Outstanding' provider by 2016.*
- *Maintain staff turnover to below 15% during 2014/15 contract year.*
- *Maintain company sickness and absence of staff to below 2% year on year.*
- *Complete an annual Self-Assessment Report, with feedback from, and in collaboration with our learners, employers and staff.*

The company's strategy for IAG is:

Rationale

Alliance Learning is committed to providing robust Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) to all learners, customers, employers, staff and clients. IAG is at the heart of the service Alliance Learning provides to ensure that customers receive good quality training with outcomes to help them progress in their careers. For some people who have grown up in families and households where there is no knowledge of the education, training and employment options available, this support will be invaluable. For others, having the opportunity to talk through the different options means making the right choices is less daunting.

Effective IAG is essential for enabling individuals to take responsibility for their life choices and progress in learning and work. Good careers advice is critical if people are to raise their aspirations and capitalise on the opportunities available to them.

Our IAG Mission

- All learners, customers, employers, staff and clients will have access to good quality information and advice around future learning and labour market opportunities*
- We will signpost and refer learners where we cannot provide a customised preferred service*
- Our staff will be suitably trained to deliver our service and support diverse needs*
- We will tailor our services to meet individual needs, fully embedding equality and diversity considerations*
- All curriculum delivery will involve a robust initial assessment with thorough pre-IAG*
- We will ensure all [service users] understand enough about the world of work to know what skills they need to succeed in getting and keeping a job*
- We will use career and local labour market information to inform our services, ensuring our provision is relevant and supports individual progression*
- Our curriculum based learning will be linked to careers advice and guidance, ensuring our offer meets learner needs and the demands of employers. This will include Start, Mid and End IAG. We will advise on work experience opportunities for our learndirect and Traineeship provision to help explore career opportunities and expand networks*

Success measures

- Staff observation Grades a minimum Grade 2*
- Minimum success rates of 87% on Apprenticeships*
- Job outcome rate of 80% for Traineeships and Apprenticeships*
- 85% customer satisfaction from curriculum delivery*
- Staff qualification and skills matrix reflects skills required for delivery*
- Good quality stakeholder feedback, including course evaluations*
- Ofsted Grade 2 aspiring to Grade 1 for 2016*
- Successful Training Needs Analysis delivers employer requirements*
- Quarterly staff updates to inform of company performance*

As mentioned, the company is run by the Chief Executive supported by the Quality Improvement Executive and the Senior Management Team; SMT meetings are held fortnightly, at which all aspects of performance against contracted targets and KPIs are reviewed, with improvements and external impacting factors identified and addressed, and the management team meets every six weeks to carry out similar planning and review. Delivery/curriculum teams meet weekly to carry out detailed, in-depth analysis of performance at team and individual level, in relation to each learner. The timing of these gatherings is such that the one is informed by the other, and decisions and key information is thus transmitted frequently and effectively up, down and across the organisation, ensuring all staff are up to date at any given time with developments, issues, successes and areas for development/improvement. As mentioned, leadership and management are a particular strength of the organisation, with all

staff encouraged to contribute to planning, delivery and review, and to propose solutions on an ongoing basis. Staff commented positively about the level of their involvement in these processes which, they averred, explained their firm commitment to Alliance and its vision:

'They're always trying to be better, and to make you better'

'Always open to anyone's ideas'

'They can't say yes to everything, but they will consider everything'

'We always know exactly where we are, and where we need to be'

Alliance has in place a range of policies relating to equality and diversity, confidentiality and data protection, and staff described various ways they had promoted these principles, including dedicated sessions in classroom sessions addressing stereotypes, the provision of prayer room and facilities to support religious and cultural beliefs, recommending alternative provision where Alliance programmes may not have been suitable, identification of additional learning or support needs, and the provision of such support, either directly, for example, coloured paper or screen filters for those with dyslexia, additional coaching in functional skills, or through access to a third party for specialist help. Learners referred to ways in which staff had demonstrated and promote these principles, for example, changing course attendance times to fit around a learner's childcare needs, providing additional tutorials to help catch up on missed sessions, timing visits flexibly to fit in with shift patterns.

'If I can't come, they'll email, and I can complete it at home'

They referred to the way in which the topic of mutual respect had been repeatedly visited during sessions, and commented on how confidentiality had been emphasised in relation to private conversations between them and staff, and how they had discussed data protection and security in relation to their personal data held by Alliance. Staff described how they analysed learner achievement by gender and demography to ensure recruitment and achievement consistently across cohorts and identify any factors potentially impacting.

Managers explained that they ensured Alliance provision and activities adhered to current legislation, and that they were notified of changes that might impact on them through a number of different routes; for example, changes in funding or eligibility for programmes was notified by Skills Funding Agency; membership of the GM Learning Provider Network, and links with Alliance member companies alerted them to changes in workplace regulations, for instance, in manufacturing health and safety, health and social care regulation and staff competence requirements; participation in Employer Ownership Scheme in relation to Apprenticeship Trailblazers alerted them to adjustments to qualification requirements, as did automatic notification by awarding bodies to the content of awards and any legal changes impacting; contacts with ACAS and attendance at update sessions keeps managers abreast of employment law.

When such changes affect Alliance provision, appropriate curriculum teams and senior managers revise provision accordingly, with standardisation ensuring all staff were aware of the changes. Informal observation highlighted training workshops in which factory conditions, including health and safety regimes, were in place. Staff are required to attend regular updates on Safeguarding, Health and Safety, Employee Rights and Responsibilities, and carry out health and safety and safeguarding assessments of new sites where they will be delivering programmes. All learners are provided with copies of relevant policies that they are subject to, which detail the applicable legislation.

The learner outcomes Alliance has defined include hard outcomes in relation to awards and progression, and softer outcomes based on personal learning and thinking skills -

- Independence
- Creativity
- Reflection
- Teamwork
- Self-management
- Participation

Achievement of these outcomes by individuals is measured and recorded at individual review, and where progress appears limited, additional activity is agreed to help develop the appropriate skill; as mentioned, Alliance may benefit by exploring ways of aggregating achievement/distance travelled using the power of OneFile.

Learners commented positively about the way they had acquired and developed these skills, citing increased confidence, improved communication and team work and better understanding:

'Opened my eyes to business life'

'More sensitive toward patients'

'Better time management'

'More of a team player'

The service is promoted in a variety of ways, according to programme and target group. For example, the Alliance website carries details of all programmes with areas designated for employers, apprentices, commercial customers and so on, in which provision and its potential benefits, eligibility criteria, and any support available. Apprenticeship opportunities are also promoted on the National Apprenticeship Service website. Staff liaise with their counterparts in other providers, directly and via the GMLPN, and organisations such as Connexions and other referral services, to update them on provision for potential inward referrals; Employment Programmes are similarly promoted through contacts with Jobcentre Plus. Services are promoted by the Marketing team, who engage in a mix of relationship management with member companies and existing customers, and through making new contacts, usually targeting a particular geographical area or sector. Staff attend careers and job fairs at local schools and colleges and any other relevant event that might attract individual learners or companies wishing to access development for their staff.

All promotional activity is reviewed for its impact, and prospective learners are asked to say where they heard about the company or programme; the principal route for Apprentices and commercial learners is through their company and for the former, the NAS website, although careers events, referrals from other providers and word of mouth are also significant recruitment sources. For Employment Programmes Jobcentre Plus is the principal route for prospective learners initially, although having accessed provision once significant proportions of learners self referral for further programmes.

As mentioned, one of Alliance's strengths is in the way in which it involves all staff in the planning, development, delivery and review/improvement of services; the business planning process begins with the Board and senior managers agreeing the objectives for the forthcoming year and then each team devising its own plan for meeting those objectives. Staff were able to cite several features of programmes that they had contributed to, and commented also that at performance reviews they contributed to ideas and activities to achieve improvement; examples

of these contributions include the introduction of new teaching techniques, incorporating the use of mobile phone Apps.

Learners confirmed that they were regularly consulted about their needs and wishes, and that their suggestions and requests had been acted on, for example improvements to the OneFile system, the provision of a common room, which learners designed.

Partnership and networking are, as described, a strength of Alliance; at strategic level, participation in the GMLPN and links into local authority and regional LEP, participation in the Trailblazer and the company membership scheme all provide access to labour market intelligence on current and future skills needs and trends, helping shape provision. Membership of GMLPN has provided access to the Impact programme in which members run and attend workshops designed to share good practice and improve management and delivery; similar links to GTA (Group Training Association) England offer opportunities for members to partner and collaborate on improving performance and developing provision, as well as sharing good practice. Links with local schools, colleges and training providers, provide opportunities to promote services and identify outward referral options for learners for whom Alliance provision is not appropriate. These links, along with contacts at Jobcentre Plus and Connexions also offer marketing and recruitment opportunities, while contacts with local authority and statutory services help identify specialist support provision on particular issues Alliance staff are not competent to deal with.

Partners spoke very positively about collaborating with Alliance, describing the mutual benefits of joint working:

'Very supportive – they provided safeguarding training for our staff'

'It's about constant communication and sharing'

'Everything we ask they have an answer to'

2. Resources

The assets invested and applied in providing an effective service

Resource costs are factored into programmes, with income and expenditure carefully monitored against target and budget; within individual programmes staff have discretion to purchase any reasonable support materials they need to deliver successfully and appropriately. Alliance has a sophisticated workshop/factory setting training facility, and equipment is regularly reviewed for continued functionality and safety, and routinely replaced when necessary. Staff described how they made specific requests for substantial investments in machinery, for example a new construction vehicle, to ensure provision related to modern equipment in use in the workplace. Partnership arrangements with a number of key local employers has led to the provision by those partners of essential safety equipment and machinery to support programmes. Staff are issued with laptops and/or tablets which enable them to access the OneFile system remotely and efficiently.

The recent establishment of Board member Sub-groups to review specific areas of the business and suggest improvements makes innovative use of a major resource in the form of banks of knowledge and experience that can be harnessed by the company. Managers explained that new staff had recently been recruited to major on data analysis in response to a growing need for more reports and more sophisticated evaluative information, thus helping reduce the pressure on them.

The majority of information resources used by staff to support learners are internet based, and staff explained how they regularly reviewed key sites for continued relevance and currency, and to support their own teaching; they described how they researched appropriate YouTube videos to help demonstrate techniques or for examples of good practice, and how they provided recommended sites to support learner research, such as reputable trade and professional associations sites, official sites in the gov.uk range, including quality assurance bodies, health and safety executive, local employers for job opportunities and to help applicants prepare for interview. The OneFile system also allows staff to upload new information for learners, perhaps recent articles or papers, teaching notes, so that they are constantly being refreshed and updated. All changes to, or new, resources, are quality assured by a manager with designated responsibility to ensure currency and consistency.

Updates to qualification content or assessment methodology are automatically notified by awarding bodies, and the changes required are incorporated through standardisation to ensure all staff are aware of the new requirements. Changes to eligibility criteria and other official matters impacting on funded provision are notified by Skills Funding Agency and appropriate documentation provided; there is specific staff responsibility to ensure all originals of official paperwork are stored read only on a central drive so that only the most recent can be accessed.

All job roles come with specified competences and qualifications, for example, IAG NVQ, Management awards, Business Admin, and for delivery staff appropriate TAQA teaching, assessment and internal quality assurance units; the IAG strategy stipulates that '*Staff qualification and skills matrix reflects skills required for delivery*'; this ensures that as company priorities evolve roles and personal targets continue to match business needs and awarding body or funding provider criteria.

As mentioned, staff development is a particular strength of Alliance, with many staff having progressed to new, more responsible roles; they described how they were supported into their new role, including being provided with the appropriate skills and qualifications. Managers commented that all new staff and the marketing and promotion teams had undergone training in IAG, to help improve customer relationships and better to provide personalised support to clients. They described how they designed CPD sessions to reflect needs identified in observations of teaching, and how they circulate monthly good practice updates for staff on observation outcomes, latest information and updates on the range of topics affecting the company and staff. They explained that through the GMLPN staff were able to access from, and provide to, partners' staff, a range of master classes and coaching sessions on good practice in 'demonstrating impact'

Staff described how they were frequently encouraged to attend development opportunities to help develop additional skills and talents, and to stay abreast of current legal requirements and industry standards.

'There's always CPD – not forced, encouraged'

'Loads of development'

They recalled recent development they had attended, such as TAQA units, team leadership, upskills on Functional and IT skills, ECDL, Ofsted workshops on how to deliver engineering in a classroom setting, first aid, employment law updates, IAG.

Recently recruited staff described their induction into the role, as did recently promoted staff, and those returning from extended absence; the induction comprises an introduction to the company, and an overview of the job role, followed by visits to each department, to help staff understand how their role fits into the whole; it also includes specific training on internal systems and paperwork, updates on safeguarding, health and safety, equality and diversity, an

initial assessment of maths and English, and the construction of a training plan, with informal reviews at the end of each day and a formal post induction evaluation by staff and line manager.

Staff commented on how the induction had been essential in helping them to understand their role and its relationship to those of others, the boundaries to their responsibilities, and who to go to for support:

'Helped me see how my job linked into the company'

'I needed to know who is responsible for what'

Review of documentation highlighted a series of internal emails from managers seeking feedback and reflection on the induction (*'What you got out of the induction by going into each department, and the general organisation and delivery of the induction'*). Feedback provided is positive, for example:

'Everyone is very supportive with the emphasis on what you don't know, ask'

'Good insight into all the departments to give a well-rounded overview of the business as a whole'

'Really helped me and gave me a good start to work'

3. Service Delivery

The way in which the service is delivered effectively

Staff explained that when first meeting prospective learners they provided in-depth explanations of the programme, its potential benefits and the help available to them, with a step by step description of each of the components, from sign up, through initial assessment, to induction, programme and learning planning and reviews. This detailed explanation is supported by an easy to access learner pack, which provides full information for ongoing reference; and the Learner Induction Booklet, which provides comprehensive information about the company and the roles of individual staff with whom learners will have contact, similar information is available to learners on OneFile. The Apprenticeship Guide tells learners that Student Services has *'dedicated members of staff available to offer information, advice and guidance on a wide range of issues. If we can't help you, we will direct you to someone who can, whether that be another organisation or individual'*.

Learners were able to confirm that they had received this level of detail, and that staff had checked with them that they had understood the extent and limitations of the programme and the support provided within it.

'They told me all the important people I need to know'

Managers reviewed recent performance figures for Alliance programmes, which showed a steady improvement over recent years in overall and timely success rates, which are well in excess of national averages and in line with the success measures for the IAG service; this is evidence that the service is being delivered effectively to meet its objectives.

Employers and staff commented enthusiastically about the professionalism of staff:

'They respect confidentiality – very professional'

'They go above and beyond for our staff, we'd be lost without them'

'Helped in ways I never expected from them – fantastic'

'Very responsive – keep me in the loop'

'If they can't answer straight away, they'll always get back to you'

'They won't recruit someone to a course if it's not suitable'

Learners described how they had been provided with options throughout their time on programme, beginning with the choice as to whether or not to enrol, through the development of learning plans in line with their preferences and opportunities, through to exploring optional units in relation to career goals, employment opportunities and progression routeways, up to the point at which they were able to choose whether or not to progress to the next level of award. They discussed how they had reviewed with staff the details of the optional units and explored the criteria for each, recalling how this process had helped them to reject their original ideas in light of their improved understanding. They confirmed that any decisions they took had been theirs to make, and that if in doubt, they had been given extra time to consider before choosing, or had had additional sessions to explore further options, until they were clear. They commented, however, that the explanations and information they had been provided with, including the progression pathways outlined in the Learner Induction Booklet (*'The Sky's the Limit, Life After Alliance'*) had enabled them to make properly informed decisions.

'Helped me understand why I was doing each unit'

'They explained all the units in relation to my interests and job role'

'We agreed I'd leave my optional units until later, when I'd had a bit more experience so could be clearer about what I wanted'

Staff described how when choosing their options learners would sit with them at the computer, and they would call up the units and evidence criteria and work through the various choices and implications for career paths and further learning opportunities; learners also recalled such sessions, opining that they had been essential in helping them to understand their options; they further recalled how staff had provided them with tips on how to refine their internet searches when carrying out their own research, and how they had been recommended appropriate websites to research progression opportunities, volunteering placements and job vacancies, and to use the National Careers Service site to explore job content and required skillsets.

Staff described various referrals they had made to support learners or prospective learners, such as Connexions, Compassion in Action for ASB victims, Alcohol and Drugs recovery, health provision. They commented that they always followed up referrals to ensure they had had the desired impact and provided the help, support or information intended. Learners confirmed that they had benefited from referral to additional functional skills support and extra sessions on IT and practice assessments.

4. Continuous Quality Improvement

The way in which the service provided is reviewed and improved on an ongoing basis

The planning and review arrangements described above incorporate, as mentioned, identification of issues impacting on achievement of targets, and of actions to address these. Review of documentation highlighted instances where it had been discovered that learner groups were not completing in time, or where success rates had fallen below target; in each case, actions to address the causes – improved planning processes and additional, and more targeted, learner support, respectively – were agreed and implemented, and the resulting

improvements logged. Review of reports highlighted recent achievement analyses, showing steady improvements over the last three years in all occupational areas, and latest rates:

Overall: 84%	National: 69%
Timely: 73%	National: 55%

Health: 88%	National: 67%
Childcare: 82%	National: 72%
Engineering: 83%	National: 73%
Manufacturing: 83%	National: 75%
Admin: 82%	National: 72%

Review processes incorporate the extent to which learners are achieving their intended hard and soft outcomes, with staff and learner agreeing appropriate action where achievement is lower than expected. Review of databases highlighted cohort records of learner achievements at mid point in the programme, with the majority registering 75% achievement or greater against target.

Alliance gathers feedback via learner and employer surveys and reviews, and informally during ongoing contacts; staff described various ways in which feedback from these sources had been acted upon, such as provision of extra questions and practice tests, more training on OneFile. Learners and employers confirmed that their views were regularly sought and recalled instances where their suggestions or requests had been implemented, including extending the review period for learners to allow time for them to balance work and learning, putting both organisations' logos on programme documentation to highlight partnership, changing the pace and timing of sessions, including more video examples to illustrate techniques.

'They always ask if there's anything else they can do'

'They always tell us how they're going to respond to our feedback'

Feedback from partners is also sought, through formal and informal meetings, and partners, commenting on the responsiveness of Alliance staff to their feedback, described how staff put together an inspection team to peer review other providers, jointly developed quality systems following in-depth discussions. Managers and partners explained that as relationships developed and evolved, each party continued to review the continued relevance and benefits of the link up. Staff reported that on return from meetings with partners they would share with colleagues the outcomes of discussions and any issues arising. Managers described how they had been able to use contacts through the GMLPN to establish relations with the lead organisations in an Apprenticeship Trailblazer, and how this had enabled them to involve a group of SMEs in the sector in evaluating the efficacy and practicalities of implementing new provision within their own workplaces, and contributing to forward planning.

Along with the quality assurance and review measures already described, Alliance has implemented a range of approaches which combine to create a quality safety net. They include:

- The development of the Self Assessment Review and Quality Improvement Plan, which grade current performance and achievements against the Common Inspection Framework, identifying improvements, and assigning responsibility and target dates for implementation.
- External audits and compliance visits by Ofsted, funding providers and awarding bodies ensure that Alliance continues to operate in line with regulations and requirements,

identifying improvements if necessary, and that any changes in the regime(s) are notified.

- Internal and external quality assurance ensures systems are being adhered to and that staff complete their responsibilities in line with requirements, identifying improvements.
- Standardisation ensures staff involved in development and delivery are aware of the changes required by audit or because of alterations in award content or assessment process, are involved in implementing the necessary changes, and continue to deliver consistently across all staff.

Included within the quality assurance arrangements is the monitoring and review of staff performance. Methodologies include regular observation of practice by managers and peers, regular one to ones and supervisions with line managers, and the annual appraisal, along with ongoing monitoring in relation to achievement of team and personal targets. Staff found that the appraisal, which includes a review of last year's performance, factors impacting, and a chance to identify potential progression and development opportunities, was a useful way of reflecting on their practice and on how well they had performed overall, while they commented that access to ongoing performance monitoring and informal one to ones enabled them quickly and effectively to implement ideas and innovations, based on others' experience and good practice, and improve their day to day contributions.

As mentioned, the use of technology to support and enhance the service is a particular strength. As well as the OneFile system, which enables comprehensive recording of learner data, activities and progress, and a range of analytical and reporting of performance by cohort and across all subject areas, Alliance has:

- Implemented an e-portfolio that enables learners access at any time or place, to upload assignments and evidence and to access support materials, practice tests, and so on; and
- Allows internal quality assurance to be carried out remotely and at flexible times, saving staff time and resources;
- Invested in NOMAD, a mobile phone App that enables staff to synch laptops with OneFile to access up to date records from venues with poor Wi-Fi, and subsequently upload the changes;
- Issued staff with laptops and tablets to enable them to access OneFile remotely and provide support to learners at their workplaces;
- Equipped the Leigh premises with banks of PCs to enable learners to study and research, and to provide access for those with no equipment of their own;
- Invested in the latest equipment and resources for the engineering and manufacturing technology learning workshops.

The monitoring and review arrangements described include review of agreed actions to evaluate their effectiveness in achieving the desired aim; staff commented on how the search for continuous improvement involved everyone in examining the outcomes and results of any changes made, referring for example, to the way they fed back to managers their ideas for new functions and other ways to improve the OneFile system, which were collated and raised periodically with the supplier; following implementation, staff tested the innovation to check that it had had the desired effect, and for its 'domino' impact on other functions. Managers

explained that they had revised, simplified and standardised lesson plans, and following their introduction had kept the process under review to check its effectiveness and to fine tune until they were satisfied. Review of documentation highlighted action to involve strategic staff more in challenging practice, and the subsequent introduction of board member sub-groups, whose impact was reviewed at board and SLT meetings (and found to be highly positive).

7. Conclusion

The Review highlighted an organisation committed to quality improvement in the interests of commercial success and the welfare and achievements of its learners, a company that benefits from inclusive leadership and management and the universal buy-in of staff to its mission, values, and most importantly, its learners. A well respected partner, Alliance Learning is responsive and innovative, and forward looking.

Alliance Learning Ltd will be required to complete the annual **matrix** Continuous Improvement Check; a format for this, which will include the areas for continuous improvement identified during this Assessment, will be sent in twelve months time to be completed and sent to the Assessor for review and approval. The process is repeated after two years before the Accreditation Review in three years time. This will ensure that the Standard continues to provide a useful vehicle to help the organisation to continuously improve services.

8. The matrix Standard Evidence Grid

Criteria	Met	Strength	AfCI
The service has clearly defined measurable aims and objectives which link to any wider organisational strategic aims. 1.1	✓		
The service is provided with clear leadership and direction 1.2	✓	✓	✓
The organisation implements policies to promote equality and diversity, impartiality, confidentiality and professional integrity in all aspects of service delivery 1.3	✓		
The organisation complies with existing and new legislation which might impact upon the service 1.4	✓		
The organisation defines client outcomes and uses them as a measure of success for the service 1.5	✓		✓
The organisation promotes the service in ways which are accessible to all those eligible to use it 1.6	✓		✓
Clients and staff influence the design and development of the service 1.7	✓		
The organisation establishes effective links with other appropriate partnerships and networks to enhance the service 1.8	✓	✓	
The organisation uses its resources effectively to deliver the service 2.1	✓		
Clients are provided with current, accurate and quality assured information which is inclusive	✓		

2.2			
The organisation defines the skills, knowledge, competencies and qualifications, in line with current national recognised professional qualifications and frameworks, for individual staff roles, linked to the aims and objectives of the service	✓		✓
2.3			
Staff are supported in undertaking continuous professional development and provided with opportunities for career progression	✓	✓	✓
2.4			
Effective induction processes are in place for all staff	✓		
2.5			
The service is defined so that clients are clear about what they might expect	✓		
3.1			
The service is delivered effectively to meet its aims and objectives	✓	✓	✓
3.2			
The service provided is impartial and objective	✓		
3.3			
Clients are given appropriate options to explore and understand that they are responsible for making their own decisions	✓		
3.4			
When exploring options, clients are provided with and supported to use appropriate resources including access to technology	✓		
3.5			
Clients benefit from signposting and referral to other appropriate agencies or organisations	✓		
3.6			
The organisation measures and evaluates the service against its stated aims and objectives and identifies improvements	✓	✓	
4.1			
The organisation monitors and evaluates client outcomes to support and improve service delivery	✓		✓
4.2			
The organisation evaluates feedback on the service to build upon its strengths and addresses any areas for improvement	✓		
4.3			
The organisation evaluates the effectiveness of its partnerships and networks to improve the service	✓		
4.4			
The organisation defines quality assurance approaches which are used to improve the service	✓	✓	
4.5			
Staff performance, linked to their role within the aims and objectives of the service, are reviewed and evaluated to improve the service	✓		
4.6			
Effective use is made of technology to improve the service	✓	✓	✓
4.7			
The organisation continually reviews improvements to help inform the future aims and objectives of the service	✓	✓	

	4.8			
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