



*Rhagoriaeth i bawb – Excellence for all*

Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg  
a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru

Her Majesty's Inspectorate  
for Education and Training in Wales

**A report on**

**Acorn Learning Solutions Limited  
Head Office,  
Somerton House,  
Hazell Drive,  
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NP10 8FY**

**Date of inspection: July 2013**

**by**

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

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

**Key Question 1: How good are the outcomes?**

**Key Question 2: How good is provision?**

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

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

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

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

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

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## Context

Acorn Learning Solutions Ltd is one of the largest work-based learning (WBL) providers in Wales. It is part of the Acorn Group whose parent company is the French-based Synergie Global Group. However, the three locally-based directors have responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the business, which has its headquarters in Castleton between Newport and Cardiff.

The award of the provider's new Welsh Government contract in 2011 initially saw a reduction in its contract value. Since then the provider has been asked by the Welsh Government to take on, at short notice, many displaced learners from other providers. There has been a corresponding increase in the provider's contract as a result. Currently there are around 1,000 learners on the programme.

The provider delivers the following WBL programmes across Wales:

- Foundation Apprenticeships (FAs);
- Apprenticeships (MAs);
- Higher Apprenticeships; and
- Route Ways to work.

It offers the following training routes:

- Health Care and Public Services;
- Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies;
- Business, Administration and Law;
- Business Administration Financial;
- Retail and Customer Services;
- Information and Communication Technology;
- Agriculture (Waste Management); and
- Hospitality.

Following underperformance by a number of its sub-contractors it has now replaced them with four new sub-contractors. Its current contractors are:

- Morgan Daniels Training;
- Cornerstone Training;
- Vocations Training;
- Charnwood Training;
- Learn Direct (formerly JHP);
- Progression; and
- BT.

## Summary

<b>The provider's current performance</b>	<b>Adequate</b>
<b>The provider's prospects for improvement</b>	<b>Good</b>

### Current performance

The provider's full framework completion for WBL learners over the past three years (2009-2012) has seen a downward trend against national comparators. The unsatisfactory performance of some of its previous sub-contractors, together with the taking on of a number of displaced learners from providers, who failed to secure Welsh Government contracts for WBL, contributed to this underperformance.

However, the provider has taken positive action to address this trend by replacing the failing sub-contractors, restructuring its organisation and reviewing its performance monitoring of all of its provision. It has also brought in more robust procedures for sub-contractors including a useful three day induction programme for them.

The provider has put in place good mechanisms for raising learners' awareness of Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC), Welsh language and culture and wellbeing. These include web hubs for learners to access up-to-date information. However, many learners have yet to use all of these sites. There has been an increase in the take up of using Welsh language during assessment and reviews by Welsh speakers but not enough has been done by the provider to raise the awareness of the language amongst learners who do not speak Welsh.

### Prospects for improvement

The provider's capacity for improvement is good because:

- it has taken decisive action to deal with underperforming sub-contractors and has put in place good procedures for the induction of new sub-contractors;
- good plans are in place to engage all sub-contractors fully, including staff development supported by the most recent business systems and business technology;
- there is improvement in the monitoring of data including better use of a monitoring system and the introduction of a traffic light system to identify underperformance more quickly across its provision; and
- the setting of targets for improving the outcomes for all learners is appropriate.

## Recommendations

- R1 Improve the rates at which leavers attain their frameworks and other qualifications
- R2 Make better use of specific short term targets for the development of learners' skills
- R3 Improve the extent that leavers develop their knowledge and understanding of ESDGC and the language and culture of Wales
- R4 Make sure that managers translate the provider's strategic direction into operational objectives
- R5 Improve the self-assessment process to ensure that the self-assessment report is current and evaluative

### **What happens next?**

The provider will address the recommendations from the inspection in the improvement plan to the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) as part of the regular improvement planning cycle.

## Main findings

### Key Question 1: How good are outcomes?

Adequate

#### Standards: Adequate

Overall, the rate at which learners complete their programme and gain their full framework qualification is adequate.

The provider's three year trend (2009-2012) for overall framework success rates for learners, which includes Foundation Modern Apprenticeships (FMA) and Apprenticeships (A), shows a decline against an improving rate in the national comparators.

The latest verified data (2011-2012) shows that framework success rates for Foundation Apprenticeship (FMA) and Apprenticeship programmes (A) have an overall success rate of 82% against a national comparator of 85%.

The provider's internal, unverified data for 2012-2013 indicates an improvement for both programmes with a projected overall success rate of 86%.

Most learners make good progress and develop appropriate vocational and practical skills. A few learners use their learning well to improve the services that their organisations provide.

All learners use an on-line portfolio system to record their progress (e-portfolio). The standard of their work overall is good. Most learners benefit from constructive and detailed reviews with their training advisers and are able to download and listen to recordings of the reviews. All learners have good individual learning plans (ILPs). However, many learners' ILPs do not contain specific short term, challenging learning goals.

All learners study Essential Skills Wales (ESW) qualifications as part of their framework. A minority of learners attain higher levels of ESW qualifications than are required by their framework. Most learners display good oral, reading and writing skills but the numeracy skills of a minority of learners are not good enough.

Welsh speaking learners are able to use their language skills and to have their assessments through the medium of Welsh. Learners who do not speak Welsh do not improve their Welsh language skills well enough.

#### Wellbeing: Good

All learners feel safe within both their on and off-the-job learning environments. Most learners feel well supported and know what to do if they require any additional support. They have a clear understanding of health and safety issues.

Nearly all learners develop and maintain good working relationships with managers,

employers, assessors and peers. Learners' attendance is good in both on and off-the-job training.

In the sessions observed a few learners engaged in good discussions on healthy lifestyles and only a few learners have access to gym facilities. The majority of learners were aware of the provider's wellbeing hub, a web based information access point which provides good information and advice on wellbeing.

Nearly all learners behave well and have a positive and mature attitude to their training. Almost all learners enjoy their learning. This is effective in helping them to develop a wide range of practical and theoretical skills to prepare them for the world of work.

Nearly all learners are happy on their programmes and feel more confident as a result of their training. They show good enthusiasm, commitment and motivation. Most learners are keen to progress to higher levels of training.

All learners contribute very well to feedback questionnaires and discussion. The Learner Voice Survey shows that learners' satisfaction levels with the provider are well above the sector benchmark.

A few learners participate well in various community activities and take part in fund raising events that support local charities. A few learners develop a good awareness of the needs of others in their community and are involved in wider community events.

At induction the provider issues a useful handbook to all learners, containing appropriate information on the support and guidance that learners can expect. However, few learners utilise or subsequently refer to it.

<b>Key Question 2: How good is provision?</b>	<b>Good</b>
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### **Learning experiences: Good**

The provider's wide range of provision meets employers' and learners' needs well. The majority of employers are closely involved with the learner in the planning of assessments. This helps learners to make good progress. In a few cases, the provider gives employers very good support in recruiting and selecting learners. The provider has worked well with local and multi-national employers to develop good training programmes that complement and enhance employers' own training programmes.

The provider supports 14-19 Learning Networks well. This includes helping learners to gain relevant vocational skills and work-related education whilst at school through partnerships with employers. For example, a large retail store has made presentations in schools to explain what they expect of learners in the world of work and to improve learners' social and economic awareness.

Assessors review the results of learners' initial screening assessments during their recruitment interviews. The provider's staff make good use of these to agree

individual learning plan objectives and targets. ILPs and learning assessment reviews contain good targets to develop learners' literacy and numeracy, although in a minority of cases targets are not specific enough. The provider's staff help learners to make good progress in developing their written communication skills. Most learners do essential skills assignments that match their work well. This enables them to further develop and evidence their occupational skills and knowledge. For example one learner developed an on-line system to monitor the progress of customers' issues. This has helped to improve communication within the company and with its customers.

There are good examples of training advisers encouraging learners to pursue essential skills at a higher level. However, in a few cases, the level that learners are working at does not allow them to develop their skills further. The provider encourages learners to participate in wider key skills, but take up is too variable.

The provider has a useful Welsh language strategy. This includes the recent introduction of a Welsh Hub to raise learners' awareness of the language and culture of Wales. There is good provision for Welsh speaking learners. The provider enables Welsh speaking applicants to have their recruitment interviews in Welsh. However, there is little promotion of the Welsh language to non-Welsh speaking learners.

The majority of training advisers use topical subjects well to discuss sustainability and global citizenship. However, in a few cases, this is too superficial. Most learners understand sustainable development but their understanding of global citizenship is weak.

### **Teaching: Good**

Overall, teaching, training and assessment are good. Most staff have high expectations of learners and encourage them to achieve a good standard of theory and practical skills appropriate to their job roles. Training advisers have good up-to-date knowledge about their occupational area and specialist subject. They use their expertise and professional experience well to train and support the learners effectively.

Training advisers plan and prepare their off-the-job training sessions well. They have detailed lesson plans with clear aims and objectives. Almost all training sessions are in the work place. They relate closely to the needs and business of the employer and the training and development needs of the learner. The majority of employers are fully aware of the learners' progress. Nearly all training sessions include reference to opportunities for learners to develop essential skills, and knowledge of ESDGC and the Welsh dimension.

Literacy and numeracy skills are developed within the context of almost all vocational learning areas. This works well. The majority of training advisers correct spelling and grammatical errors in learners' NVQ portfolios and other assignment work. They give constructive comments, both written and oral, to explain how learners can improve.



The provider makes sure that almost all learners use an NVQ e-portfolio. Training advisers use a 'destiny pen', which records and stores data electronically, to record assessment evidence and other aspects of learners' work. These electronic assessment methods provide almost instant feedback to the learner and the provider. They have, also, substantially reduced paperwork and are very effective in tracking and recording learner progress. However, in a few cases, the pace of assessment is too slow and as a result learners are not able to make the progress that they are capable of.

### **Care, support and guidance: Good**

The provider has good procedures in place to ensure that learners receive appropriate care, support and guidance. As a result, most learners receive good support from their training advisers and provider support staff.

Most training advisers conduct a rigorous health and safety induction with learners and regularly check learners' understanding of health and safety issues in the workplace.

Most learners receive good advice and guidance prior to enrolling on their programme. This includes the expectations that the provider and employer have of the learner.

The provider has effective strategies in place to promote good behaviour. It monitors learners' attendance and punctuality well. There are appropriate arrangements in place to deal with bullying and harassment and learners receive clear guidance in their learner handbooks. This includes a handbook containing comprehensive information about equality and diversity. However, few learners subsequently refer to their handbooks during their time on their programme.

The provider has an appropriate policy and procedures for safeguarding. All training staff have a current CRB/DBS and the provider regularly updates and reviews this information. All training staff attend mandatory safeguarding training.

The provider makes sure that all learners undertake an initial assessment to identify any basic skills needs. Most training advisers now have the Level 3 ESW Practitioner certificate, which improves learners' access to qualified tutors to support their literacy and numeracy needs in both the workplace and in their off-the-job training. Additional learning plans are in place for entry level learners who require additional support. Staff regularly monitor the effectiveness of the support and provide further support as necessary. Learners also have access to learning coaches, who provide additional one-to-one support as required.

The provider has good specialist support resources for learners with disability needs. This includes an effective partnership with a number of specialist agencies such as Merthyr Tydfil Institute for the Blind (MTIB). Managers work well with this organisation to ensure that effective support is in place for learners who are visually impaired.

## **Learning environment: Good**

The provider has an inclusive approach to learners and briefs them well on its equality and diversity policy when they join. Training advisers refer to this during reviews to monitor and extend learners' understanding. A few learners undertake additional assignments on equality in the workplace which link to the employers' business. In the review sessions, with their assessors, learners demonstrate a good understanding of diversity. In group sessions, learners show a high level of mutual support for each other and demonstrate a good ability to listen to each other with respect.

Overall, workplace settings are of a high standard and learners have access to modern equipment and facilities that help them to make the best progress in their skills development. All learners feel safe in both their off and on-the-job environment. Provider staff regularly remind learners of the procedures to follow if a bullying or harassment issue should arise. All employers give learners access to good quality equipment and information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. Most employers have appropriate break out rooms for private discussions with training advisers. Off-the-job learning facilities are of a high standard and enable learners to benefit from good resources and equipment.

The provider makes effective use of the views and opinions of learners and employers. These include learner and employer satisfaction surveys, which inform self-evaluation and quality development planning. The provider ensures that appropriate action is taken and feedback given on any issues raised by learners and employers as a result of the surveys.

<b>Key Question 3: How good are leadership and management?</b>	<b>Good</b>
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## **Leadership: Adequate**

The provider's three directors are responsible for the strategic direction and management of the WBL contract. All three have extensive experience of the WBL sector and are fully aware of the Welsh Government's policies and priorities and local priorities. The provider uses these effectively to inform its business plan. The provider puts the needs of learners first and also prioritises its links with employers appropriately. The directors give clear direction and guidance to their staff. All staff understand their roles and responsibilities within the provider. However, managers do not always translate strategic plans into operational objectives for all staff to follow.

Communication in the provider is good with staff receiving weekly headlines of company business, quarterly newsletters, access to an internal staff website and a regularly updated intranet.

Following the rationalisation of the WBL provision in Wales in 2011, the provider, at the request of Welsh Government, took on responsibility for a number of displaced learners. Whilst the provider's own performance was already in decline against the national comparators, the taking on of these additional learners had a further negative effect on its performance. Initially, managers put in supportive action for the

learners and the sub-contractors who had the majority of the learners. However, this did not work effectively and the provider has now replaced the failing sub-contractors.

As a result of this experience earlier this year, in consultation with staff, the directors re-structured its business into four segments to provide a more comprehensive service to learners and employers. This brought together the delivery side of the business to include commercial activities with the work-based learning. The company now focuses on delivery of learning, which is supported by the three other segments: employer engagement; quality assurance and contract compliance; and data and quality. However, it is too early to evaluate the impact of these changes.

The directors have overall responsibility for budgets and regularly review expenditure and company performance, including the monitoring of sub-contractors' performance. They do this well.

### **Improving quality: Good**

A recent management restructure enabled the provider to review many of the systems and processes that support quality improvement across the organisation. It is too early to judge the impact of this restructure on its performance. However, the provider has also improved processes for the monitoring and management of sub-contractors. This includes better use of data across its provision.

An internal working group called 'Aspire' has been set up to develop key areas of the provision, including quality. The group has played a key role in introducing a new peer observation process, streamlined administrative processes, and the revision of key documents to ensure that engagement with learners is improved. Provider and sub-contractor staff use the group well to meet and share good practice. Staff participate well in these development activities.

The self-assessment report process involves all staff and sub-contractors. The report uses evidence from a range of sources including the views of learners and employers through surveys and good employer engagement, peer observations, and internal audits. The latest self-evaluation report is detailed but is too descriptive and not evaluative enough.

A business plan supports quality development well with targets set for improvement. The main quality development plan is a useful diagnostic tool based on the Estyn Common Inspection Framework. The plan identifies areas for improvement, such as increasing the framework success rates of learners in specific subject sector areas. It also links staff development and performance targets to increasing learner outcomes and the continuous improvement of quality. However, a few of the actions are not specific enough.

Staff from the provider and sub-contractors undertake a good range of appropriate staff development and contribute well to national organisations such as the NTFW. There are good opportunities for the sharing of good practice through a variety of working groups. A three-day induction programme provides sub-contractors with a good understanding of the provider's quality procedures and priorities.

### **Partnership working: Good**

Overall, the provider has good working practices with a wide range of organisations including the main sub-contractors as well as employers, local authorities, schools and higher education providers. This good partnership working has a positive impact on learner achievement.

The provider has recently reviewed its sub-contracting arrangements and now works with eight sub-contractors, five of which are new. It is too early to comment on the impact of these developments.

The provider has developed new, robust and comprehensive procedures for its arrangements for sub-contractors to follow. These include monthly performance and documentation reviews as well as consistent arrangements for induction. The provider has developed a comprehensive induction package for all new sub-contractors, which covers all aspects of sub-contracting arrangements, including the expectations of the provider and the support available.

Overall, the provider's communication with sub-contractors is good. Many sub-contractors' staff join the provider's staff for conferences and training events to share information and good practice.

The provider has developed effective working relationships with a wide range of employers. It has also developed good links with a wide range of partners to provide training for both pre and post-16 learners. Partners include 14 to 19 networks in the provider's area, local and national employers, schools, higher education (HE) providers and Careers Wales.

The provider works particularly well with schools in the Cardiff, Bridgend and Rhondda Cynon Taff areas to deliver a good range of vocational learning pathways to Years 10, 11 and 12 pupils and a work skills programme to Year 10 pupils who are in danger of disengaging from education. The vocational learning pathways include two days of vocational activities outside of schools. The provider works well with a number of Cardiff schools to deliver a leadership and management programme at level 2 to more able and talented pupils. It also works well with a specialist school to support autistic and special educational needs pupils at Years 11 and 12.

The provider has established good links with HE providers to deliver higher education awards and units. For example, it has a close working relationship with the University of the Heads of the Valleys Institute. Senior and middle managers are actively involved with the work of several organisations at regional and national level, including the NTfW.

### **Resource management: Adequate**

Overall, the provider has processes and procedures in place to manage resources well. The strategic directors meet regularly to monitor performance and to ensure that expenditure matches the needs of learners and delivery of its WBL contract.

The provider ensures that regular financial audits take place throughout the financial year. Senior managers review budgets monthly and implement actions to ensure financial stability. The provider makes sure that sub-contractors are funded proportionately to their contract with the provider.

The provider has developed a 'Value for Money' policy to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of programmes. However, this process has not yet had a significant impact on improving learner outcomes.

The provider employs an appropriate number of suitably qualified and experienced staff. For example, many of the financial services assessors and training advisers previously worked in the banking sector. The provider deploys them effectively to make best use of their skills and experience.

Most staff have good opportunities to gain appropriate training and qualifications. The provider has a comprehensive learning and training plan for staff with appropriate targets. These are aligned closely with the provider's key strategic priorities.

All staff attend basic skills training and almost all have achieved practitioner qualifications. However, not all training staff employed by sub-contractors have yet achieved these qualifications.

A few staff are part of the 'Aspire' team that is currently developing the use of technology to enhance learning and improve efficiency. The provider's staff use E-portfolios, webinars (video link), MP3 players and Destiny pens effectively. However, not all sub-contractors utilise or have access to these resources.

The provider manages learning resources and accommodation effectively. The resources at the majority of training facilities are good, and include an appropriate range of ICT equipment.

The adequate outcomes for learners mean that the provider gives adequate value for money.

## Appendix 1

### Learner satisfaction

The outcomes from the provider's learner voice questionnaire were very positive. Seventy-three per cent of learners felt that overall the provider was very good. Ninety per cent felt that their training was better than they expected. In all five major aspects of the learner voice, including information and advice, health and wellbeing, teaching and training, responsiveness and help and support, the provider was better than the average for the sector.

## Appendix 2

### The inspection team

Bernard O'Reilly	Reporting Inspector
Mark Evans	Team Inspector
Sharon James	Team Inspector
Bernard Hayward	Team Inspector
Sandra Barnard	Team Inspector
Steve Bell	Team Inspector
Christopher Jones	Peer Inspector
Marshal Clayton	Peer Inspector
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