House of Commons
Committee of Public Accounts

The monitoring, inspection and funding of Learndirect Ltd.

Twenty-Second Report of Session 2017–19

Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report

Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 26 February 2018
The Committee of Public Accounts

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Publication

Committee reports are published on the Committee’s website and in print by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the inquiry publications page of the Committee’s website.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Richard Cooke (Clerk), Dominic Stockbridge (Second Clerk), Hannah Wentworth (Chair Support), Ruby Radley (Senior Committee Assistant), Kutumya Kibedi (Committee Assistant), and Tim Bowden (Media Officer).

Contacts

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**Summary**

With the collapse of Carillion, questions are rightly being asked about how Government manages companies who deliver our public services. The failure of Learndirect in delivering quality training to apprentices whilst receiving millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money, £121 million in the 2016–17 academic year alone, is another stark example of a poorly performing contractor and poor oversight by Government and its regulators. And another contractor with contracts across several Government Departments.

Learndirect Ltd’s performance on apprenticeships has been in steep decline since 2013. Learndirect failed to address its under-performance, and has failed to act in the best interests of learners. Ofsted had concerns about Learndirect Ltd in spring 2015, but despite the company’s 75,000 learners making it the UK’s largest commercial further education provider, Ofsted decided not to inspect until November 2016.

Even then, Ofsted accepted the potential sale of part of the company as a reason to postpone its inspection, and only finally inspected in March 2017. When Learndirect Ltd found that it had been rated as ‘inadequate’, it launched a legal challenge which delayed publication of the inspection report. The judge ruled fully in Ofsted’s favour, and the report was finally published in August 2017.

The Department for Education would normally cancel an ‘inadequate’ provider’s contract and withdraw its funding almost immediately. But Learndirect Ltd threatened that such a course of action would harm its learners and jeopardise its ability to deliver other key government contracts. The company continues to function, and expects to receive over £105 million of funding from its main government contracts in 2017–18. This apparent special treatment clearly begs the question of whether Learndirect Ltd was too big, and too important to government, to be allowed to fail.

The Government needs to learn lessons from the failure of its contractors and, particularly where a company holds contracts across several Departments, ensure it has a grip on how these companies are performing.
Introduction

Learndirect Ltd is the UK’s largest commercial further education provider, engaging with around 75,000 learners each year. Most of its funding comes from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), but it also has contracts with several other government bodies, for which it is sometimes the sole supplier. In the 2016–17 academic year, the company received £121 million from all of its central government contracts, of which £106 million (88%) was from ESFA. Ofsted planned to inspect Learndirect Ltd in November 2016, but agreed to defer the inspection because the company was negotiating the sale of its apprenticeships business, a sale which did not ultimately take place, despite there being widespread concern about Learndirect Ltd’s performance. Ofsted finally carried out its inspection in March 2017, the same time that ESFA issued the company with a notice of serious breach of contract for falling below expected levels of service, and rated the company’s overall effectiveness as ‘inadequate’. Learndirect Ltd made a formal complaint about the timing and conduct of the inspection, followed by a legal challenge. These steps were unsuccessful, but they delayed the publication of Ofsted’s report until mid-August 2017. The government bodies contracting with Learndirect Ltd have since had to make decisions about their ongoing dealings with the company. ESFA decided to continue funding Learndirect Ltd through to July 2018, and it is possible that the company may retain some government contracts beyond that date.
Conclusions and recommendations

1. **Learndirect Ltd has received hundreds of millions of pounds of public money, while neglecting its learners in pursuit of profit and frustrating the Ofsted inspection regime with delaying tactics and spurious legal action.** ESFA and its predecessor the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) gave Learndirect Ltd almost £500 million in the academic years from 2013–14 to 2016–17. The quality of Learndirect Ltd’s apprenticeships provision was in decline from 2012–13, and in 2015–16 it failed to achieve ESFA’s minimum standard for apprenticeships. Yet, despite this downward trend, the company waited until September 2016 to develop an improvement plan. In March 2013, Ofsted rated Learndirect Ltd as ‘good’ for overall effectiveness, but by March 2017 Ofsted considered the company’s performance to be ‘inadequate’. Learndirect Ltd launched a legal challenge, claiming that: Ofsted should not have inspected its apprenticeships provision, because it was about to be moved to another company in the Group; and Ofsted had not gathered enough evidence to reach reliable conclusions on its apprenticeships training. The judge ruled fully in Ofsted’s favour, but the legal action meant that the report could not be published until August 2017, five months after the original inspection. This prevented valuable information on Learndirect Ltd’s performance from being in the public domain, and stopped government from intervening sooner.

**Recommendation:** *Government should learn the lessons from the failure of Learndirect Ltd, in particular concerning the need to understand how many government contracts a company holds at a given time and how well it is performing against each of those contracts.*

2. **Having awarded Learndirect Ltd several vital contracts for a variety of public services, government was then restricted in its ability to take decisive action when the company’s apprenticeships provision began to fail.** Learndirect Ltd is England’s largest commercial further education provider, and in the 2016–17 academic year around 88% of the £121 million it received for carrying out work for central government came from ESFA. It is also the single supplier on the government’s framework contract for testing services. Under this framework, the company delivers UK citizenship tests for the Home Office and initial teacher training tests for the Standards and Testing Agency (STA). From May 2017, following the 2017 Ofsted inspection, ESFA began work to establish the full extent of government’s involvement with Learndirect Ltd, and to develop a coordinated plan for the future of those contracts. ESFA had to consider whether to withdraw the company’s funding for further education activities within three months, in line with normal practice. Learndirect Ltd stated that unless it received £48 million in the 2017–18 academic year from its main source of ESFA funding, the Adult Education Budget (AEB), it would likely enter administration or become insolvent. This would affect large numbers of learners, and jeopardise the company’s ability to deliver against its other government contracts. ESFA decided that the size of Learndirect Ltd made it an unusual case, to which special considerations should apply. It awarded Learndirect Ltd £45 million of AEB funding for 2017–18 and extended the company’s contract to July 2018, the end of the academic year.
Recommendation: The Department for Education and other government bodies should develop a framework for identifying any risk that a commercial provider becomes so large and essential to the delivery of public services that it cannot be allowed to fail, or requires special treatment if it begins to do so. The Cabinet Office should report back to us on progress with developing that framework by the end of December 2018, and the Department for Education should do so separately by the start of the next academic year.

3. Learndirect Ltd charges unusually high management fees to its subcontractors, which means that a large amount of funding is not available to be spent on teaching and learning. Learndirect Ltd subcontracts some of its work to smaller providers, and charges them a management fee. This fee ranges from around 15% to 40%, depending on the level of support offered. The company has said that around 30 of its subcontracted providers pay the full 40% management fee. ESFA requires all providers who subcontract their provision to be transparent about the level of management fee that will be charged. But ESFA provides no guidance on the support that providers should offer their subcontractors or the levels of support that might be merited by different levels of management fee.

Recommendation: ESFA should formally publish, in time for the next academic year, its expectations about the services that should be offered to subcontractors, and the associated management fees that are reasonable.

4. In assessing when to re-inspect Learndirect Ltd, Ofsted did not take full account of the company’s size and the consequences for learners of its declining performance. Learndirect Ltd was training over 20,000 apprentices each year, many of whom were affected by the declining quality of its training and support. Yet it was nearly two years after first expressing concerns about Learndirect Ltd’s declining performance that Ofsted finally, in March 2017, conducted another inspection. A full inspection of Learndirect Ltd requires Ofsted to commit around 15% of its total inspection capacity for the further education sector. Given the resources involved, Ofsted decided that the rate of Learndirect Ltd’s performance decline did not justify an early inspection as a matter of immediate priority. Ofsted is likely to face these prioritisation challenges more often in the future, as the profile of further education providers changes in response to the apprenticeship levy, with new providers entering the market and some providers growing significantly or merging.

Recommendation: Ofsted needs urgently to re-visit how it plans and prioritises its use of resources and the different type of risk attached to a private sector failure, in a way that takes account of risks to high numbers of learners and the changing provider-base in the further education sector.

5. Ofsted’s policy for when it is prepared to defer an inspection risks putting providers’ business interests ahead of learners’ interests. Ofsted originally planned to re-inspect Learndirect Ltd at the start of November 2016, but agreed to defer its inspection when Learndirect Ltd claimed it was negotiating the sale of its apprenticeships business. Ofsted’s policy states that an inspection may be deferred if “the provision is due to merge, close or move, and it is decided that no useful purpose will be served in inspecting it.” The sale of part of Learndirect Ltd’s business did not ultimately take place, and Ofsted did not carry out the inspection until March 2017,
over four months later. Learndirect requested a deferral in March 2017, on the same grounds as those that prompted Ofsted to defer its planned inspection on November 2016, but this time Ofsted did not defer the inspection. Given Learndirect Ltd’s importance to the sector and the number of learners affected, Ofsted should not have been so easily put off in November 2016, and should have resolved to conduct its inspection earlier. Ofsted needs to develop a clear and consistent approach which takes better account of potential gaming by commercial providers.

**Recommendation:** By June 2018, Ofsted should develop a specific deferral policy for commercial providers, to ensure that learners’ interests always take priority over the pursuit of profit.
1 Learndirect Ltd’s funding, performance, and contracting arrangements

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Department for Education (the Department), Ofsted, the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), and Learndirect Ltd, on the monitoring, inspection and funding of Learndirect Ltd.1

2. Learndirect Ltd is the UK’s largest commercial further education provider, engaging with around 75,000 learners each year. Its core business is skills, training, and employment services. Most of its funding comes from the ESFA, an executive agency of the Department for Education, but Learndirect Ltd also has contracts with other government bodies.2

Learndirect Ltd’s declining performance

3. Learndirect Ltd received around £488 million in total from ESFA in the academic years 2013–14 to 2016–17. The company’s income from all its central government contracts in 2016–17 was around £121 million, of which £106 million (88%) was from ESFA.3 Learndirect Ltd’s performance in apprenticeships was in decline after the 2012–13 academic year, and in 2015–16 the percentage of apprentices achieving their qualification stood at 58%, which was below ESFA’s minimum standards threshold of 62%.4 However, the company told us that it did not put an improvement plan in place until autumn 2016, after the end of the 2015–16 academic year.5 It was during the same year that Learndirect Ltd set up Learndirect Apprenticeships Ltd as a separate entity within the Group, as part of a long-term plan to sell off the apprenticeships element of the Group’s business. Learndirect Ltd entered negotiations to sell Learndirect Apprenticeships Ltd to another education provider in mid-2016, seeking a large cash injection into the Group.6

4. Learndirect Ltd explained that, in September 2016, it contacted Ofsted to ask whether, if an inspection happened to be planned, the ongoing sale negotiations regarding Learndirect Apprenticeships Ltd might prompt Ofsted to defer the inspection until after the sale was complete. Ofsted further explained its conclusion that, if Learndirect Ltd were to apply for a deferral, it would most likely be granted under Ofsted’s deferral policy. Ofsted therefore decided to delay a planned inspection of Learndirect Ltd until the sale had concluded.7

5. Ofsted decided to re-schedule its inspection for March 2017.8 When Learndirect Ltd was informed of the inspection, a few days before it was due to take place, the company again sought a deferral, on the grounds that it was about to move all of its apprenticeships activity into Learndirect Apprenticeships Ltd. The inspection went ahead, and Ofsted

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1 Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, Investigation into the monitoring, inspection, and funding of Learndirect Ltd, Session 2017–19, HC 646, 14 December 2017
2 C&AG’s Report, para 1
3 C&AG’s Report, paras 1, 1.6, Figure 3
4 C&AG’s Report, para 2.5, Figure 5
5 Qq 48–51
6 Qq 27, 66, 96; C&AG’s Report, para 1.8
7 Q 45
8 Q 45
concluded that the company’s overall effectiveness should be rated as ‘inadequate’, based on outcomes for learners and apprenticeships provision being ‘inadequate’. All other elements of the inspection produced a ‘requires improvement’ rating.9

6. Ofsted told us that conducting the March 2017 inspection was a more challenging task than usual. It had difficulty in accessing information, and logging on to systems which held data on how learners’ progress was being tracked. Ofsted believed that there was a poor level of co-operation from Learndirect Ltd, which culminated in the company declining to attend the normal inspection feedback meeting at which findings are discussed.10

7. Four days after the inspection, knowing that Ofsted intended to rate it as ‘inadequate’ for overall effectiveness, Learndirect Ltd made a complaint to Ofsted about the inspection and asked for publication of the report to be withheld until the complaint had been resolved. The company claimed that Ofsted had not taken account of the process to separate its activities into two distinct businesses. It also believed that Ofsted had not taken a large enough sample size of learners to reach reliable conclusions.11

8. Having been informed that its complaint was not upheld, Learndirect Ltd began legal proceedings against Ofsted on 2 June.12 This action included an injunction, which prevented Ofsted from publishing the report. Ofsted told us that it understood this injunction also prevented it from discussing the case with any other parties, including government bodies. The judge ruled fully in Ofsted’s favour, and the report was published on 17 August 2017.13

Government’s ability to take action

9. Learndirect Ltd is ESFA’s largest provider, receiving £106 million of funding from ESFA in the 2016–17 academic year. It also received almost £15 million from its other central government contracts in 2016–17.14 It is the sole supplier of the UK citizenship tests for the Home Office, and the initial teacher training tests for the Standards and Testing Agency (STA). The company also provides employment related services for the Department for Work & Pensions.15

10. In May 2017, following the March Ofsted inspection, ESFA set up a team in preparation for terminating Learndirect Ltd’s funding, in line with its policy on providers whose overall effectiveness is rated as ‘inadequate’ by Ofsted. As part of this process, ESFA entered into discussions with other government bodies and Learndirect Ltd about their contracts with the company.16 Learndirect Ltd told ESFA that unless it received £48 million of funding from the Adult Education Budget (AEB) in the 2017–18 academic year, the company might enter into insolvency or administration. Learndirect Ltd also stated that these circumstances would pose a significant threat to its work for the Home Office and STA, and to provision funded by ESFA’s European Social Fund projects.17

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9 C&AG’s Report, paras 3.7–3.8, Figure 7
10 Q 45–46
11 Q 68–72; C&AG’s Report, para 3.10
12 C&AG’s Report, para 3.11
13 Q 72; Correspondence with Ofsted, dated 18 January, para 3.11
14 Q 36; C&AG’s Report, paras 1.6–1.7
15 Q 63; C&AG’s Report, paras 4.17–4.19, 4.22
16 Q 36, 63; C&AG’s Report, paras 4.2–4.3
17 C&AG’s Report, paras 4.10–4.11
11. ESFA said it concluded that, given Learndirect Ltd’s size and reach across government, withdrawing funding from the company would have a disruptive impact on large numbers of learners and risk the continued delivery of services for several government bodies. Accordingly, it decided to take a different approach from its published policy, and to fund the company through the whole 2017–18 academic year. ESFA awarded Learndirect Ltd £45 million of AEB funding for the year. Total ESFA funding for the company in 2017–18, which additionally covers pre-existing apprenticeships, advanced learner loans and European Social Fund activity, is likely to be around £95 million. In total, Learndirect Ltd expects to receive around £105 million from all of its main government contracts in 2017–18.18

**Subcontracting arrangements**

12. We asked Learndirect Ltd to justify the seemingly high management fees it charges its subcontractors. The company explained that, in its adult education business, the standard management fee is 20%. This amount covers its administration of the funding and audit compliance activities. Learndirect Ltd charges for additional items such as: access to training content; marketing material; IT systems; and quality assurance. The full suite of additional services takes the management fee up to 40%. Learndirect Ltd told us that around 30 of its subcontractors are paying the full management fee of 40%. We were also told that subcontractors working on Learndirect Ltd’s European Social Fund contracts pay a 20% fee, and those working on apprenticeships pay between 15% and 20%.19

13. ESFA explained that Learndirect Ltd charges a higher management fee than the great majority of providers in the market. ESFA does not give specific guidance on the level of subcontractor fees that it deems appropriate. However, in an effort to encourage greater transparency, ESFA requires all lead providers to disclose the level of management fee that they intend to charge.20

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18 Qq 16, 64–65; C&AG’s Report, para 4.3, Figure 8
19 Qq 4, 7
20 Q 4
The monitoring, inspection and funding of Learndirect Ltd.

2 Inspection

Planning and prioritising inspections

14. We asked Ofsted about its risk assessment process, and how this influences the timing of inspections. Ofsted told us that it carries out a risk assessment of providers each year. The assessment is based on outcome data typically made available around six months after the end of the academic year to which they refer, along with any other intelligence received.\(^{21}\)

15. Ofsted inspected Learndirect Ltd in March 2013, and rated the company’s overall effectiveness as ‘good’. This meant that, unless subsequent risk assessments gave cause for concern, Ofsted would next conduct a short (rather than a ‘full’) inspection in 2018. Ofsted did not carry out a risk assessment of the company in 2014, because it took assurance from the outcome of its 2013 inspection.\(^{22}\)

16. Ofsted explained that it first saw the decline in Learndirect Ltd’s apprenticeships outcomes in early 2015, which reflected results from the 2013–14 academic year, during which the company engaged with over 20,000 apprentices. It therefore gave Learndirect Ltd an amber risk rating in spring 2015, based on a ‘poor’ score for apprenticeships and a ‘fail’ for some small elements of provision. However, at that point the company’s performance was still above the benchmark average, so Ofsted “did not see it as an urgent case for inspection”.\(^{23}\)

17. Ofsted explained how, in early 2016, it saw that Learndirect Ltd’s performance on apprenticeships in the 2014–15 academic year placed it below the sector average for comparable provision. In March 2016, Ofsted changed its assessment of Learndirect Ltd’s risk rating to red, due to poor performance in a number of areas including apprenticeships. In July 2016, Ofsted concluded that, based on this risk assessment, it should amend its plan to conduct a short inspection by August 2018 and instead schedule a full inspection for November 2016.\(^{24}\)

18. We asked why Ofsted did not schedule a short inspection in spring 2015, given the company’s decline in performance and the large number of apprentices involved. Ofsted told us that even a short inspection, when conducted on a provider as large as Learndirect Ltd, requires a substantial team and would have entailed postponing other planned inspections. Ofsted further explained that a full inspection of Learndirect Ltd requires the organisation to commit around 15% of its total capacity to inspect further education and skills providers.\(^{25}\)

19. Ofsted also stated that the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in April 2017 may lead to significant growth in the provider-base in the further education sector, which will present Ofsted with a resourcing challenge. Ofsted told us that it is conducting particularly careful risk assessments of new providers, and is using data about the use of subcontractors to give it additional perspectives on provider risk.\(^{26}\)

\(^{21}\) Qq 40, 53
\(^{22}\) Q 40; C\&AG’s Report, paras 3.1–3.3
\(^{23}\) Q 40–41, 44; C\&AG’s Report, paras 1.5, 3.3
\(^{24}\) Q 40; C\&AG’s Report, para 3.4
\(^{25}\) Qq 42, 45
\(^{26}\) Qq 53–56
Deferring inspections

20. We also asked about Ofsted’s approach to deferring planned inspections. Ofsted explained that it has a formal deferral policy, which it applied in the case of Learndirect Ltd. Ofsted told us that, in September 2016, Learndirect Ltd asked some hypothetical questions about whether the sale of its apprenticeships business would trigger the deferral of any planned inspection. Ofsted explained that, in October 2016, around a month before it had planned to inspect Learndirect Ltd, ESFA provided notification that negotiations for the sale were in progress. Ofsted said it had examined its deferral policy, which states that an inspection may be deferred if “the provision is due to merge, close or move, and it is decided that no useful purpose will be served in inspecting it.” Ofsted concluded that, if it were to notify Learndirect Ltd of an imminent inspection and the company formally applied for a deferral, a deferral was likely to be granted under the policy as it stood.

21. Ofsted told us that, in December 2016, it heard that the proposed sale of Learndirect Ltd’s apprenticeships business had fallen through. It therefore initially re-scheduled its inspection for February 2017. However, a subsequent delay in the production of final performance data for the 2015–16 academic year, which was important for the inspection, prompted Ofsted to put the date back to 20–23 March.

22. On 16 March 2017, Ofsted notified Learndirect Ltd about its planned inspection. The company immediately asked Ofsted to defer the inspection, because it was in the process of transferring its apprenticeships activity to another company in the Group, Learndirect Apprenticeships Ltd. The transfer meant that Learndirect Ltd would not be delivering any more apprenticeships training after 1 May 2017. Ofsted rejected the request, based on: uncertainty about the timing of the transfer; the large number of learners involved; and the apparent decline in performance. It carried out a full inspection on 20–23 March, as planned.
Formal minutes

Monday 26 February 2018

Members present:

Meg Hillier, in the Chair

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown       Anne Marie Morris
Martyn Day                      Lee Rowley
Luke Graham                     Gareth Snell

Draft Report (The monitoring, inspection and funding of Learndirect Ltd.), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 22 read and agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Twenty-second of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 28 February 2018 at 2.00pm]
Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the inquiry publications page of the Committee’s website.

Monday 15 January 2018

Jonathan Slater, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education, Peter Lauener, former Chief Executive, Education and Skills Funding Agency, Amanda Spielman, Chief Inspector, Ofsted, and Andy Palmer, Chief Executive, Learndirect Ltd.

Q1–113

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the inquiry publications page of the Committee’s website.

LDL numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

1 Mr James Golfar (LDL0004)
2 The Sign Maker (LDL0003)
3 Windows of Distinction (LDL0001)

Published correspondence

The following correspondence was also published as part of this inquiry:

1 Correspondence with Ofsted
2 Correspondence with Ofsted, dated 9 February
3 Correspondence with Andy Palmer, Chief Executive, Learndirect Ltd.
4 Further correspondence with Ofsted
List of Reports from the Committee during the current session

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee’s website. The reference number of the Government’s response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

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