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Ms J Stephenson
Strategic Manager – Inclusion
Durham County Council
County Hall
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Dear Ms Stephenson

Ofsted 2011–12 survey inspection programme: employability - the impact of skills programmes for adults on achieving sustained employment

This survey evaluates providers' response to initiatives launched on 1 August 2011 to use Skills Funding Agency funds flexibly to support people on benefits.

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and participants, during my visit on 23 and 24 January 2012 to look at your work in employability provision.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and participants; scrutiny of relevant documents; analysis of participants' work; and observation of one learning session and one induction.

Key findings

- Durham County Council (DCC) has developed its strategy relating to employability provision very effectively, with significant restructuring of programmes and staff to focus on helping participants, including those furthest from the job market, back to work. The new offer is well designed, incorporating labour market intelligence very effectively to meet the needs of the county's employers. It includes a particularly wide range of vocational and employability programmes that can lead to progression routes from pre-entry to level 3. Much of this offer was new at the time of the visit and it was too early to analyse its impact. DCC collaborates well with other providers and shares resources, including staff expertise, to

ensure that participants across the county can access provision at an appropriate level.

- DCC works well with large employers in the retail industry to develop short bespoke provision in response to a recruitment drive in the local area. DCC's Regeneration and Economic Development Service (RED) uses work trials very effectively to help participants secure employment. It also provides good ongoing support for participants who have gained employment. DCC has recently begun to implement a marketing strategy to increase its links with small- and medium-sized employers and micro businesses.
- Initial assessment is good and involves a comprehensive range of assessment tools. Staff use participants' self-assessment of their employability skills well to set and monitor carefully relevant targets and milestones. Staff in the Adult Learning and Skills Service's employability team are particularly skilled at supporting unemployed people and they are beginning to work with a wider range of participants with very challenging barriers to employment. They are also beginning to share their expertise more widely across the service.
- Participants develop good skills to help them gain and keep a job. For example, one participant seeking work in the security industry has benefited from learning how to use email for job applications and is now able to use the information technology routinely used by security guards.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- building on the highly effective practice to offer work trials and working closely with employers to set up work experience, and to plan and visit employability courses
- continuing to share best practice to provide in-depth support for participants, particularly those with most barriers to employment
- evaluating the success of the new programme offer in helping participants achieve sustained employment.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop employability provision at Durham County Council.

As explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. A copy of this letter is also being sent to the Skills Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

Marina Gaze
Her Majesty's Inspector