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Ms S Saunders
Divisional Manager for Employment, Learning and Skills
Halton Borough Council
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Kingsway
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Dear Ms Saunders

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 visits on 16 and 17 November 2011 and 31 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, participants and employers; scrutiny of relevant documents; analysis of participants' work; and observation of four learning sessions.

Key findings

- Halton Borough Council (HBC) has a very good strategy for reducing unemployment and assisting local residents to secure employment. Its learning and skills initiatives and programmes in employability relate directly to the growth business sectors in the borough. The Halton Employment Partnership (HEP), of which HBC is a member, effectively brings together expertise from local learning and skills and employment agencies to help businesses identify and achieve their current and future employment needs.
- Collaboration with employers to ensure that they offer jobs to unemployed local people is good. HBC is currently working closely with a large retailer to provide bespoke training for 100 participants as part of its recruitment

campaign for a new local supermarket. All these participants have been out of work for at least six months. HBC recently has led a similar project for a large distribution centre, which provided Halton residents with good training and ensured that 75% of the staff it employed were local residents.

- HBC tailors provision effectively to support participants with multiple barriers to employment. It offers employability skills programmes which meet the needs of participants who have been out of work for a long time. HBC also offers four-week programmes with two weeks focused on generic employability skills and two weeks on a specific employment sector. The council is also developing a new initiative to encourage participants to volunteer; lack of recent work experience is a significant barrier to employment for many participants.
- Participants develop good skills to help them sustain employment. Initial assessment of literacy and numeracy is very good and continues throughout the programmes. Participants understand the relevance of literacy and numeracy skills as they develop them in the context of work situations. All programmes incorporate good use of teamworking, problem solving and confidence building. However, the learning goals and milestones for employability recorded in participants' individual learning plans are not always meaningful.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- developing ways for participants to access work trials and work experience so that participants gain experience and can show their skills to employers
- ensuring individual learning plans have specific and measurable goals linked to employability and incorporating and acting on feedback employers give from job applications and interviews
- implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of the new database in monitoring participants' progress and job outcomes.

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

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