

Darlington Borough Council Learning and Skills Service

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 51474

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Last day of inspection: 20 January 2012

Type of provider: Local authority

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Information about the provider

1. Following the council's restructure in April 2011, Darlington Borough Council Learning and Skills Service (the service) was separated from the Libraries Service and is now under the leadership of the lead officer for 14 to 19 education and training within the People Directorate, Educational Services. She is supported by a senior leadership team comprising of three managers. The teams for learning and skills and educational services work to provide a consolidated service for all post-16 education and training and to support pre-16 education through the 14 to 19 partnership.
2. The provision includes accredited and non-accredited programmes for adults from entry level to level 3, foundation learning programmes for young people and work-based learning. At the inspection, 115 learners were in learning for social and personal development, mainly in family learning. Learning for qualifications included 53 learners in health and social care, information and communication technology (ICT), and Skills for Life. Apprenticeship work-based learning covered 32 apprenticeships and 11 advanced apprenticeships in child care, health and social care, construction, motor vehicle maintenance, and business administration. Most of the 18 Train to Gain learners were in health and social care.
3. Too few apprentices were available to inspect and grade individual work-based subjects. Inspectors graded work-based learning overall as employability training. They also inspected family learning. Other provision in learning for qualifications and learning for social and personal development was considered under the main findings. The European Social Fund supported youth participation programme, Skills4me, was out of scope.
4. Darlington has a diverse social and economic mix, with areas of disadvantage and hidden pockets of deprivation situated alongside affluent areas. Sixteen per cent of Darlington's wards are in the 10% most deprived nationally. The overall unemployment rate in October 2011 was nearly 2% above the national rate. However, for 18 to 24 year olds, this rises to 13.5%, 5.5 percentage points above the national rate.

Type of provision	Number of learners in 2010/11
Provision for young learners: Foundation learning	45 learners
Provision for adult learners: Learning for qualifications Learning for social and personal development	151 part-time learners 448 part-time learners
Employer provision: Train to Gain Apprenticeships	43 learners 67 apprentices

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Grade 2
	Grade
Outcomes for learners	2
Quality of provision	2
Leadership and management	2
Safeguarding	2
Equality and diversity	2
Learning for qualifications in employment	Grade
Employability training	2
Learning for social and personal development	Grade
Family learning	2

Overall effectiveness

5. Darlington Borough Council Learning and Skills Service is a good provider. The proportion of learners who achieve their qualifications has improved steadily over the past four years. Adult learners' achievements are good. The overall proportion of work-based learners achieving their qualification is approaching the national average, although apprentices are less successful than advanced apprentices. However, apprentices who complete their programmes make good progress and many gain permanent employment. Learners become more confident and develop good skills that help them at work, in their families and in the wider community.
6. The most effective teaching and learning sessions are well paced and use a good variety of different activities to interest and motivate learners. However, too many sessions are not sufficiently challenging. Work-based assessment is very thorough but does not always start early enough for the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) aspect of the apprenticeship framework. The close involvement of workplace supervisors during reviews helps to ensure that on- and off-the-job training are linked effectively. The service's extensive range of partners play a particularly effective role throughout planning, delivery and

support for learning. Support for learners is good; the service makes very effective use of specialist external agencies.

7. Leaders and managers set a clear direction and support staff effectively to fulfil their roles using good communication and staff training. The service has successfully recruited a high proportion of learners from disadvantaged communities and plans carefully to ensure their well-being and safety. Following the service's recent restructure, managers introduced improved processes to assure the quality of provision. Some of these have not completed their first cycle and it is too soon to comment on their effectiveness. However, staff take good account of the feedback they receive from learners and partners. The self-assessment report is generally accurate but the development plan is not specific enough about individual subject areas and its targets not always measurable enough to monitor progress.

Main findings

- Overall success rates in learning for qualifications show significant improvement from a low base and are now high. Education and training learners are particularly successful; almost everyone gained their qualification in 2010/11. The declining trend in the ICT success rate shows marked recent improvement to a good level. Most learning for social and personal development is accredited and learners achieve their learning goals and qualifications.
- Apprenticeship success rates have improved steadily over the past four years and now approach national rates. However, too many apprentices at intermediate level leave before the end of their programme and are less successful than advanced apprentices whose success rates are high. The pace of progress for all apprentices has improved significantly and most complete their programmes within the planned time.
- Learners significantly improve their employability and social skills. They grow in confidence and independence at work and in their ability to support their children and families at home. Employers highly value apprentices' contributions in their workplaces. Many learners continue in learning, gain employment or become effective volunteers in their communities. Learners report that they feel safe and they consistently demonstrate safe working practices. The service's effective e-learning guidance helps learners stay safe when using the internet.
- A significant amount of teaching and learning activity is good or better, but too many sessions are only satisfactory. Better sessions are characterised by a good pace, the frequent checking of learners' understanding and a well-balanced range of teaching and learning activities that promote active learning and full participation. Many tutors do not sufficiently exploit information and learning technology or the virtual learning environment to enhance their teaching.
- Work-based learners enjoy learning in small groups. Their supervisors are fully involved in reviews and cooperate closely with assessors to ensure that job roles and on-the-job training link effectively with off-the-job training. Placements are good and offer interesting and varied work for most

apprentices. Assessment is rigorous and supportive but it does not start early enough in business administration.

- Highly responsive and well targeted provision helps make efficient use of the service's reduced resources and is supported by excellent partnerships. Particularly effective multi-agency work supports the identification of areas of need, informs the range of courses offered and enhances the provision of support for learners.
- Learners receive much good personal and learning support from their tutors, employers, support staff and external partners. Mentors provide highly effective support that enables the most vulnerable learners to complete their programme. Very effective partnerships with a range of external agencies support learners' wider needs. However, the records of work-based learners who may be at risk of leaving too soon are not always up-to-date.
- The clear strategic direction places a good focus on providing a high-quality service, particularly for the most vulnerable within the local community. The service has formed excellent strategic links with a wide variety of partners. Council members provide very effective challenge and support through a range of focused committees who scrutinise the work of the service.
- Arrangements for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults are good. Staff receive detailed training in safeguarding, which includes the Common Assessment Framework, and they have a very good understanding of child protection policies and procedures. Links with the local safeguarding board and external agencies are good.
- The service has very successfully engaged with hard-to-reach learners who traditionally would not take part in learning activities, particularly the most vulnerable and challenging learners. Good staff training prepares staff very effectively to motivate and support learners who have a range of complex social and personal needs. The views of users are actively sought and acted upon to promote improvement.
- It is too early to judge the impact of the enhanced quality improvement arrangements. The process to observe teaching and learning is now more comprehensive and systematic and the service uses this effectively to identify good practice and development needs. Managers recognise that they do not use the findings in a sufficiently focused way to improve the amount of good and outstanding teaching.
- Self-assessment is inclusive and incorporates the views of learners, employers and stakeholders. The overall report is evaluative and identifies areas for improvement. Specific subject areas are not sufficiently reflected in the quality improvement plan. Areas identified for improvement closely match inspectors' findings but plans for improvement have too few measurable targets.

What does Darlington Borough Council Learning and Skills Service need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that the 'at risk' process is implemented consistently, particularly for apprentices, and provide prompt and effective support to minimise the number who leave early.
- Focus the observation of teaching and learning process more closely to reduce the proportion of satisfactory provision; use opportunities to share good practice and staff development that enable tutors to provide a consistently good or better learning experience.
- Ensure that individual subject areas are fully reflected in the self-assessment report and quality improvement plan and use data analysis more effectively to set explicit and measurable targets overall and at subject level.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- the patient, knowledgeable and supportive staff
- the opportunity to learn new skills
- being able to learn at home using the virtual learning environment
- meeting new people in a friendly environment
- well planned lessons and clear explanations by tutors
- developing their confidence
- good advice and guidance
- being respected at work by older colleagues.

What learners would like to see improved:

- the provision of classes in the evenings or at weekends for men
- the classes that cannot run because of low numbers
- the amount of time to prepare for exams
- planning of work to avoid repeating topics that have been previously covered.

Summary of the views of employers/stakeholders/partners as confirmed by inspectors

What employers/stakeholders/partners like:

- the effectiveness of multi-agency working to target the most vulnerable families
- good communication and regular feedback about learners' progress
- the approachability and responsiveness of staff in providing a welcoming environment for learners
- the impact of learning on improving volunteers' confidence and effectiveness

- highly individualised support for learners and employers that helps apprentices develop vocational and personal skills
- the positive attitude of learners and their willingness to learn
- knowledgeable support from staff when disciplinary issues arise
- learners' awareness of commercial realities and the need to provide value for money at work.

What employers/stakeholders/partners would like to see improved:

- no areas for improvement were identified.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

8. Darlington Borough Council Learning and Skills Service has improved its provision since the previous inspection. The provider has maintained its strengths and made good progress to rectify the key areas for improvement during a period of major change. The restructured service has adapted rapidly to changing priorities and responded well by developing a highly targeted curriculum that focuses on supporting the most vulnerable learners. Management structures are clear. Good communication and staff development ensure that staff understand their roles and responsibilities and are fully equipped to carry them out. Work-based learning overall success rates have steadily improved and overall outcomes for learners are good. The service has continued to develop successful and productive external partnership links to support local community priorities.
9. Rigorous quality improvement processes have been introduced, some of which have not yet completed a full cycle. Managers are aware of the need to further refine the observation of teaching and learning process to reduce the proportion of satisfactory teaching. The service uses the views of learners, employers and partners very effectively to improve the provision. The self-assessment process is evaluative and generally accurate, and it is used as an effective tool to drive improvement. The process is inclusive of staff and other stakeholders. The provider identified most of the strengths and areas for improvement found by inspectors. The resulting quality improvement plan links clearly to the improvements required but does not use data well enough to establish sufficiently clear targets against which they can be measured.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 2

10. Success rates in learning for qualifications have improved significantly from a low base. They are now good overall and outstanding in education and training. Effective action to change the delivery of ICT has halted a declining trend; in the first term of 2011/12 almost every learner achieved their qualification. The majority of learning for social and personal development is accredited and most learners achieve their qualification and their learning goals.
11. Most apprentices enjoy their learning. All apprentices who stay on their course make good progress. Success rates for qualifications completed in the planned time have improved significantly and are now eight percentage points above the national rate. Train to Gain success rates are very high. Almost every learner achieved their qualification during the past two years. Overall apprenticeship success rates have improved steadily over the past four years and are now nearing national rates. However, not all apprenticeship groups are equally successful. While all advanced apprentices and apprentices in motor vehicle and construction have high success rates, above national rates, apprenticeship success rates in health and social care, and business administration are low. Retained learners in these subject areas achieve their qualifications but too

many leave early. In health and social care, retention has improved this year; there are no early leavers and all learners are on target to achieve on time.

12. Work-based learners and adults develop many good work-related and personal skills. They grow in confidence and self-esteem and improve their communication and interpersonal skills. Increased levels of self-motivation promote good progress in education, training and work. Adults develop good parenting and social skills. Their development of confidence helps them access support services more effectively and to communicate better with their children's teachers. The workplace managers and supervisors of paid and voluntary workers comment very favourably about learners' positive work attitude and their good contribution in the workplace. Many learners make good progress into permanent employment.
13. Learners feel safe. Safeguarding and health and safety are covered well at induction. Learners receive clear guidance on the high standards of behaviour expected of them. They have a good understanding of health and safety and adopt safe working practices. Staff challenge any inappropriate behaviour. The service provides valuable guidance and training to help learners understand and follow safe practice when using the internet. Good links with health service professionals raise learners' awareness about safe and healthy lifestyle choices.
14. Many learners make increased and more effective community contributions following learning. In particular, volunteers become more active in their community; some support community learning through working as teaching assistants and others carry out vital youth work to support disaffected young people. Learners gain a good understanding of their rights and responsibilities as citizens when working in a voluntary context. Other learners use their improved communication skills and confidence to carry out a wide range of civic duties.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

15. Teaching, training and learning are generally well planned, flexible and responsive. However, while inspectors observed much teaching that is good or better, too high a proportion of teaching is satisfactory. In the best sessions, tutors use a balanced range of teaching and learning methods; sessions are well paced and planned to meet the differing needs of individuals in the group. Learners are interested and highly motivated and they participate actively. For example, in a cookery session on scone making, the recipe and method were adapted, enabling less experienced cooks to follow the basic recipe and the more confident to apply their skills to more complex dishes. An extension activity was available for faster or more advanced learners. Another tutor effectively used themes from current reality television programmes to illustrate Tuckman's theory about the stages of group formation to help learners discuss and understand the process. Work-based learners appreciate the benefits of learning in small groups. While no unsatisfactory teaching was seen, weaker sessions were not paced appropriately for the ability of the learners or did not promote active learning sufficiently. Few tutors make effective use of information and learning technology. Tutors with more confidence use the

virtual learning environment to support learners' independent home study or to illustrate technical points, but much of the virtual learning environment is used simply as a repository for course materials.

16. Work-based learning assessment is thorough. Workplace assessors in some childcare employers carry out frequent assessments and support improvements in learners' pace of progress. However, business administration learners are slow to start their NVQ assessment. Flexible and frequent reviews closely involve workplace supervisors who receive good communication about each learner's progress. Quality assurance arrangements for internal verification are robust; all work is sampled. Managers recognise that target setting is not always precise enough or linked to planning for teaching and learning. Pilot arrangements to link outcomes and individual targets directly to planning through the recognition and recording of learners' progress and achievement show early signs of success.
17. Although the range of provision is smaller than at the previous inspection, it is more highly focused and responsive to those with the highest level of need. The service has successfully developed provision to meet specific local needs and is very responsive to requests from key partners. The service works effectively with the most challenging learners who have been unsuccessful in previous learning. Employers' needs are well met through flexible and professional working relationships. Partner agencies report that highly targeted work makes a significant difference to wider family members, for example, in the young parents' project and family learning intensive support. The recent appointment of 12 new tutors will extend the range of provision.
18. The service has excellent links and working relationships with a wide range of partners, including schools, family support agencies, health professionals, volunteer groups, early intervention and youth offending teams. These partnerships inform and influence strategy, programme design, information, advice and guidance and the wider support for learners. Particularly high levels of collaborative multi-agency working make best use of reduced resources through collective approaches. Well established links with the Tees Valley local authorities help the service develop systems and processes. Staff share good practice through joint staff training and resource development. A number of external support agencies provide specialist support to work-based learners who have experienced profound trauma such as homelessness or abuse. Good employer links provide interesting and varied work placements and ensure that on- and off-the-job training are linked and supported by the allocation of work tasks.
19. Staff, tutors and employers provide much effective support. The service provides good, well planned support at key transition points for individual learners, some of whom have a high level of need. This helps learners overcome multiple barriers to learning, particularly personal and social problems. Support is closely linked to a much improved focus on learners' achievements, designed to ensure that the service is highly alert to learners at risk of leaving early. However, its record of these learners is not always up-to-

date, sometimes delaying the provision of support. Crèche provision enables family learners with young children to attend. Excellent intensive support helps those at the margins of society, such as Travellers, to take their first steps in learning. All staff are qualified to level 2 in information, advice and guidance enabling them to support learners in their classes. Support arrangements are closely monitored but their impact on improving achievements is not evaluated.

Leadership and management

Grade 2

20. The service's clear strategic direction places a strong focus on providing a high-quality service that particularly targets the most vulnerable people within the local community. Managers have handled reduced funding and the service restructure very effectively. They make good use of detailed data analysis on education, training and employment trends for Darlington to support strategic programme planning that complements the work of other providers within the area. However, at an operational level data are not used sufficiently to set challenging targets for individual tutors. Staff roles and responsibilities are clear and they have a good understanding of the key objectives of the service. The staff development programme is good and enables tutors and other staff to understand the needs of learners and support them. Staff value the open management culture; their morale is high. Excellent strategic links with a wide variety of partners inform planning and the range of provision.
21. Council members provide the service's managers with rigorous challenge and support through a range of focused committees whose members carefully scrutinise their work. Progress towards wider strategic objectives set for the service are closely monitored and reviewed through local strategic partnerships.
22. Safeguarding for children and vulnerable adults is good. Detailed training provides staff with regular opportunities to become skilled in understanding the wider aspects of safeguarding and vulnerability. They have a very good understanding of child protection policies and procedures. They are confident in using the disclosure process. They value and make good use of the cause for concern process to inform the designated officer promptly when a learner is becoming vulnerable. Links with the local safeguarding board and external agencies are good. Policies and procedures to prevent bullying and harassment are implemented effectively. External checks on health and safety and risk assessments are systematic and effectively carried out. Safeguarding is a key agenda item at all management team meetings and learners receive good reinforcement during learning sessions.
23. The service has been very successful in recruiting hard-to-reach learners who traditionally would not participate in learning activities and is particularly effective in supporting the most vulnerable. Nearly half of the learners are recruited from the most disadvantaged 10%, and 56% from the most disadvantaged 25%, of Darlington's wards. Good training for staff prepares them well to work with learners who have a range of complex social and personal needs. The service uses partnerships with a broad range of external agencies effectively to support learners with wider needs, for example, those

with dyslexia, hearing and visual impairments. The service is active in raising awareness and understanding of, and in celebrating, diversity and cultural differences throughout its provision. Data are used to compare any differences between success rates. However, targets to improve participation by difficult-to-reach groups are not sufficiently clear. Community venues are selected to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act and have good levels of adaptive equipment to support the diverse needs of learners. Learners' understanding of equality and diversity is satisfactory.

24. Very effective engagement with users supports and promotes improvement. The views of learners, employers and partners are systematically collected through a variety of channels including surveys, forums and by following up learners who leave courses. Good use is made of partner links to communicate with representatives within the community. The service is very responsive to users' views through the quality improvement process.
25. Thorough and improved quality improvement arrangements have been introduced as part of the service's restructure. The quality improvement cycle evaluates all key aspects of learning, but some of the new arrangements are not yet fully established and it is too soon to judge their effectiveness. The service moderates the grades awarded following the observation of teaching and learning and follows a more comprehensive and systematic process than previously. Observations are detailed and include sufficient information to enable tutors to understand what they need to do to improve. Managers recognise the need to use the findings in a more targeted way to focus closely on improving the proportion of good and outstanding teaching. Managers use the moderation process effectively to identify themes of good practice and development needs but too few opportunities are available to enable tutors to share good practice across the service.
26. The self-assessment process includes staff at different levels and incorporates the views of learners, employers and partners. The overall resulting report is evaluative and generally very close in its judgements and grades to those awarded by inspectors. The overall quality improvement plan links well to areas for improvement but it does not sufficiently reflect targets for improvements in specific subject areas. Many targets for improvement are not sufficiently measurable.
27. The service uses its available resources prudently to secure good value for money. Skilful curriculum design helps ensure that provision is not duplicated with other local providers. Good links with external partners maximise and develop the provision for learners. Effective use is made of a variety of community venues to provide learning and support throughout the area.

Learning for qualifications in employment

Employability training

Grade 2

Context

28. A training and skills coordinator and four full-time assessors support 32 apprentices and 11 advanced apprentices. Apprentices work towards qualifications in health and social care, and child care, engineering (motor vehicle), construction (site joinery) or business administration. Most attend off-the-job training in dedicated training rooms and engineering or woodworking workshops. Eighty-six per cent of learners are aged 16 to 18, 66% are female, 8% are from minority ethnic backgrounds and 3% of learners have declared that they have a disability.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners who complete their programme are good. A high proportion of learners face considerable personal challenges, such as homelessness, teenage pregnancy or a history of abuse. Despite these, overall success rates have improved and approach national averages. Success rates for advanced apprentices are very good and outstanding for business administration at 100%. Completion rates within the expected time are high, significantly above the national average. A good proportion of apprentices progress to further training and employment.
- Apprentices' success rate in business administration has improved to 68%, but this is still below the national average. Apprentices' success rates in health and social care, and child care remain low at 58%. Only 67% of 16 to 18-year-old apprentices achieved their framework, five percentage points below the national average. Too many learners leave early; this year eight learners have already left without completing their course.
- Learners develop good work and social skills in placements that successfully meet their needs and those of their employers. Supervisors are particularly supportive, allocating job roles to meet qualification requirements. Many learners enjoy varied, challenging and responsible positions, often with considerable external training. All learners feel safe. However, most worry they may not be able to complete their course due to fears about the sustainability of their employment.
- Most teaching and learning are good. They focus appropriately on workplace skills. Inspectors saw no unsatisfactory teaching. Learners enjoy working in small groups and the adult atmosphere. In the better sessions, tutors use interesting active learning methods to motivate learners successfully, keeping them fully involved in lessons. In weaker sessions, learners repeat work with which they are already familiar or are inactive in sessions that are directed too much by the tutor.
- Assessment is rigorous and supportive. Assessors help trainees create well structured portfolios. Rigorous and supportive reviews are valued by learners

and their supervisors. The targets set are usually substantial and easily understood; any targets missed are promptly followed up. A minority of targets are less clear. NVQ assessment does not start early enough in business administration; assessments are delayed until the technical certificate is complete.

- Partnerships are used very effectively. Good recent initiatives and marketing have extended the placement base. A number of external partners provide further specialist support for learners struggling with profound personal challenges such as family and home break-up, bereavement, pregnancy, homelessness and substance misuse. Relationships with placement providers are very good and employers are highly satisfied with the support they receive from the service.
- Support is good. Staff in all subjects have a particularly good focus on supporting learners who are vulnerable and those with significant problems in their personal circumstances. Assessors visit learners frequently. The service has created an effective mentor role to provide learners with counselling and referral to specialist support agencies.
- The service provides a good induction. Information, advice and guidance are also good. Most learners are clear about their chosen career path and their rights and responsibilities. They know how to complain if necessary. Most employers are pleased with the maturity of trainees following induction. However, a significant number of business administration apprentices are insufficiently prepared for the demands of their workplaces.
- Leadership and management are good. Open and responsive managers communicate very effectively with staff. Good staff training includes classroom and behaviour management. Value for money is good. Limited resources are used efficiently to create good outcomes for a challenging client group. The use of data has improved although managers make insufficient use of retention data.
- Managers have improved their focus on learners' achievements. They review their progress frequently with staff, giving extra attention to those nearing their expected end date. They successfully identify additional learning needs and pastoral or employer concerns. However, progress reports are not always up-to-date; four of the thirteen current learners identified as being at risk of leaving their course had not been referred to the mentor.
- The service supports social and educational inclusion well. It encourages participation in education and employment by learners often unable to take part in these. The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Staff focus appropriately on learners' cultural requirements. However, questions used to check learners' understanding of equal opportunities during reviews are sometimes superficial. Few learners had more than a basic understanding of equality and diversity.
- Quality improvement processes are satisfactory. Staff engagement with employers and learners, to identify and implement improvements, is good. Internal verification processes are effective in developing assessors and their practice. The observation of teaching and learning process leads to largely

accurate judgements and successfully identifies staff development needs. The process includes observations of key parts of the learners' experiences, including reviews.

- Each work-based subject has its own self-assessment, but there is no overview for the remit. The weighting of outcomes for learners, when evaluating the quality of provision, is not always considered sufficiently. In business administration, the impact of low retention on outcomes was not identified. Assessors are insufficiently aware of the service's priorities for improvement. Some actions in the quality improvement plan have not been implemented.

What does Darlington Borough Council Learning and Skills Service need to do to improve further?

- Ensure business administration learners are more aware of workplace requirements by paying more attention to them in induction, work trials and recruitment procedures to ensure that all learners fully understand employers' expectations.
- Ensure business administration learners start working on their NVQ assessment as soon as feasible to improve their achievement.
- Improve the rigour of learners' progress tracking to ensure all learners who are at risk of leaving early receive support.
- Improve self-assessment and quality improvement by ensuring that the weighting and relevance of outcomes for learners are reflected in the proposed grades. Identify common themes across work-based learning so that all staff understand the section's priorities.

Learning for social and personal development

Other social and personal development learning provision considered as part of the main findings but not separately graded: *health and social care, information and communication technology, hospitality and catering, history, education and training.*

Family learning

Grade 2

Context

29. In the first term of the current year 133 learners enrolled on family learning programmes. In 2010/11 there were 301 learners in total. Most learners are women and 12% are from a minority ethnic heritage. The service offers family literacy, language and numeracy (FLLN) and wider family learning (WFL) using taster workshops, and short and long courses. Almost all the provision is accredited. The programme is provided by two main tutors and additional hourly-paid staffing. The provision is coordinated by the learning and skills manager.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are good. Learners enjoy their classes and attendance is generally good. Retention on the FLLN courses has been rising steadily in recent years and was 84% in 2010/11. Retention on the WFL courses shows a sustained rate of 86% in the last three years. Achievement rates are high, with over 95% of learners gaining qualifications in both programmes.
- Most learners make good progress in achieving personal and group learning goals. The provision successfully builds learners' confidence and self-esteem. Learners gain useful skills in a number of areas, including budgeting, family safety and first aid. Learners improve their own literacy and numeracy skills. They also develop a better understanding of the work their children are doing at school and how to support their learning.
- The progress made by learners increases their economic well-being and helps them to contribute to the local community. Learners develop their parenting skills effectively and many become more actively involved with their children's school as a result of attending a family learning class. Schools report positive effects, such as an increase in children's attendance and motivation.
- Many learners continue in education or training as a result of their participation in family learning. Some find employment or become involved in voluntary work. Learners report gaining confidence in making telephone calls and how to prepare for interviews. They also gain a better understanding of their rights and responsibilities as citizens or employees and volunteers.
- Learners find the service welcoming and friendly. They feel safe in the classes and are confident that any concerns they have will be dealt with sensitively. Learners enjoy the social opportunities to meet others in an informal learning environment.

- Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Staff carefully assess the needs of individual learners. The extent to which this information is used effectively in planning and delivering lessons varies. In the better lessons, the pace of the work is well planned and tutors make frequent checks on learners' understanding. Other lessons are satisfactory, but they include too much information for some learners in the group or do not take sufficient account of learners' individual aims.
- Tutors are skilful in enabling learners to use resources with their children more effectively. They successfully show parents how to make reading with children more interesting and how to help them with writing skills. Parents are encouraged to create their own learning resources that they can use at home. The strong emphasis on learning through fun helps to sustain parents' interest and confidence and enables them to apply this with their children.
- Provision very successfully meets the needs of those attending family learning classes. Learners can access taster, short and longer courses. They appreciate the opportunity to gain accreditation in almost all the courses. Provision is available at a range of venues, including schools, children's centres, women's refuge accommodation and in the home. The extent of family learning has been reduced in the current year following budget cuts. Learners have insufficient opportunities to develop computer literacy skills.
- The service successfully targets its work to meet the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable families. Their participation is promoted by the excellent partnership work with a wide range of agencies that refer families to the service. Partners from schools, the health service, the teenage pregnancy service and many others speak very highly of the service's responsiveness to those most in need, and the flexible approach to developing and providing courses.
- Support for learners is good and contributes significantly to the positive outcomes for learners. Staff are skilful in providing good support in what are often complex and sensitive contexts. Advice and guidance are offered by well trained staff. Good support is provided for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Learners appreciate the childcare that enables them to attend classes. In a few classes, the service provides insufficient support for learners whose first language is not English.
- A particularly successful aspect of the service is the intensive support it provides for families in their own home. In many cases, these families are experiencing particularly difficult circumstances. In some cases they are not ready to join a group or attend a centre. Skilful work takes place with the families to start a learning programme in the home and many join courses at a later date.
- Leaders and managers effectively promote a culture of high expectations in the service. Staff meet regularly with their manager to review the provision and share practice. A well developed training programme ensures staff develop the correct skills to work with targeted groups of learners.
- The promotion of safeguarding is very good. Staff are well trained in all aspects of safeguarding. This enables them to work very effectively with other agencies to raise any concerns they have about safeguarding and to participate fully in

multi-agency case conferences. Promotion of equality and diversity is good. The targeted work of the service is effective in working with communities that are under-represented in education, such as Travellers. Since the previous inspection there has been some successful work to increase male recruitment and further initiatives are planned.

- Quality assurance procedures are satisfactory. Involvement of staff in the self-assessment process is good and they are aware of the quality improvement plan for the whole service. However, the service has no specific quality improvement plan for family learning. Inspectors agreed with the main judgements in the self-assessment report and the report identified most of the areas for improvement. Individual course monitoring is good but data are not collated sufficiently to inform overall analysis of the provision. The service does not formally monitor the destinations of learners at the end of their courses.

What does Darlington Borough Council Learning and Skills Service need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that all lessons provide an appropriate level of challenge for individuals in the group, for example, by sharing good practice in teaching and learning.
- Extend the analysis of data on attendance, retention and destinations so that quality improvement strategies and future planning are better informed.

Information about the inspection

30. Three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one additional inspector, assisted by Darlington Borough Council Learning and Skills Service manager, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the funding body, the previous inspection report, report from the inspectorate's monitoring visit and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.
31. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails to gather the views of learners. They looked at questionnaires learners, employers, partners and other stakeholders had completed on behalf of Darlington Borough Council Learning and Skills Service. They also visited learning sessions, assessments or progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subjects the provider offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Darlington Borough Council Learning and Skills Service

Learning types: 14-16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; **16-18 Learner responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; **19+ responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses; **Employer responsive:** Train to Gain, apprenticeships. **Social and personal development:** all adult safeguarded provision

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	19+ Learner responsive	Employer responsive	Social and personal development
Approximate number of enrolled learners				
Full-time learners	43	0	43	0
Part-time learners	186	53	18	115
Overall effectiveness	2	2	2	2
Capacity to improve	2			
A. Outcomes for learners	2	2	2	2
A1. How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	2			
A1.a) How well do learners attain their learning goals?	3			
A1.b) How well do learners progress?	2			
A2. How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2			
A3. Do learners feel safe?	2			
A4. <i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	n/a			
A5. <i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	2			
B. Quality of provision	2	2	2	2
B1. How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	3			
B2. How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	2			
B3. How well do partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	1			
B4. How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2			
C. Leadership and management	2	2	2	2
C1. How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2			
C2. <i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	2			
C3. How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2			
C4. How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	2			
C5. How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	2			
C6. How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	3			
C7. How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2			

*where applicable to the type of provision

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