

# Southampton ACL

## Focused monitoring visit report

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**Unique reference number:** 54509

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**Type of provider:** Local authority

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## Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

### Context and focus of visit

Southampton City Council provides adult and community learning (ACL) through its contract with the Skills Funding Agency. The service provides personal and community development learning, family learning, neighbourhood learning in deprived communities, First Steps and programmes for the unemployed, along with a Train to Gain contract.

At the last inspection in June 2009, overall effectiveness and most aspects were judged satisfactory; the quality of provision and preparation for life and work were judged to be good. In November 2009 the council decided to make ACL a fully commissioned service in order to reduce costs and to focus more sharply on priority groups and neighbourhoods. Service managers put in place a tender system in summer 2010 and selected 25 partners to deliver the ACL work in Southampton. Fourteen private organisations were contracted along with eleven local government and education partners. In 2009/10 just over 6,000 learners took ACL programmes in Southampton. However, in 2010/11, following restructuring of the provision, the service expects to meet its funding target of 4,500 learners.

### Themes

#### Self-assessment and improvement planning

<b>How well have self-assessment and quality improvement systems led to improvement across the service in 2010/11?</b>	<b>Reasonable progress</b>
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The service has appropriately addressed the key areas for improvement identified at the last inspection, which related to advice and guidance, use of management information, and use of learning goals in non-accredited learning. In line with its relatively new commissioning role, the service has adjusted its contract arrangements to ensure that external providers and internal partners focus specifically on the quality of provision. Contracts also ensure that providers are clear about the council's main ACL priorities and their role in helping to meet them. Service managers provide partner organisations with good support and a helpful guidebook that clearly outlines expectations, good practice, key documentation and timescales. Providers value the service's support and guidance through informal communication and the termly review meetings. The service's strategic role is helping providers to sharpen their own quality systems, which in turn are having an impact on outcomes for learners. However, managers recognise that these systems are relatively new and still evolving.

## Outcomes for learners

### **What progress has the service made in improving outcomes for learners since the last inspection? Reasonable progress**

The proportion of learners who successfully complete their ACL programmes has improved over years. In 2008/09 the proportion was 88% and in both 2009/10 and 2010/11 around 97% successfully completed. Achievements are, in the main, 'soft outcomes' as much of the provision is non-accredited. Even so, achievement rates have remained high, at around 94% for the past three years. Achievements in 2009/10 were best in wider family learning programmes and high in personal and community development learning, which account for the majority of learners in any one year. Recruitment of male learners has declined in 2010/11. This was expected as male-dominated sports provision on the Itchen estuary was discontinued since it did not attract learners from priority groups. However, recruitment of Black and minority ethnic learners, those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and the over-60s exceeded the targets set. Recruitment of learners from priority neighbourhoods was below target, but an improvement on previous years.

## Quality of provision

### **How has the service improved teaching and learning and, in particular, the way in which tutors assess learners' progress and achievement? Reasonable progress**

At the last inspection, teaching and learning were good but inspectors identified weaknesses in tutors' assessment practices. The service's internal lesson observation system indicates that the quality of teaching and learning remains high, with the overwhelming majority of lessons graded as good or better. Consistency across providers has improved, primarily as a consequence of joint lesson observations by the service's managers and appropriate moderation of written feedback forms. As acknowledged by the service, the system is now well established but would benefit from further refinements. For example, not all observers make sufficiently detailed or evaluative judgements about learning. Observers' comments about equality and diversity focus on the service's highly inclusive nature but do not make clear what constitutes outstanding practice in this area.

A higher proportion of tutors are now formally recognising and recording learners' progress and achievement as a consequence of clear guidance from managers and effective support for providers. In the early stages of their courses, most learners identify their starting points and what they hope to gain, and tutors then work with them to review their progress. Although positive about how much they have gained from their courses, particularly in terms of confidence and self-esteem, not all learners interviewed were convinced of the value of this formal approach and many felt that it was an administrative necessity rather than a tool to help them to measure their own progress.

## Leadership and management

### **To what extent are learners' views and feedback used to inform developments?**

**Reasonable progress**

Tutors and managers routinely seek the views of their learners, in a variety of informal and formal ways, including forums, questionnaires, evaluations after lessons and one-to-one meetings. They are highly responsive to any concerns raised and can readily cite examples of how learners' views have led to changes, such as the length, timing or location of a course. Learners interviewed confirm that tutors regularly ask for their views. At a more strategic level, the service draws very effectively on broader intelligence and research about the city to inform future developments, such as the mix and balance of programmes. Service managers recognise the need to analyse learners' views across the whole service more systematically, and have plans to introduce consultation events and to talk to groups of learners directly. Partner organisations are now required in their contracts to seek and analyse learners' views. In the final stage of the contract review process, providers are asked to demonstrate how learners' views have been used to improve provision and this will inform procurement decisions.

### **What progress has been made in improving information, advice and guidance for learners?**

**Reasonable progress**

Contracts with partner organisations are now more explicit about the role of each provider in relation to information, advice and guidance (IAG) for learners. The service is using the termly review meetings successfully with providers to monitor and review progress in meeting these expectations. Records of providers' progress are kept up to date and inform training and development. Managers and providers speak enthusiastically about the way in which this has improved understanding of the role of IAG in their work with learners, and in improving the way in which relevant actions, such as referrals to other specialist services, are taking place. Southampton4learners has been launched as a central advice and guidance portal. Useful learning cards have been developed and circulated to providers to encourage learners to access the portal. It is, however, too early to judge the impact of these actions. Service managers have also used opportunities such as Adult Learners' Week to promote learning opportunities and to find out more about what learners would like to know.

### **What progress has been made in using management information efficiently to develop and improve the service?**

**Reasonable progress**

Over the past two years, service managers have collected and used data well to inform planning. For example, demographic data from 11 priority neighbourhoods have been analysed and used to inform contract levels, and to confirm that they align as well as possible with the council's key priorities. Formal communication with providers has improved and data are shared with managers and providers in order to inform changes to contracts and interim target setting. Data from providers are recorded centrally and followed up regularly. Service managers are well informed as to the progress their providers and partners are making in fulfilling their contracts.

These data have been used to identify gaps in provision, and this has successfully allowed managers to respond to gaps by initiating special projects.

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