

Somerset Skills and Learning

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Local authority
Somerset Skills and Learning
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Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

Somerset Skills and Learning is located in the council's Resources Directorate. The provision, led by a lead operations manager, has three divisions: skills and foundation; leisure learning; and organisational performance each led by a senior manager. In 2009/10 the service provided learning opportunities for around 14,000 learners, the majority of whom enrolled on informal learning and community programmes. It also offered apprenticeships for young people and adults, Entry to Employment programmes for young people and Train to Gain programmes for adults. It operates through 18 community-based centres across Somerset.

The previous inspection in March 2010 judged the overall effectiveness of the service to be good, as were outcomes for learners, the quality of provision, leadership and management, the capacity to improve, safeguarding and equality of opportunity. Four subject areas were graded. Of these, preparation for life and work, community development and family learning were judged to be good. Business administration and law was satisfactory. This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit, which included the areas for improvement identified in the last inspection report.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in developing the direct involvement of employers, learners and part-time staff in self-assessment?

Significant progress

The previous inspection reported that self-assessment was thorough and accurate but the direct involvement of employers, learners and part-time staff in self-assessment was underdeveloped. Somerset Skills and Learning has made significant progress in developing arrangements which have led to the better involvement of these groups. The provider has worked hard to improve the direct involvement of employers and has had some success in using the regular learner reviews to gather feedback from employers for use in self-assessment. However, it acknowledges that there is still more to do to.

Part-time staff are now much more involved in self-assessment. They play an important role in reviewing performance at monthly team meetings, the results of which inform the bi-monthly and quarterly performance reviews. Staff are well informed about success and retention rates in their areas of work and how these relate to the performance of the service overall.

The involvement of learners has been developed well through an improved learner survey which curriculum team members have helped to design. Feedback from learner focus groups is now more structured and informs performance reviews. A

senior manager makes regular visits to all the centres to gather additional information from learners and administrative staff.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving outcomes in all areas and completion rates for learners within allocated times? **Reasonable progress**

Somerset Skills and Learning has made reasonable progress in improving outcomes in all areas and completion rates for learners in allocated times. The last inspection reported that success rates were high on courses leading to qualifications, particularly longer courses. These high rates have been maintained. Success rates have improved on shorter courses for qualifications. Outcomes for those on courses leading to qualifications in employment were satisfactory. Success rates within allocated times were low on both apprenticeship and Train to Gain programmes but were improving. Overall success rates in apprenticeship programmes have been maintained at 68%, just below the current national average. Success rates for apprentices in their allocated times have continued to improve and, at 62%, are just below the national average. Of these, success rates within allocated times for adult apprentices have improved markedly, but this has not been the case for 16- to 18-year-old apprentices. Those for Train to Gain programmes have continued to improve and are now at the national average of 79%. Success rates in allocated times on Train to Gain programmes have improved considerably from a low base of 45% in 2008/09 to 77%, again just below the national average.

Quality of provision

What progress has Somerset Skills and Learning made in the setting of specific, measurable and challenging individual targets to improve the way staff assess learners' progress? **Reasonable progress**

At the previous inspection, initial assessment and target setting in community development and family learning were insufficiently detailed. Learners in the adult safeguarded provision did not understand the need to record and assess progress and achievements. This has now improved both in community development and family learning. Initial assessment is generally more detailed. Target setting has improved and the more global learning goals have been reduced to smaller, more tightly-defined learning objectives relating to more specific activities. However, some individual learning plans (ILPs) still include goals which are vague and insufficiently detailed.

Target setting in the adult safeguarded learning provision is insufficiently detailed except in the arts subject areas where staff have received training in target setting. This has not been identified during the quality assurance of the ILPs. Target setting has been identified as an area for development in the latest curriculum performance meeting. The existing ILPs have too little space to enable more detailed recording of

individual learning targets. Learners now have a better understanding of the need to record and assess progress and they appreciate the way it enables them to plan and develop their learning.

How much progress has the provider made in improving pre-course information and administration to ensure that prospective learners are well informed? **Significant progress**

At the previous inspection, some pre-course information and administrative procedures were unclear and not coordinated very well. This has now been completely rectified. Learners are now clear about what they need to do to enrol on courses. They now have accurate information about courses and are well informed. The call centre, which is the first point of contact for potential learners, now has all the necessary information about the courses and the procedures to apply for them. This is also consistent with the information in the brochure and on the provider's website. The provider works closely with the call centre and this is formalised through a formal agreement which is reviewed every three months. Monthly meetings take place to discuss any operational issues. Communication between the call centre at the council and the provider is now good.

There are closer links between the call centre and the provider with staff shadowing each other to promote a better understanding of the provision and the role of the call centre. Close links have been established to ensure effective use of information technology services. Feedback from learners about the content and availability of information on courses and enrolment is good.

Leadership and management

What progress has Somerset Skills and Learning made in collating, monitoring, analysing and acting upon key performance information on learners' attendance and progression rates? **Reasonable progress**

The previous inspection reported that success and retention rates were monitored regularly but information about learners' attendance and progression was not collated centrally. Individual tutors continue to monitor attendance and follow up non attendance on their own courses. The provider now records information about attendance on a central database, but this is not yet routinely analysed or used. Somerset Skills and Learning is currently working with another organisation to develop a useful reporting system.

The service has made good progress in gathering, analysing and using information on learners' progression across all provision and at individual curriculum level. For example, the provider has identified that progression rates from First Steps provision are not sufficiently high and that organisational changes could improve progression rates in courses leading to qualifications in employment. It has taken action to improve, which includes the development of a strategy for progression from First Steps provision and a better strategic linking of the organisation's skills and

foundation divisions to form clearer progressions routes. A progression route pathways map for each curriculum area is in the early stages of development and all course information sheets now include progression information.

<p>How much progress has Somerset Skills and Learning made in setting clear and measurable individual targets for staff to improve teaching and learning?</p>	<p>Significant progress</p>
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The previous inspection highlighted that action plans to improve the quality of teaching and learning sometimes lacked specific and measurable targets. The provider has made significant progress in improving the quality of action planning resulting from the observation of teaching and learning. The procedures for observing teaching and learning are well established and a moderation panel had just been set up at the time of the previous inspection. The moderation panel monitors action points identified during the observations of teaching and learning. These are checked at each review which takes place at six- to eight-weekly intervals. Action points are also checked at each annual review. Points for action are now more specific and individual targets are now measurable. They are used to good effect to improve the quality of teaching of individual members of staff. The observations of teaching and learning are used well in conjunction with performance management to provide good support for staff. The provider makes good use of peer observation.

The moderation panel has also used the action points well to identify common themes for improvement, both within and across curriculum areas. As a result, curriculum managers have provided training, such as in the use of information and communication technology within teaching. The proportion of sessions graded as good or above has increased steadily over the last three years.

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