

Norfolk County Council Adult Education Service

Follow-up re-inspection monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

This is the third re-inspection monitoring visit to Norfolk County Council Adult Education Service following publication of the inspection report on 9 March 2015, which found the provider to be inadequate overall.

Leadership and management were judged inadequate. Outcomes for learners and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment were judged to require improvement, as were the subject areas of foundation English and independent living and leisure skills. Sport was judged to be good.

Inspectors identified three themes at the initial monitoring meeting with the service in April 2015, including 'improvement in the quality of study programme'. Subsequent to a decision by the Education Funding Agency (EFA) to remove the service's contract for the 16 to 19 study programme, and its closure at the end of the 2014/15 academic year, this theme no longer features in this re-inspection monitoring report.

Themes

Improvement in leadership and management

Significant progress

Service managers continue to direct strategic and operational improvements in a methodical and ordered fashion. With support from elected members and senior officers, the service is being positioned such that it can respond to, and inform, wider county council priorities. Service managers have a realistic perspective of immediate challenges in relation to, for example, patterns of national and local funding. The conversion of selected courses to full-cost in the new year, designed to provide income to underpin other learning activities, illustrates this well. Much has been learned by managers from the reasons why the EFA removed the 16 to 19 study programme contract in the previous academic year.

Operational improvements are evident, such as online attendance records and a weekly performance management and quality improvement meeting to track progress against the service's action plan. Arrangements are now in place with an external adult guidance company to provide careers advice to learners, but contract monitoring is not yet secure.

It is taking time to finalise the structure of the senior management team due to an understandable desire to identify the most appropriate candidates through rigorous recruitment procedures. The introduction of new locality-based programme managers and a service-wide learning observation team is premised on enabling better collective working, staff taking individual responsibility, and facilitating internal challenge. It is too early to determine the effectiveness of these arrangements but

staff are largely positive and understand the need for change. Despite obvious progress, managers continue to recognise through the self-assessment process that, overall, the service still requires improvement.

Management actions focus well on improving the quality of teaching and learning. Incremental improvements are evident. Data are now available and used more effectively by managers and teachers. Their more robust monitoring is helping to inform classroom practice, tackle instances of lower attendance and identify patterns in course cancellations.

Particular attention has been given to sharpening the quality, impact and scope of classroom observations, primarily through a small team of observers. The recently introduced process is well conceived, identifies areas for improvement accurately and requires subject leaders to act on the findings. Observers read situations well in classrooms and workshops, and are unobtrusive and competent. Follow-up actions are prompt and include detailed and constructive feedback to teachers, mentoring, peer support or training. Re-observations are carried out to check progress. Teachers are largely welcoming of the new process as part of their professional development. A minority have rejected this level of scrutiny and opted to leave the service.

More broadly, opportunities for continuing professional development are being provided, with good take-up. Subject leaders are encouraged to create bespoke training opportunities and teacher networks, with the service's own cadre of outstanding teachers being drawn upon to provide peer support.

Taken together, the various actions by managers are timely and positive but their long-term impact is not yet evident. Headline data for 2014/15 for retention and achievement indicate an improving trend for adult learners. Apprenticeship success rates continue to be strong, but concerns remain about the retention and success rates in GCSE English and mathematics, which are below national rates.

Managers are receptive to the support provided by the adult education scrutiny group, but there is scope for it to be more challenging. Inconsistencies remain in the management of processes for learners with additional needs. Operational links between the service and its key community partners, such as children's centres, are not sufficiently secure.

Leaders and managers have moved quickly to meet expectations in respect of the Prevent duties. Training has been introduced for all service staff, with some teachers weaving related concepts and learning points into their lessons creatively.

Improvement in teaching, learning and assessment

Significant progress

In the small sample of sessions seen, the large majority of learners were progressing well. Learners in English and creative writing made good progress and were willing to contribute to the lesson through well-directed, teacher-led discussions. Entry-level learners on English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses were able to verbalise their thoughts well and demonstrated appropriate progress in their writing skills. In the better mathematics lessons, learners had quickly gained the confidence to assess their own work, noting the progress that they had made over a short period. They shared revision notes and clarified for each other their understanding of ratios and fractions. In a small minority of lessons, learners had a less positive experience and struggled to understand or contribute to group discussions. On such occasions teachers had failed to take sufficient account of their needs. Silversmithing learners learn good practical skills with many returning to gain a qualification.

A 'pocket puppet' family learning session had the hallmarks of effective adult learning. Numbers attending are consistently high. The apparently simple task of making a puppet for their children lent itself well to learners teaching each other sewing machine skills, creating puppet characters and sharing ideas. There was active involvement by a small number of fathers who commented positively on how they applied at home the art and craft skills they had learnt, enabling them to spend 'quality time' with their children.

The service is succeeding in attracting its target group of learners, often those with poor previous experiences of education, or seeking the qualifications needed to secure employment or gain promotion.

Generally, teachers prepared lessons well and used relevant materials matched to learners' levels. Their good subject knowledge enabled them to set informed questions and ensure a smooth transition to learner activities. Strong references to current news stories in the study of Shakespearean plays in English lessons added interest and relevance to the subject. Teachers made helpful links to the requirements of forthcoming examinations. Learners commented on the usefulness of detailed written feedback from tutors.

Managers are aware of the inconsistencies that still persist in the quality of teaching. In the weaker sessions, teachers failed to explain mathematical processes sufficiently to ensure understanding. They did not apply strategies to allow less confident or less accomplished learners to contribute to discussions. Too often they read directly from hand-outs and in such instances learners made, at best, adequate progress.

Learners who are receiving additional support are well served, primarily through learning support assistants. The results of assessments of learners' starting points are now used more effectively than previously. However, in a minority of instances, support needs are not identified or interventions poorly timed, with learners a long way through a course before receiving the help they needed. With few exceptions,

learners are appreciative of the individual reviews carried out by teachers, but these are not always completed in a timely manner.

Managers and teachers display a strong commitment to personalising learning as far as is practical and fully supporting students. Learner support is more responsive than in the recent past. The weaknesses which exist are often in relation to detail or to practitioners seeking to understand more about, and to refine, their practice. A continued focus, through professional development, has the potential to tackle these inconsistencies and develop further teachers' knowledge and skills.

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