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Mr Kevin Pearson
Principal Learning and Skills
Gateshead Council
Dryden Professional Centre
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Dear Mr Pearson

Short inspection of Gateshead Council

Following the short inspection on 2 and 3 March 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The inspection was the first short inspection carried out since the provider was judged to be good in October 2010.

This provider continues to be good.

- You and the leadership team have maintained a relentless focus on addressing the needs of the hardest-to-reach members of your local communities during a period of prolonged economic hardship. You have successfully reshaped and grown your provision through a significant expansion in the size of your employability programmes and the number of apprenticeships, study programmes and traineeships that you offer. As a result, you have increased the opportunities for young people and adults to develop the necessary skills and attributes to make them more employable and socially resilient.
- Senior directors within the local authority have supported you and your leadership team to be ambitious and take considered risks in shifting the strategic aims of the service towards becoming a significant provider of skills-based training in the area, while at the same time retaining your underlying commitment to equality of opportunity and access to learning for the most disadvantaged.

- You and your leadership team have successfully introduced and implemented a range of new programmes since the last inspection. You are now one of the largest local authority apprenticeship providers in the country, with an offer for all age groups, and at different levels, in a diverse range of employment sectors, ranging from health and social care to retail. Although the first year of the implementation of study programmes and traineeships was not successful, with too many young people leaving programmes early or failing to complete their qualifications, your decisive interventions have turned around these programmes, so that now many more learners are completing their qualifications and progressing into employment or apprenticeships. Across all of these programmes, learners develop good English and mathematics skills, with the great majority achieving qualifications in these subjects at higher levels than when they first entered the provision.
- Your community learning programme, on which half of your learners are enrolled, has been successfully adapted by managers to make it more focused on developing skills for employment or on providing learners with the knowledge and confidence to take up volunteering roles in the community. Your large family learning programme is now well integrated into the local schools' network, with many learners progressing to your burgeoning teaching assistants programme. Community learning is increasingly being used successfully for the most vulnerable unemployed young people and adults as a stepping stone to your formal employability provision.
- Although your last full inspection was over five years ago, during which time much has changed within the further education and skills context, you have successfully addressed the remaining relevant areas for improvement from your last inspection report. In particular, you have effectively transformed your system for observing teaching, learning and assessment so that it is now a powerful tool for quality improvement. At the same time, you have tightened up the arrangements for recording and measuring the progress and achievement of learners on your community learning programmes, with the result that you can have confidence in the very high success rates achieved by these learners.
- Through an inclusive and regularly updated self-assessment process, you and your leadership team have a good understanding of the strengths of your provision and the areas that need to be addressed. The resulting quality improvement plan is a living document that enables your senior managers to monitor the speed and effectiveness of improvement actions, as demonstrated by the successful way in which they intervened to turn around the failing traineeship programme. However, this level of understanding of the service's strengths and areas for development is not shared by the local authority's elected members, whose engagement with the service over the past few years has become more sporadic. As a result, they do not provide sufficient scrutiny and challenge to you and your leadership team.

Safeguarding is effective.

- The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and it takes appropriate actions to safeguard learners. Systems for recruiting and vetting staff are comprehensive, enforced and effective. All staff receive mandatory safeguarding training, appropriate to their level of responsibility in overseeing the safeguarding of learners. A well-designed induction programme for learners means that they have a good understanding of the full range of risks they are exposed to, and how and to whom they should report any concerns. Managers have developed specific induction programmes for disabled learners or those with learning difficulties and young people as they generate the majority of incident referrals. All incidents that are reported are dealt with promptly and appropriately by the designated safeguarding officers. However, there is no formal report that analyses the frequency and type of incidents in order to plan for appropriate interventions and support.
- The understanding of the Prevent duty among staff and learners is underdeveloped due to some confusion within the local authority as to who should take the lead in implementing the duty. As a result, only two thirds of staff have received the basic awareness training, and the promotion of British values in teaching and learning is inconsistent across the different curriculum areas.

Inspection findings

- The effectiveness of leadership and management is good. Senior directors within the local authority have empowered the leadership team of the learning and skills service to develop new programmes and to expand the provision. This was with the express aim of assisting the most disadvantaged and hard-to-reach learners to re-engage in learning as a way back into employment. Over the past two years, managers have increased the number of apprenticeships four-fold, with the great majority of these being taken up by unemployed young people. The proportion of learners who are unemployed or economically inactive now make up 70% of all learners enrolled on programmes compared with 45% at the time of the last inspection. Managers have designed a coherent progression pathway for these learners, with routes from non-accredited community learning, through employability programmes, traineeships and study programmes, to apprenticeships. The curriculum now matches the key growth areas in the regional economy, such as sales, retail, customer care and social care highly effectively. As a consequence, learners' progression into employment is outstanding.
- Despite the successful impact of this provision, and the support provided by senior directors, elected members do not provide sufficient scrutiny and challenge. Compared with previous years, elected members do not receive regular reports on the performance and quality of the provision, so governance at this level is ineffectual.

- After an inauspicious start, managers' implementation of both the study programmes and traineeships has been effective. In their first year, problems with retention and attendance, and the insufficient number of available work placements, resulted in too few young people completing their qualifications. Well-targeted and speedy interventions by managers now mean that current learners on these programmes, particularly traineeships, are making good progress, with the great majority on target to achieve their qualifications. Initial assessment has been improved, so learners are put on courses at the right level. Targeted support and better monitoring of attendance have addressed poor learner behaviour. Tutors are supported to make English and mathematics more vocationally relevant. The number and quality of work placements have been increased so that they now give learners a more productive experience. The pace of improvement has been slower on the longer study programmes, where insufficient monitoring of learners' short-term targets prevents them from making the necessary progress.
- The large and expanding apprenticeship programme is good. Apprentices' success rates within the planned timescale are good. Apprentices develop new skills very well. Both apprentices and employers can describe the development of significant vocational and personal skills, such as the use of phonics by apprentice teaching assistants and the analysis of spreadsheets in business administration. As a result, apprentices' employability is greatly enhanced, with progression into and within employment being good, and progression between intermediate and advanced levels being high. Apprentices are well supported by their assessors; they value their reviews, particularly for the quality of pastoral support they receive. Although managers and assessors have a good personal knowledge of their apprentices' progress, the current management information system fails to record progress accurately. Elements of the assessment process still require improvement. Assessment plans do not show how the tasks apprentices undertake will ensure that they will meet all the competencies within the framework. Assessors do not make sufficient use of intermediate targets to identify slow progress or support needs.
- The system for recognising and recording progress and achievement in community learning is effective. This was one of the main areas for improvement at the last inspection. Community learning still represents a significant proportion of the overall provision and community learners achieve very high success rates. There is now a clear and well-documented process in place for establishing learner targets and objectives and for recording progress across all programmes. Managers apply quality assurance and moderation procedures effectively, and there is good cross-referencing to the observation system to check that tutors are using these procedures appropriately. Initial assessment informs the development of comprehensive individual learning plans, which tutors adapt well to meet the range of different types of learners, such as disabled learners or those with learning difficulties. For the majority of learners, tutors set targets appropriately based on the starting points of individuals. However, for a minority of learners, targets remain too vague and do not offer them sufficient challenge.

- Since the last inspection, managers have radically overhauled the system for observing teaching, learning and assessment, turning what was an area for improvement into a strength. Observation reports now have a good focus on the impact of teaching on the progress of learners, rather than on teaching techniques as was the case previously. The action plans for the majority of reports have specific, measurable and time-bound targets that managers monitor effectively. All tutors and assessors receive support from a group of enthusiastic quality champions to implement their action plans. Information from action plans provides a key component of the performance management system, which managers use effectively to drive up standards. Apart from a small number of tutors and assessors who have been resistant to change, and have failed to benefit from the mentoring support offered, the great majority of teachers and assessors have improved their practice, as evidenced by the good standard of teaching, learning and assessment observed at inspection.
- The commissioning and monitoring of the performance of sub-contractors is effective. The commissioning of nine sub-contractors extends the reach of the service into specialist programme areas where it has no existing capacity, such as hairdressing and barbering, or to specific groups of learners. The staff of sub-contractors are well integrated into service-wide training, with the result that they deliver against consistent quality standards and objectives. Managers identify underperformance quickly, such as when one sub-contractor lost half of its apprentices due to early withdrawals, and put in place effective support arrangements to enable them to improve.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- success rates in study programmes and traineeships increase further by improving the effectiveness of monitoring and short-term target-setting to support achievement within the planned timescale
- all targets in individual learning plans in community learning are sufficiently challenging
- the planning of assessments in apprenticeship reviews are improved through the use of intermediate milestone targets against which the rate of progress can be measured more effectively
- the capture and use of data are more accurate so that data become an objective measure of the progress that apprentices make on their programmes
- the analysis and reporting of safeguarding incidents are formalised so as to improve the planning of support for vulnerable learners
- the implementation of the Prevent duty is accelerated, so that all tutors and assessors feel confident to identify and refer learners at risk of extremism and radicalisation, and to promote British values in the classroom and at reviews
- elected members are re-engaged in the governance of the service.

I am copying this letter to the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Charles Searle
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors were assisted by Principal of the Learning and Skills Service as nominee. Inspectors met with senior directors within the corporate directorate where the service is located. They held meetings with a range of service managers, tutors, assessors, apprentices, learners and employers. Inspectors carried out observations of teaching, learning and assessment, and conducted walk-throughs of courses to explore particular themes. They scrutinised learners' work and assessment records, and key documents relating to the service's strategy and implementation plans, self-assessment and improvement plans, and safeguarding records. Inspectors considered the views of learners through discussions during learning sessions visited and through responses received through Ofsted's online questionnaire.