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20 April 2016

Ms J Yandall  
Head of Investment and Employment  
Regeneration and Business Directorate  
Central Bedfordshire Council  
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SG17 5TQ

Dear Ms Yandall

### **Short inspection of Bedfordshire Adult Skills and Community Learning Service**

Following the short inspection on 14 and 15 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 June 2011.

#### **This provider continues to be good.**

Managers have fundamentally reviewed the service's learning programmes, commissioning arrangements and management structure over the last two years with a view to sharpening its focus on employment, work preparation and local regeneration. They have done this effectively, with the direction and planning of the service informed well by the local area economic strategy. Adult learning is a valued contributor to wider council economic objectives.

Targeted groups include learners from the most deprived areas across central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough, and those who are unemployed, economically inactive or have not attained a full level 2 qualification. You and your commissioned partners have succeeded in attracting and retaining this group of adult learners, many of whom display barriers to learning such as poor skills, low self-esteem and in some cases mental health issues. Learners comment positively on how tutors and support staff make them feel welcome, valued and therefore more likely to work towards positive outcomes. Overwhelmingly, learners enjoy their courses and customer satisfaction is high.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment remains good. At the last inspection it was reported that tutors plan their sessions well and take great care to meet the needs of each individual learner. This still remains the case, but some weaknesses in target setting for individual learners are still evident. Managers have good systems in place to review the quality of teaching and learning and work constructively with tutors and providers in this respect. All are keen to improve the quality of classroom practice and willingly consider and act on advice. More generally, the leadership team is analytical, objective and willing to take difficult decisions about, for example, commissioning or ceasing less effective programmes. There is scope, however, for the self-assessment process to be more evaluative. The team recognises that while outcomes in accredited courses are good, learners' progress and achievement in non-accredited provision requires improvement. Managers, working alongside employers, are thinking creatively about introducing new and different 'learning packages'.

The delivery of adult learning is through commissioned providers, alongside a small in-house team. Arrangements for contract management have evolved well in the recent years and service managers have a constructive relationship with all providers who themselves work collectively to identify gaps in provision and to improve processes. Scrutiny arrangements for the service operate well through an employment and skills improvement board, which has the advantage of broad council officer membership.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

Safeguarding arrangements are robust. Tutors are alert to particular safeguarding issues which vulnerable adults may encounter, such as in relation to domestic violence or mental health. Providers each follow their own safeguarding procedures but service managers record and take action on safeguarding referrals including standing down concerns when they have been dealt with. Managers draw readily on guidance from local authority safeguarding officers and access specialist training for tutors through the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Tutors make learners aware of how to stay safe online and whom to contact if they have any concerns. All local authority and provider staff have undertaken training in the 'Prevent' duty.

### **Inspection findings**

- Teaching, learning and assessment are good. Learners make good progress in improving their skills in information and communications technology and mathematics and skills for employment. They speak confidently of how they can apply these skills outside their sessions; for example, applying for jobs by email, using their mathematical skills to further their careers or supporting improvement in their children's learning. Learners enjoy the courses they undertake, with a few returning to act as volunteers or peer mentors. The standard of learners' work is appropriate and demonstrates how they have progressed.

- Attendance at the generally small group lessons is good. This allows for closer peer support and enables learners, often new to learning, to bond quickly as a group. Learners recognise and value their own personal development; in a mental well-being group one described the course as 'invaluable'.
- Tutors are aware of learners' starting points and plan their lessons appropriately. Their feedback to learners is, in the main, constructive and shows them how to improve. Occasional weaknesses in teaching include lack of challenge for most-able learners, learners' targets being too generic and teacher questioning not being directed to encompass all learners. These weaknesses result in learning not always being as effective as it could be.
- Tutors are adept at ensuring that often reluctant and nervous learners settle quickly. In such instances, learners value the support they receive from their tutors.
- Well-resourced work clubs enable job seekers to access good-quality advice and guidance. Assessment of learners' starting points is thorough and used well by tutors to identify next steps or refer job seekers to further training. Work supervisors are responsive to the needs of apprentices and intervene in a timely and sensitive manner to tackle any issues which apprentices may face before these manifest themselves as problems.
- Through the curriculum offer, teachers seek to promote learners' functional skills in areas such as mathematics but also through 'step into' courses, which have the added objective of introducing those who may be longer-term unemployed to sector areas such as health and social care, computing and enterprise. Frequent taster courses are offered in different careers that enable job seekers to explore which route is best for them. Discussions are taking place between managers and employers to devise new and different forms of employment-related learning, including recruitment and career fairs and work experience. Managers and providers are not, however, promoting or marketing programmes sufficiently well. In particular, council websites are not learner friendly.
- On 2014/15 accredited programmes, the proportion of adults achieving qualifications was high. All subject sector areas performed at, or above, national rates with the large majority of courses being well above national rates for similar providers. Learners' progress and achievement in non-accredited provision was, however, in need of improvement.
- A programme of lesson observations and tutor performance reviews is used to good effect by managers. External associates carry out classroom reviews and review the consistency of observations. This professional overview helps improve the quality of teaching and learning and has unearthed commonly occurring weaknesses in classroom practice, including in assessment and the best use of tutor questioning.
- Service managers monitor the performance of subcontracted providers well. They identify areas for improvement and track subsequent actions. Providers receive monthly data reports on learners' retention

and achievement and any relevant comments from customer-satisfaction surveys conducted by the service. Providers report that data has 'vastly improved' over the last two years. Service managers have a constructive relationship with providers, who work collectively to identify gaps and to improve processes such as progression, planning of provision and referral pathways. A provider network seeks to ensure that duplication is minimised and that provision is well targeted. Service managers and their partners are turning their attention to mapping and improving progression pathways for learners within and beyond the service. An in-house, direct-delivery team works collaboratively with providers and brings additional expertise to the service.

- Against this positive backdrop, the self-assessment document is insufficiently evaluative and targets for providers are not challenging enough. Moreover, processes and data recording in relation to destination data are weak.
- Commissioning arrangements are currently under review with managers receptive to making changes and improvements where needed. The review will sensibly extend to how other key departments and functions within the council including health, community safety and social landlords, can work in tandem with adult learning. Discussions also involve employers, with a view to matching provision with employer need.
- You have a clear focus on preparation for employment and are informed by the local area economic strategy. Adult learning forms a key element of the business and regeneration aspect of the council's work and is well integrated with wider council objectives.
- The distribution of adult learning opportunities is informed well by demography, local intelligence and other factors such as travel to work. There is, however, insufficient access by learners across both council areas to English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) provision both in terms of learners' general language needs but also as a necessary rung on the employment ladder.

### **Next steps for the provider**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- outcomes and success rates for learners undertaking non-accredited courses improve
- self-assessment processes become more evaluative and data better aligned to national rates to enable managers and tutors to identify more precisely where improvement is needed
- they consider the need for increased ESOL provision
- they adopt a more thorough approach to identifying and recording learners' destinations with a view to understanding better the impact of the service
- they improve the marketing and promotion of provision.

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

Tony Gallagher  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection we were assisted by your employment and skills service manager who acted as nominee. We held meetings with you and your management team as well as with council strategic managers and a cross-section of providers. We carried out visits across both council areas to observe the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, spoke with learners and reviewed their work. We also reviewed service documentation including your self-assessment report.