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Mr Barry Hughes
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Dear Mr Hughes

Short inspection of The Learning Curve

Following the short inspection on 8 and 9 June 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 2012.

This provider continues to be good

Since the previous inspection The Learning Curve has become part of the Selwood Housing Group while retaining its separate charitable status. The Learning Curve's stated purpose and Selwood Housing's mission are closely aligned; both organisations aim to improve the lives of people living in the areas they serve and both concentrate their services primarily in Wiltshire.

The Learning Curve continues to ensure that a high proportion of learners successfully complete their qualifications and develop their social and personal skills. Learners increase their ability to gain employment, develop their career or progress to further education as a result of their course.

The teachers at The Learning Curve continue to be appropriately qualified and experienced, although some need further support in developing their skills in promoting English and mathematics. Staff are skilled at supporting their vulnerable learners; they balance effectively the need to nurture their confidence and social and personal skills with challenging them to make rapid progress on their course.

The information, advice and guidance that learners receive continue to be relevant and appropriate. Learners are mostly on courses that meet their needs well,

although a few could be challenged further by being on a higher-level course, or are not yet ready for the challenges their course presents.

Staff are very good at promoting equality. They fully understand that many of their learners need to develop skills that allow them to work collaboratively and integrate these skills well into their programmes. By adhering to The Learning Curve's mission 'to provide accessible learning and guidance for socially and economically disadvantaged groups', they provide a welcoming and safe opportunity for people to return to education.

Safeguarding is effective

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and action is taken to safeguard learners. Staff and trustees are trained effectively and with appropriate regularity on safeguarding and the prevention of radicalisation and extremism. A senior leader has been designated and trained as the officer responsible for safeguarding. This person is supported well by a trustee and another member of staff who have received enhanced training on safeguarding. The Learning Curve responds well to concerns about safeguarding. For example, following concerns raised by staff about lone working, managers quickly provided the relevant staff with electronic alarm devices.

Learners told us that they feel safe when attending courses organised by The Learning Curve. They know to whom they should report any concerns and feel that teachers deal effectively with the concerns they raise. They are confident that teachers and staff provide them with good advice and support on how to deal with issues in their personal lives.

As a result of well-planned courses, teachers help learners develop effective strategies for working with others, and learners behave respectfully towards each other and staff. This is particularly evident on the Prince's Trust team programme that The Learning Curve runs for 16- to 25-year-old learners.

Inspection findings

- Since the previous inspection managers have maintained the high standards of provision and ensured that a high proportion of learners successfully complete their course. Many tutors evaluate the quality of their courses well and consider the effectiveness of their teaching on these courses. They are frequently helped to make improvements to their work through training or by learning from their colleagues.
- Senior leaders of Selwood Housing led the takeover of The Learning Curve in 2015 very well. They have stabilised the finances and produced a realistic, achievable strategic plan for the next five years. They have managed staff well during this period of change, and staff recognise the benefits the two organisations bring to each other. Senior leaders of Selwood Housing have worked hard to develop the knowledge of the further education sector necessary to provide strategic direction and have begun to work well with local stakeholders. The chief executive officer, for example,

has become the chair of Wiltshire Council's education, employment and skills board. New trustees of The Learning Curve bring a good range of skills and experience. Following a thorough induction, they are having an impact on holding managers to account.

- Senior leaders use a succinct, well-considered quality improvement plan effectively to monitor the impact of actions taken to improve learners' experiences. However, until very recently, their evaluation of the quality of provision has been fragmented and has not provided staff, trustees and stakeholders with a clear indication of the strengths and areas for improvement. As a result, reports to the trustees lack the depth and analysis they need to question managers and hold them to account for the quality of provision. A recently introduced policy for monitoring and improving quality forms a sound basis for bringing together the various monitoring processes. However, it does not express clearly how staff, learners and stakeholders will contribute to, and be informed of, the evaluation of the provision.
- Managers carry out appraisals of their teachers that evaluate their efficiency and professionalism well. However, appraisals do not focus sufficiently on evidence of the teachers' teaching and assessment and the impact teachers have on their learners. While many teachers undertake useful professional development, managers do not track this or fully evaluate the impact it has on the quality of provision for learners.
- Leaders have developed a clear vision for the future of The Learning Curve which closely aligns with the articles and purpose of Selwood Housing. They have successfully started to provide a wider range of courses to people in Wiltshire. For example, they are introducing apprenticeships where they benefit communities, and traineeships to bridge the gap between introductory courses and apprenticeships.
- Courses are well designed to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged members of the communities served by The Learning Curve. Many learners have not received education or training since leaving school with few qualifications. A very high proportion face many barriers to leading a stable life. The courses at The Learning Curve help them develop their confidence to continue in education or training, gain employment or make positive changes to their lives, such as securing housing or resolving family problems.
- The curriculum is well designed to make it as easy as possible for learners to join a course. Teachers are very skilled at encouraging learners and identifying how best to support each individual. Courses take place mostly in community-based venues that are easily accessible to learners. Managers and teachers use their links with other services and professionals well to make contact with, and support, people who may benefit from learning. For example, in some areas midwives and social workers work closely with The Learning Curve staff to encourage young pregnant women to take a course in effective parenting. In some areas, there is an increasing need for staff to develop partnerships to encourage young people who would benefit from training; this is particularly so where few referrals are made by general practitioners and cuts to social support services are reducing the availability of advice and guidance.

- In 2015/16 managers recognised that they needed to do more to help learners develop their English and mathematical skills. As a result, they have recently introduced functional skills courses in English and mathematics that use an effective mixture of online activities and group and individual tuition. Managers have not yet provided enough training for the staff to be fully confident to teach functional skills courses, and teachers of all subjects are not placing sufficient emphasis on developing learners' English and mathematics. While support for learners with learning difficulties and disability is effective and plentiful, support for those who speak English as an additional language is scant.
- Managers are beginning to use the newly established relationships with Selwood Housing well to identify tenants who would benefit from education or training. Several learners told us that it was only through information from Selwood Housing that they became aware of courses provided by The Learning Curve. For example, an officer of Selwood Housing noticed that a tenant found it difficult to complete a tenancy agreement. The officer was able to provide basic information about courses to the tenant and then refer the tenant to The Learning Curve.
- Managers have established a particularly successful partnership with the Prince's Trust to provide 12-week personal development programmes. These successfully improve the lives of many young people in Trowbridge and Salisbury who have achieved little educational success or who have become socially isolated. Through this programme learners become more confident and articulate, develop their ability to get on with others and begin to improve their employability skills, such as punctuality and reliability.
- All learners on subcontracted provision are on courses that lead to qualifications, and a very high proportion achieve them. Managers have designed provision which supports The Learning Curve's core purpose and targets disadvantaged, socially isolated and unemployed people. The needs of learners in these groups are met well through carefully chosen subcontractors from the voluntary sector who specialise in working in disadvantaged communities. Subcontractors collect the views of their learners well; many report that their course had a transformational effect on their lives.
- Since the previous inspection managers have reduced provision in the large number of subcontractors spread throughout the south-west of England as they focus their provision more effectively on West Wiltshire and nearby communities. The Learning Curve's strategic plan is to further reduce more distant subcontracted provision. Managers have increased the rigour of their scrutiny of subcontractors. However, they rely too heavily on infrequent visits and reports from subcontractors on outcomes, rather than assuring themselves of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and the progress of learners during their courses. Senior leaders are in the process of implementing clear standards for subcontractors, but the impact of these is not yet evident.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- establish a cycle of quality monitoring and improvement activities which ensure that staff, learners and stakeholders contribute to an evaluation of the quality of provision and that staff have a clear understanding of their role in making improvements
- increase the evaluation in appraisals of teachers' teaching and assessment practices, and the impact these have on learners, and ensure that the professional development teachers complete, and its impact, is evaluated
- develop partnerships with professionals in all communities to ensure that people who would benefit from training are aware of the opportunities offered by The Learning Curve
- develop teachers' abilities to use a wide range of teaching strategies for delivering functional skills courses in English and mathematics; ensure that teachers pay greater attention to developing learners' English and mathematical skills in all subjects and that learners whose first language is not English are given the support they need
- monitor closely the performance of learners and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in subcontractors to ensure that any risks of learners not achieving are identified early.

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

Steven Tucker
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection we were assisted by the head of Learning Curve operations as nominee. We met you and your senior leaders, teachers, other members of staff and two trustees. We visited lessons to collect information about learners' progress and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. We spoke to learners during lessons and in a meeting that you arranged. We reviewed key documents including those in which The Learning Curve's leaders evaluate the quality of provision and standards achieved, the provider's evidence of safeguarding and reports on learners' satisfaction with their course.