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Simon Leveaux
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Tower Hamlets Idea Store Learning
1 Gladstone Place
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Dear Mr Leveaux

Short inspection of Tower Hamlets Idea Store Learning

Following the short inspection on 1 and 2 November 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 March 2013.

This provider continues to be good.

Since your previous inspection, you have worked successfully with managers, staff and partners to make sure that the service continues to provide good learning experiences and opportunities to develop employment and social skills for residents and other users. Staff at all levels work hard to plan courses and lessons based on the needs and abilities of individuals and identified community groups. These play a good part in building learners' confidence and in helping them to engage with their communities, families and employers more productively. Learners and tutors work together well, resulting in teaching and course activities that are vibrant and engaging.

During the past two years, you have rationalised and clarified leadership roles and successfully established new service management and delivery structures. Programme managers and assistant programme managers understand their roles well and manage their provision and tutors effectively. Leaders and managers understand fully how well the wider Idea Store service meets local needs, know the quality of provision well, and know how well learners are progressing. You work well with the head of Idea Store and other council officers to bring together library, learning and other community provision.

Elected members visit Idea Store frequently and receive clear briefings on the strengths and weaknesses of provision. Councillors are highly supportive of the Idea Store concept and its development. The Idea Store concept and the adult learning aspects of the Idea Store operation play a central role in the delivery of the Tower Hamlets Partnership community plan. The Idea Store model is a successful one and the number of residents and other users who visit Idea Stores continues to grow

year on year. In order to reach communities better, a new Idea Store has been opened during the past three years, at Watney Market, and this received around 800,000 visitors in the first year of operation.

Idea Stores provide a focal point for the communities in which they are based, and users value highly the integration of adult learning, legal and housing advice, library, and work and performance spaces within each site. The Idea Stores are vibrant places where users can work independently or take part in formal classes. Learners enjoy visiting the Idea Stores and value very highly the safe, inclusive atmosphere of the centres. In community outreach venues, learners feel similarly safe and welcome and they enjoy learning in venues that are conveniently situated.

The very large majority of learners make good progress on their courses and achieve their learning goals or their intended qualifications, and many move on successfully to higher level courses or into employment. Many learners are able to play a more active part in their communities by using English, communication and other skills developed on courses. Learners involved with family learning are able to assist their children more effectively with schoolwork and communicate more confidently and productively with their children's schools. A good proportion of learners develop employment skills that allow them to gain jobs or to begin earning an income from craft or other practical activities.

Teaching, learning and assessment are of a high standard and learners enjoy the challenging and engaging lessons they attend. Staff in all settings work hard to make sure that teaching is well planned and stimulating, and they ensure that learners become fully involved in activities that are relevant and well paced. During our visit, inspectors noted that punctuality and attendance were good on Idea Store Learning courses, but less good on the minority of outreach courses in community settings. This appears to be a pattern confirmed by attendance data.

Senior leaders, managers and elected members know the provision well. Leaders recognise that while Idea Store Learning remains a good and improving provider, further work is required for it to become outstanding. You have made good progress in dealing successfully with most of the recommendations made in your previous inspection report of 2013 and you have maintained strengths in the provision.

However, the low attendance on community outreach provision, and your lack of success in attracting men to the provision, continue to slow your journey towards being an outstanding provider. Outreach courses make up a small proportion of the service's provision. Nonetheless, you, your managers and your community partners are clear that such courses are important in providing learning opportunities for many of the hardest-to-reach groups in the borough and for those who may lack confidence to attend an Idea Store or other, more formal setting. You must continue working to raise teachers' expectations for good attendance and continue implementing the follow-up procedures for those who do not attend sessions so that the learners for whom these courses exist may take their first steps towards engaging fully with the service's broader curriculum offer.

You are currently planning an expanded apprenticeship offer, but taking thoughtful steps to understand and meet the requirements of the new apprenticeship frameworks and standards, and the commissioning processes, before beginning expansion. A suitably broad apprenticeship offer, with clear pre-apprenticeship entry routes, will help you meet the needs of employers and those young adults in the borough seeking vocational training.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders maintain safeguarding arrangements that successfully promote learners' safety, health and well-being, and these arrangements integrate well with wider borough plans expressed through the 2015 community plan. Leaders, managers and teachers work successfully to make sure that learners consider their own safety and well-being alongside those of the Idea Store community and the wider Tower Hamlets communities, to promote tolerance, awareness and understanding of diversity.

All staff complete appropriate safeguarding training, and many take training courses in a good range of connected topics. Learners and teachers pay careful attention to health and safety, and induction in these topics and in broader safeguarding matters is thorough. Learners are able to explain confidently how they stay safe in learning venues and online, including by avoiding the dangers of radicalisation and extremism.

Staff ensure that British values are embedded into the core values of the Idea Stores and clearly posted throughout the centres, with an atmosphere of mutual respect being evident across all provision. Learners are expected to, and do, adhere to the well-established and well-promoted classroom rules. Across all venues, learners respect each other, and report that they feel safe. Teachers are adept at integrating British values and information about ways to avoid the dangers of extremism and radicalisation into lessons naturally. Learners showed confidence and a good understanding of the democratic processes of British society.

Inspection findings

- The diversity of learners' backgrounds and experiences is celebrated and shared well within lessons, and often forms the basis of activities or projects for learning. For example, in creative arts courses, the artwork that learners create frequently draws on their backgrounds, experiences, interests and motivations. Across English and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes, all learners are encouraged to speak in English in the classroom to ensure that lessons are inclusive and can involve all members of the group. Teachers are effective in using the diverse experiences and backgrounds of learners to inform the planning process and lead stimulating lesson content with high levels of engagement and participation.

- Managers have focused staff development activities since the previous inspection on valuing diversity and creating resources that encourage learners to explore their backgrounds and experiences in productive and positive ways. A good range of extra-curricular activities and projects draw on learners' experiences to develop skills further, for example the very successful 'Write Idea' creative writing competitions for ESOL learners, and the volunteer-run 'speaking English with confidence' clubs. However, the majority of staff make very little use of the service's virtual learning environment (VLE) to share good practice and resources, or to work with learners outside lessons. Most staff find the current VLE cumbersome, but would welcome opportunities to use online learning platforms where they would enable better communications between tutors and learners.
- Attendance across the provision has improved since the previous inspection and is currently high at around 90% overall. Strategies put in place by managers to focus on improvements in punctuality and attendance have affected the classroom practice of teachers positively, most of whom enforce high expectations around attendance and punctuality. However, although attendance and punctuality are now good in Idea Store lessons, attendance is still low in a minority of the outreach venues. The vast majority of learners appreciate that these aspects are monitored and understand that their progress depends on good attendance and punctuality. Learners who aspire to progress from non-accredited to accredited courses must demonstrate good attendance as part of their entry criteria to the higher level courses. The majority of learners also appreciate that poor attendance and punctuality have a detrimental impact on the experience and progress of others.
- Programme managers and assistant programme managers are clear about the role they play in the self-assessment process and understand the benefits of rigorous and realistic self-assessment. The self-assessment process is effective and, at curriculum level, reporting reflects teachers' experiences. They appreciate the fact that managers use self-assessment to drive improvements in teaching and learning. They also value the ways in which self-assessment helps them develop as practitioners; they view it as a constructive tool to improve the learning experience, reflect on improvements and enhance the quality of classroom delivery. Teachers are well aware of targets in the quality improvement plan and understand where these originate. In partnership with the borough senior leadership team, the Idea Store Learning self-assessment report is subject to thorough scrutiny by the Mayor's advisory board to ensure that provision meets residents' needs.
- The planning of learning is detailed and thorough, and learning activities reflect the outcomes of assessment of learners' starting points, experiences and abilities, including their own assessment of their existing skills and confidence levels. Teachers use personal goal-setting, mid-point reviews and continuous progress tracking effectively to boost learners' confidence levels and motivate them to aim for study at higher levels. Contributions from learners are varied and vibrant, and demonstrate their high levels of enjoyment of classes. However, the coaching of presentation skills requires improvement in a minority of classes where learners struggle to express themselves clearly and confidently on a range of topics.

- Learners develop good transferable employment and life skills to help them prepare for employment and life in modern Britain. Teachers help learners to develop skills that have relevance to both their social and economic lives. For example, teachers in creative arts lessons focus well on developing communication skills in addition to art and creative skills. In other craft classes, for example, learners' improved sewing machine and self-employment skills have helped their future employment prospects. In ESOL classes and outreach classes, a good range of skills development activities helps learners prepare for employment, or to manage their money or their family budget better. For example, in one community learning course, teachers helped learners to develop their numeracy skills to understand pricing and the mathematics of bargain offers in shops; as a result, the learners feel more confident when shopping and are able to make shrewder purchases.
- Partnership working remains strong, with tangible benefits for a good range of community groups. You and your managers and teachers engage widely with local community groups and with third-sector organisations to provide bespoke courses for learners and groups with particular needs that are not met elsewhere in the borough. For example, work with the Tower Project community organisation has led to a bespoke apprenticeship which was devised and validated for those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. This apprenticeship at entry level and level 1 is now widely used across the country by a range of specialist providers for those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The service continues to apply a balanced and needs-focused fees policy, which benefits those in most need in the borough.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- levels of attendance in outreach classes are raised by applying successful strategies from Idea Store provision to outreach provision
- measures are introduced to increase participation in learning by men
- apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship provision is developed further to meet the needs and aspirations of those who are least economically active in the borough
- effective steps are taken to improve the usefulness and usage of the virtual learning environment for tutors and learners, drawing on best practice in a minority of subject areas.

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

Yours sincerely

Dr Richard Beynon
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two Ofsted Inspectors visited the service for two days. The head of business, information communication technology, languages, health and fitness assisted inspectors as nominee. We met with you and with the head of Idea Store, with other senior leaders, programme managers and assistant programme managers, and with a range of tutors and learners. We spoke with the elected member with responsibility for employability, with partners and others who engage with the service. Inspectors observed teaching, learning and assessment, and reviewed learners' written work. We reviewed key service policies and documents, including those relating to self-assessment, performance and safeguarding. We also considered the views of learners.