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Mr Anthony Baines
County Commissioner for Skills and Employability
Staffordshire County Council
Wedgewood Building, Tipping St
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Dear Mr Baines

Short inspection of Staffordshire County Council

Following the short inspection on 27–28 February 2017, 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 November 2012.

This provider continues to be good.

Since the previous inspection, your skills and employability team, supported by active and well-informed senior council officers, have instilled, in staff and learners, a clear strategic vision for adult learning that focuses specifically on combating social exclusion, promoting employability and contributing to the health and well-being of the residents of Staffordshire. As a consequence, the service offers a range of accessible provision that is very clearly aligned with the council's strategic objective of meeting effectively the needs of the diverse communities that reside in the county.

Curriculum planning reflects your commitment to providing a high-quality offer that provides well-designed and effectively targeted short courses and apprenticeships to improve the employment prospects and life chances of residents across the eight regions of the county. Managers have maintained highly productive relationships with a wide range of carefully commissioned subcontractors to reach the most disadvantaged and marginalised residents in the county, including those referred by the Job Centre for employability training, learners with severe and complex needs and people recovering from serious medical conditions.

You and your managers have made good progress in maintaining the high standards of adult learning and apprenticeship provision found at the previous inspection and successfully tackled the most significant weaknesses. Robust performance management, together with accurate and honest self-assessment, have helped you to manage and support effectively underperforming staff and the

few weak subcontractors. As a result, teaching, learning and assessment continue to be very effective in helping learners to progress and achieve.

Your decision to reduce the volume of leisure learning has resulted in a curriculum that contributes to improving life chances through promoting skills necessary for sustained employment. The very large majority of learners achieve their learning aims and progress to further courses, or into jobs or voluntary work. Outcomes for apprentices and for learners on the few courses that lead to a qualification are good, though you acknowledge they still need to improve further on a very small number of courses.

Lessons are lively and engaging. Teachers prepare learning sessions well and make good use of a wide range of accessible and well-designed learning resources and materials. Teachers are well qualified and have appropriately high expectations of their learners, regardless of educational attainment, or social or cultural heritage. As a result, learners make good progress and achieve their learning objectives. In a very few classes however, teachers do not consistently provide sufficient challenge to most-able learners, resulting in these learners becoming demotivated.

You provide a range of welcoming and safe learning environments across the county in schools, children's centres and community venues. Learners' behaviour in class and in communal areas is good. They gain good social and personal skills, such as in communication and team-working. Many report improved confidence in helping their children with school work, communicating with teachers and other authority figures, and participating in voluntary and community work.

Safeguarding is effective.

Managers responsible for safeguarding are clear about their responsibilities and they have established effective practices for safeguarding learners. Teachers are confident in referring potential concerns to the service's two designated safeguarding leads, who investigate and record each case thoroughly. Managers have established good relationships with relevant agencies to ensure that they have suitable points of referral for those learners who need further help.

Senior leaders and managers have taken effective action to ensure that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that learners are safe at the venues that the service uses. Learners report that they feel safe and that the service values and nurtures respect for their well-being.

Managers responsible for recruitment apply robust selection processes to ensure learners' safety. All new members of staff, including those working for subcontractors, have appropriate background checks where their roles warrant this.

Managers are aware of the progress of learners made vulnerable by their circumstances, including those with health concerns and learners who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. They ensure that effective arrangements are in place to keep these learners safe and help them to achieve.

Managers have implemented their obligations under the 'Prevent' duty well, with effective and regularly updated staff training. Teachers integrate themes promoting British values well during learning sessions, where appropriate. Learners are able to articulate clearly their understanding of 'Prevent' and of British values. They can explain the risks of radicalisation and know how to keep themselves safe from the dangers of extremism.

Inspection findings

- Senior council officers have articulated a very clear strategy that has resulted in the provision of coherent pathways that enable vulnerable learners to progress and succeed. As a result, the large majority of learners continue into further learning, with significant numbers of these disadvantaged learners taking up voluntary work or paid employment.
- Leaders plan provision effectively in response to the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Board's strategic priorities. Provision commissioned through subcontractors offers a targeted curriculum that meets the needs of identified priority groups, such as adults with low educational attainment, jobseekers and those with low English, mathematics and information technology skills.
- Senior leaders, including at cabinet level, use performance data very effectively. As a result, they are able to evaluate accurately improvements in achievement, the engagement of target groups in learning, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and improvements in health and well-being.
- Senior leaders have very high expectations of the subcontractors who they commission to deliver services. They have developed a highly effective framework for monitoring and assessing the quality of delivery across the range of subcontractors. Leaders take swift and effective improvement actions where they identify dips in performance. In a very few cases, subcontractors do not receive sufficiently clear guidance about what they need to do to improve, which results in these providers making improvements too slowly.
- Service managers provide very good support for subcontractors, particularly in helping to disseminate best practice in teaching, learning and assessment. They provide high-quality professional development opportunities and regular provider updates, for example in relation to safeguarding matters or curriculum developments, at subcontractor network meetings. Managers use the results of observations of teaching and learning, in subcontractors, to help teachers continually improve and to support accurate and detailed self-assessment judgements about the quality of provision.
- The development of learners' English and mathematics is good, particularly in family learning sessions. Learners improve and develop good speaking and listening skills and understand the importance of these skills when communicating with their children. Most apprentices achieve well in their English and mathematics functional skills tests and are able to apply these skills well in the workplace. However, apprentices' achievements in information and

communication technology at level 1 and mathematics at level 2 require improvement.

- Achievements on accredited courses in English for speakers of other languages are high. Your managers have provided good-quality professional development activities to support teachers to integrate these skills within the curriculum. As a result, learners develop well their ability to use English to communicate effectively both verbally and in writing.
- On courses that do not lead to an external qualification, most teachers make good use of individual learning plans to help learners record their progress and achievement compared with their starting points. Teachers and learners carefully record learning aims and objectives at the start of each course so that learners are able to record their learning journey. Most learners are able to articulate the progress they have made and can clearly say what they can now do that they were unable to do previously. In a small minority of lessons, targets for learners are insufficiently individualised and learners do not fully understand their relevance or suitability.
- Learners benefit from good teaching and learning, resulting in them developing a wide range of skills that improve their prospects of employment or further learning. Teachers plan lessons well and use strategies that engage and motivate the majority of learners. In family learning classes, learners develop strategies to improve their children's negative behaviour, as well as developing social skills and increasing self-esteem.
- The standard of learners' work in practical lessons is good, and learners are proud of their achievements. In a sewing class, learners produced work to commercial standards, which prepared them well for progression to an accredited course. In another class, for learners recovering from a stroke, the teacher had devised a practical activity that learners with limited movement could successfully complete.
- Learners receive constructive written feedback on their work, which helps them understand how to improve further. Teachers provide good verbal feedback in lessons and help learners to improve their understanding of technical terms.
- Self-assessment is an inclusive and rigorous process. Your managers make good use of performance data and feedback from learners and subcontractors to support judgements about the quality of provision. In a few instances, judgements are overly self-critical, often identifying as weaknesses matters which can be resolved relatively quickly or giving disproportionate weighting to underperformance by a small cohort of learners.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- The quality of teaching and learning continues to improve by ensuring that:
 - all learners receive clear and relevant individualised targets which should be regularly monitored, so that they have a better understanding of their progress

and achievement

- teachers provide sufficiently challenging activities for the most able learners in their classes, so that these learners continue to remain engaged and motivated to learn.
- Managers take swift actions to tackle the lower achievement on a small number of courses leading to a qualification and for apprentices taking external tests in mathematics and information and communication technology.
- Managers provide any subcontractor identified as causing concern in relation to their quality of provision with clear guidance about what they need to do to improve.

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

Jai Sharda
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Ofsted inspectors, assisted by your quality and performance manager as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors took account of your most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and meetings with subcontractors to gather the views of learners and employers. They observed learning sessions and reviewed key documents including those related to safeguarding, learners' achievements and progression.