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Mr David Lee
Delivery and Performance Manager
Learning Delivery Team and Learning Support Team
Adult Learning and Skills Service
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Dear Mr Lee

Short inspection of Durham County Council

Following the short inspection on 1 and 2 May 2018, 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 January 2015.

This provider continues to be good.

Over the past year, you and your senior management team have responded successfully to a series of changes to the Adult Learning and Skills Service (ALSS) while retaining your determined focus on improving the quality of your provision. You have aligned yourselves more closely with the local authority's priorities to promote economic development and to combat poverty. A new and committed portfolio holder has been appointed to oversee the direction and progress of the service. An external partnership board, made up of influential stakeholders, has been established to provide greater scrutiny and challenge in relation to your service's performance. More recently, you have restructured your senior management team and made appointments to key positions in the service, giving you greater capacity and expertise to quicken the pace of improvement.

The portfolio holder and senior leaders in the directorate support you energetically in your work with strategic partners to develop a curriculum that meets the needs of the most economically disadvantaged and vulnerable residents in the county. You are expanding the number of internships available to young adults with high needs and broadening the range of apprenticeships funded through the local authority's levy. You continue to build the capacity of voluntary and community sector organisations, which deliver a high proportion of your subcontracted provision, to engage in learning adults from the most marginalised social groups.

You and your senior managers are honest and self-critical about the strengths and weaknesses of your provision. You are aware that you have addressed successfully the majority of the areas for improvement from the previous inspection, but you also know that you need to improve further the quality of your teaching, learning and assessment so that it becomes excellent.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding arrangements are effective, and ensure that learners and apprentices are safe.

The recently appointed designated safeguarding lead officers have been highly effective in updating the service's policies and procedures. They have injected a sense of urgency among staff who work on directly delivered provision and among subcontractors about the centrality of safeguarding to all their activities. They have replaced the previous set of generic policies and procedures that applied across the whole of the local authority with ones that are designed specifically for the service's model of delivery. As a result, there is now a much greater focus on how effectively the 24 subcontracted providers ensure that their apprentices and learners are kept safe.

Managers maintain an accurate and up-to-date central record of all staff, including those at subcontractors. There are no gaps in disclosure checks, recruitment records, or mandatory safeguarding training. Subcontractors submit a monthly contract review report to the service, which contains a standard section on safeguarding. Managers are quick to follow up any issues that emerge from these reports, such as reported incidents or an impending disclosure check renewal date. Failure to return a safeguarding report immediately places the subcontractor in the highest risk category, resulting in swift management intervention. Managers carry out thorough and regularly updated health and safety risk assessments on the more than 100 outreach venues that the service uses, with additional assessments for specific types of learning activity.

Inspection findings

- Managers have tackled successfully the causes behind the decline in the overall achievement rates in 2016/17 of apprentices and of adult learners on health and social care and business management courses. This decline followed successive years of high and improving achievement rates for apprentices and learners. It was largely due to weak oversight of the introduction of a new management information system in the middle of 2016/17. This resulted in a number of qualification completions not being recorded on the system before the end of the year. Additionally, managers failed to identify and intervene quickly enough with the one subcontractor delivering apprenticeships when the number of withdrawals from programmes started to increase.
- Staff are now properly trained and adept at using the new management information system. Performance management of the one remaining

subcontractor delivering apprenticeships has been strengthened. As a result, the number of withdrawals has reduced, and the achievement rate for apprentices who have completed their programmes so far in 2017/18 is higher than at this time last year. The progress of apprentices on the directly delivered provision is good, with managers tracking and monitoring apprentices' progress effectively. The great majority of these apprentices develop new skills and knowledge that improves their performance at work, much of which involves dealing with the public in various local government settings, such as libraries, family centres and schools. The proportion of current adult learners remaining on health and social care and business management programmes is higher than at the same time last year.

- The management of subcontractors was found to be effective at the previous inspection. It has been strengthened further since then. Although subcontractors now deliver a smaller proportion of the provision than they did at the time of the previous inspection, it remains substantial. Managers introduced a number of changes to their approach to contract management at the beginning of this academic year to improve its effectiveness. Along with an increase in the frequency of reporting, managers now assign a greater weighting to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment when they determine the risk rating of subcontractors. This is further supported by a moderation process that ensures greater consistency in contract managers' evaluations, and action planning that focuses on improving further the stronger aspects of subcontractors' activity as well as tackling weaknesses. As a result of these changes, managers are now quicker to intervene when a subcontractor's performance dips, and they do not flinch from taking hard decisions to suspend or terminate contracts when needed. Overall, the achievement rate for learners at subcontractors remains higher than for those on directly delivered courses.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment has improved since the previous inspection. On adult learning courses, tutors now set clearer targets for learners that enable them to develop the vocational and social skills they need in different aspects of their lives. For example, learners develop their ability to apply for jobs online and to respond confidently to job interview questions. They record the development of their skills in their individual learning plans and learning logs more regularly than they did at the time of the previous inspection.
- Too many tutors still do not use the information that they gather on learners' prior attainment and experience at the start of courses to plan and deliver activities to enable learners of varying abilities to progress as far and as fast as they can. Quality audits of teaching, learning and assessment have not identified this area of improvement clearly enough to enable managers to intervene when needed; therefore, it keeps recurring.
- Highly qualified staff provide effective and impartial information, advice and guidance to adult learners prior to their enrolment on courses. This ensures that learners are on the right course at the right level. As a result, the proportion of learners who complete their courses is very high. Information, advice and guidance given to learners during and at the end of their courses are not as effective. Managers rely on tutors, rather than the qualified guidance staff, to provide information and advice to learners about their next steps. Consequently,

the proportion of adult learners who progress onto higher level qualifications with ALSS is too low.

- Careers advice for the very small number of learners with high needs is an integral part of their education, health and care (EHC) plan. Information, advice and guidance staff play a full part in all EHC plan reviews, ensuring that learners with high needs are prepared well for their next step into independent adulthood.
- At the time of the previous inspection, managers had not developed a written policy or set of procedures to address the recently introduced 'Prevent' duty, although they had started to train staff in how to identify those at risk of radicalisation and extremism and how to refer any concerns. Managers now have a well-established 'Prevent' duty risk assessment and action plan that reflect the specific model of ALSS's delivery, with its heavy reliance on subcontractors, and the demographic make-up of its mixed urban and rural communities. Managers have invested considerably in staff development to enable tutors to integrate topics about the risks of radicalisation and extremism into their teaching. They have also developed a range of materials for learners and apprentices to use at induction and reviews to make them aware of the risks. Despite these concerted efforts, teaching staff do not yet feel confident in broaching what they see as a contentious subject with their learners and apprentices. As a result, learners and apprentices' grasp of these risks is very shallow, and they cannot see what relevance they have to their daily lives.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- tutors routinely identify the prior attainment, skills and experience of adult learners so that they can better plan and deliver teaching, learning and assessment to enable all groups of learners to achieve their full potential
- staff with responsibility for the quality assurance of adult learning programmes identify all areas for improvement in a timely way so they can be tackled more effectively
- effective and accessible information, advice and guidance is available to adult learners at different stages on their courses to increase their opportunities to progress to higher-level qualifications
- managers increase the support that they give to all staff to enable them to feel more confident and empowered to discuss issues surrounding the risks of radicalisation and extremism with each other and with learners.

I am copying this letter to the Education and Skills 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 the delivery and performance manager, as nominee. They held meetings with a range of managers, tutors, assessors, learners and employers. Inspectors carried out observations of teaching, learning and assessment, and conducted walk-through observations of courses to explore particular themes. They scrutinised learners' work and assessment records and key documents relating to the provider's strategy and implementation plans, self-assessment and improvement plans, and safeguarding records. Inspectors considered the views of learners through discussions during the learning sessions they visited.