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Mr Craig Taylor  
Adult Learning and Skills Manager  
Stockton Council Learning and Skills Service  
Billingham Community Centre  
The Causeway  
Billingham  
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Dear Mr Taylor

### **Short inspection of Stockton Council Learning and Skills Service**

Following the short inspection on 5 and 6 June 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 June 2014.

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

Since the previous inspection, leaders and managers have worked effectively to ensure that learners continue to benefit from a good standard of education and training. New governance arrangements, recent management restructuring and the appointment of a new manager for the service have resulted in the establishment of a cohesive and committed team. Leaders, managers and staff are ambitious for their learners and their community. They work effectively with a broad range of partners, including Jobcentre Plus, the National Careers Service and voluntary sector organisations, to ensure that the curriculum meets the diverse needs of their locality. Consequently, individuals, including those in the most disadvantaged wards, are able to learn new skills, increase their prospects of employment and improve their quality of life through learning and communicating with others.

Leaders ensure that their self-assessment process and subsequent action plans usefully inform their improvement work and effectively address any dips in performance. For example, following a decline in the number of learners aged 16 to 18 achieving their qualifications, leaders worked with a local provider to transfer young people on study programmes to more suitable and successful provision. Managers use a wide and appropriate range of evidence to evaluate the quality of the provision. Staff at all levels understand the resulting self-assessment report and have the opportunity to challenge and discuss the findings. As a result, they are clear about what is good and what needs to improve. The manager of the service has strengthened the quality improvement process through regular termly reviews. Staff and governors receive reports following these reviews to keep themselves fully

aware of progress against performance targets within the year. The most recent outcome of this process is an 'apprenticeship rapid action plan' that is accurate, concise and focused on improving the current performance of the apprenticeship provision. The impact of this work is starting to be demonstrated through the robust day-to-day scrutiny of the work carried out by the team of assessors and through the increased involvement of employers in the review of apprentices' work.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

Leaders and managers have maintained effective arrangements for safeguarding their learners since the previous inspection. In the event of any safeguarding concerns, staff and managers are confident and able to take appropriate action. They keep secure, accurate records and monitor issues to full resolution within suitable time frames.

Staff work with a wide range of external partners to ensure that learners know how to access external services for a range of issues that they may encounter, including, for example, mental health, well-being, bereavement and debt management.

Staff receive regular training on safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty. Tutors use carefully prepared booklets and posters to promote effective learning. They reinforce these important messages during induction and teaching sessions to ensure that learners understand the full range of safeguarding themes. For example, learners attending a community interpreting course were encouraged to talk about managing stress and the impact of stress on their lives and learning. Additionally, during induction, staff ask learners questions and encourage lively debate about issues regarding their personal safety. These contributions include health and safety at work and the expectations and consequences of appropriate behaviour and positive attitudes in the workplace. As a result, learners feel safe and know who to contact if they need help.

### **Inspection findings**

- Since the previous inspection, leaders have aligned their curriculum to the priorities of the Tees Valley Combined Authority and Stockton Borough Council. They have maintained the service's strong performance, as measured by the proportion of adults achieving their intended outcomes and qualifications. Leaders recognise that, although the proportion of apprentices achieving their qualifications is improving over time, it is not yet high enough. They have taken purposeful action to improve the provision, including the appointment of a new lead manager for apprenticeships. Their work is beginning to demonstrate its effectiveness through the improved progress of current apprentices.
- Managers have ensured that arrangements for the observation of teaching, learning and assessment are well established and understood by staff. Those who carry out observations are broadly accurate in their evaluations. However, a minority of observations do not focus sufficiently on the progress of learners. This reduces the impact of the subsequent improvement feedback to teachers. One-to-one mentoring is available to staff when necessary, and staff have access to

regular training and peer support to improve their practice.

- Leaders' and managers' actions to increase the proportion of learners from the most deprived wards in the borough have been successful. Last year, the majority of learners came from these wards, with the large majority of these learners progressing to further learning, volunteering or employment. This year, the proportion of learners from the most deprived wards has increased again. Leaders rightly see this work as a key contributor in meeting the strategic ambitions of the council and combined authority to improve employment and increase economic activity.
- Staff ensure that learners make at least the expected progress in their learning. In most lessons, learners are able to demonstrate the development of new skills in line with planned learning outcomes. Tutors use weekly learning logs effectively to evaluate individual progress and set realistic targets for the next steps in learning. However, in a small minority of lessons, tutors do not provide sufficiently challenging activities to extend learning for the most able.
- Learners enrolled on functional skills information and communication technology courses make good use of a virtual learning environment (VLE). They are able to access work they may have missed or need to practise further. They also use the VLE well to help with revision in preparation for examinations.
- Staff take positive action to ensure that learners with barriers to their learning and those who have had poor prior experiences become increasingly confident about their futures. The range of courses on offer focus closely on the development of plans relating to learners' progression to further training or employment. For example, 'Amazing You' and 'Man Made' are two successful programmes that develop the health, well-being and confidence of individuals through a series of interactive lessons and visits.
- The large majority of tutors make effective use of assessment information about learners' starting points to devise appropriate individual learning goals. They are adept at ensuring that learning is relevant and stimulating. However, for a very small minority of learners on functional skills courses, this assessment is not used well enough to ensure that learners have programmes that build on their existing skills.
- Most tutors use questioning well to encourage learners to make contributions to lessons. When this is most effective, learners draw on their own experiences to inform their peers. For example, in food hygiene and community interpreting lessons, learners are encouraged to relate anecdotes about their experiences to enliven whole-class discussions. In a small minority of lessons, tutors do not include all learners in question and answer sessions. This means that, in these lessons, discussions only include the more vocal learners and the tutor gains only a limited understanding of the learning that has taken place.
- Tutors provide useful feedback to learners that helps them to improve. For example, learners on courses in English for speakers of other languages benefit from effective help in the pronunciation of difficult or uncommon words. Tutors and assessors mark learners' work regularly and give appropriate feedback. This enables most learners to make at least expected progress. However, not enough

tutors challenge the most able learners to excel beyond the level of their qualification.

- Leaders and managers have a strong focus on improving the quality of their apprenticeship provision. They have a clear and detailed action plan in place to drive improvement. The manager of the service is rigorous in monitoring actions towards achieving the plan. Governors receive regular updates regarding the progress that the team is making in improving the provision. As a result, managers know that current apprentices are making better progress towards achieving their qualifications than in previous years.
- Leaders and managers have not ensured that all employers who take on apprentices are sufficiently well informed about all aspects of the apprenticeship programme. However, they have started to take action to address this shortcoming. Increasingly, they are working to make sure that they improve employers' involvement in providing high-quality learning opportunities and their contribution to the review of apprentices' progress.
- Learners receive a good range of independent careers advice and guidance. Managers have ensured that those learners studying on employability programmes receive appropriate advice from the National Careers Service as part of their course.
- Leaders rightly identify the need for the implementation of a new careers education, information and advice guidance strategy. Managers have begun work to ensure that staff increase the amount of advice and guidance at the end of all learning programmes. They are committed to providing all learners with a 'next steps' plan so that learners are fully aware of the opportunities available to them for progression to higher-level and accredited learning, volunteering or employment.

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

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- issues of underperformance in apprenticeship provision, particularly for apprentices aged 16 to 18, are resolved through continuing to carry out rigorous monitoring of assessors' performance and apprentices' progress
- employers receive sufficient information about their role in providing a good-quality apprenticeship programme, including off-the-job training and involvement in reviewing their apprentices' progress
- the focus for evaluating the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is on its impact on learners' progress
- all tutors make frequent checks on learning and provide the most able learners with sufficient opportunities to extend their learning and deepen their understanding
- staff ensure that careers advice for all learners leads to clear plans for further progress to accredited learning and employment.

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

Yours sincerely

Ruth Harrison  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

One of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Ofsted Inspectors, assisted by the adult learning and skills manager as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors met with managers, staff and learners. They observed lessons and reviewed key documents, including those related to quality improvement activity. They also reviewed learners' work and important records and documents associated with all aspects of safeguarding.