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Ms R Spellman
Chief Executive/General Secretary
The WEA
4 Luke Street
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Dear Ms Spellman

Ofsted 2012–13 survey inspection programme: employability - the impact of skills programmes for adults on achieving sustained employment

This survey evaluates providers' response to initiatives launched on 1 August 2011 to use Skills Funding Agency funds flexibly to support people on benefits.

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and participants, during my visits on 23, 24, 25 and 27 April 2012 to look at your work in employability provision.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff, learners, participants referred through Jobcentre Plus and partners; scrutiny of relevant documents; visit to nine learning centres; and observation of four learning sessions. The evidence covered a wider range of provision funded through the adult skills budget than the designated FE contract agreed with the Skills Funding Agency.

Key findings

- Staff in all regions have responded well to the need to support more people into work. Since August 2011, many staff have increased links with Jobcentre Plus and have made revisions to their provision locally, such as redesigning the provision to focus more on work and introducing discrete employability courses. Although many centres are beginning to collect data on job outcomes, this is not consistent across the association. Senior managers do not have a clear overview of how well the provision has helped people move off benefits since August 2011 and local managers

have not received sufficient clear direction on the extent to which they should prioritise this type of work.

- The WEA has some very good specialist provision, such as the courses on community interpreting and helping children in schools, that increases learners' employability very effectively. They provide a useful platform for personal and social development that is also critical to increasing employability skills, especially for those whose personal circumstances contribute to significant barriers to sustained employment.
- The WEA works very well with local communities, third sector organisations and other partners to support learners' progression to volunteering and for many this can lead to work. However, the provision of information, advice and guidance does not always help learners understand the full range of employment options open to them.
- The staff interviewed had very good expertise and experience in supporting unemployed people. Managers were skilled at networking with partners and other providers, to understand and respond to the needs of local communities. The teaching staff observed had good subject expertise and provided good individual support. The learners interviewed had gained good practical skills and knowledge and had significantly increased their confidence and motivation. Although they had also developed crucial employability skills such as team building and problem solving, this development was often not acknowledged or recorded.
- Many of the participants referred through Jobcentre Plus join provision in literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Although these courses support the development of generic skills well, participants have few opportunities to develop their skills in work-related contexts. Managers have not evaluated sufficiently the impact of these courses on improving the employability of people who are currently seeking work.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- evaluating the impact of current provision on moving people into work and providing a clear strategic direction on the extent to which this type of provision should be prioritised and the capacity building required
- ensuring that particularly participants referred through Jobcentre Plus gain a greater understanding of all relevant career and job options and have good opportunities for developing skills in practical work-related settings
- identifying and recording learners' development of employability skills to support their progress to work more effectively.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop employability provision at the WEA.

As explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. A copy of this letter is also being sent to the Skills Funding Agency.

Yours sincerely

Karen Adriaanse
Her Majesty's Inspector