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10 July 2018

Ms Caroline Tulett
Head of Skills and Employability
Northumberland County Council
County Hall
Hepscott Park
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Dear Ms Tulett

Short inspection of Northumberland County Council

Following the short inspection on 20 and 21 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.

You and your management team have implemented your carefully crafted vision for the learning and skills service to a very high standard. Your excellent management has ensured that, during a period of significant change to the priorities of the service, the very high proportion of learners and apprentices who achieve their qualifications has been maintained. Your learners gain relevant and useful skills and knowledge that prepare them very well for work and improve their lives.

Your managers successfully prioritise the recruitment of learners and apprentices who face significant barriers to learning. Managers provide good-quality study programmes and traineeships for young people aged 16 to 19 whose educational needs are not met by other local providers. You place considerable emphasis on developing learners' confidence and self-esteem. Staff who provide support are very effective in enabling learners and apprentices to complete courses successfully. Managers continue to offer innovative schemes, such as moped hire, to enable young people in remote parts of the county to access education and training.

Senior leaders support the service very effectively. They ensure that learners have access to good-quality learning centres that are well resourced to support teaching, learning and assessment. Ambitious plans are in place to improve the learning centres in Alnwick and Hexham to the same high standard as your other centres. Senior council leaders rightly recognise the significant strengths of the service and see the strong management as a model of good practice to be shared in other parts of the council.

You and your team accurately identify the strengths and weaknesses in the education and training that the service provides. You set challenging targets to improve performance, and you and your team have been effective at tackling the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. Your managers also recognise where they need to make further improvements such as in learners' attendance.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and managers ensure that safeguarding and learners' welfare have a high priority. Learners and apprentices feel safe and work safely. Managers have created safeguarding 'champions' for each learning centre in the county. They ensure that staff are confident to discuss issues relating to safety, welfare and life in modern Britain with learners and apprentices. For example, learners and apprentices who were learning to write an email in an English class discussed confidently the security risks of spam emails. Learners in an employment skills class engaged in interesting debate about the connection between football violence and extremist views.

Managers have a very good understanding of the types of risks that learners in Northumberland face. Recently, managers have created domestic violence 'champions' to support more effectively learners who are experiencing this kind of abuse.

The reporting and recording of safeguarding incidents are very effective. Leaders have implemented an effective electronic system. This enables the safeguarding lead managers to receive swift notification of incidents affecting learners anywhere in the county. Managers are able to respond quickly with appropriate advice or referrals to external agencies.

Inspection findings

- Lecturers are enthusiastic, and they use their teaching skills and subject knowledge to inspire learners and apprentices. Consequently, most learners and apprentices develop their knowledge and understanding and gain new skills that benefit them at work or in their daily lives. For example, learners on short courses develop enhanced curriculum vitae to use in their job searches and learners from Syria confidently use everyday English.
- Managers evaluate the quality of teaching, learning and assessment accurately through frequent lesson observations. They take account of a wide range of useful evidence to identify what lecturers need to do to improve. Teaching improvement coaches provide extensive support to enable lecturers to improve their teaching and, for the vast majority of lecturers, this support is effective. Managers are in the very early stages of using video technology to observe lessons and share good practice between lecturers at different learning centres to accelerate further improvements but, at the time of the inspection, it was too early to measure its impact.
- In a minority of sessions, lecturers do not take sufficient account of learners'

starting points when planning learning activities. In these sessions, all learners complete the same activities and wait for others to catch up if they finish early.

- Leaders and managers have a clear strategy to provide courses for adult learners that enable them to develop the skills and vocational knowledge required for employment. Managers cultivate excellent relationships with external agencies and employers. As a result, they have a comprehensive understanding of the local labour market. Managers use this information well to develop courses for individuals, communities and employers. For example, managers have developed courses that provide training in customer service to support the growing retail sector in the north of the county. Managers have also developed courses in engineering to meet the workforce needs generated by the rapid expansion of the Port of Blyth. A high proportion of adult learners progress to employment or further study.
- Managers are less effective at ensuring that they enrol all adult learners onto courses at the appropriate level, based on their existing skills and knowledge. A few learners are enrolled on courses that are too easy and, as a result, they are not challenged to make rapid progress.
- Managers have successfully improved attendance since the previous inspection. However, further improvement is needed to meet the high target that managers have set for the service. Many learners value the good support for attendance that managers provide, such as help with childcare and transport. For a few groups of learners identified as a priority to the service, such as young parents, the support is not increasing attendance rapidly enough.
- 16 to 19 study programmes and traineeships are very effective at providing education and training for young people who face barriers to learning and who have often had poor previous experiences of education. Learners become self-confident and develop a range of important skills such as good timekeeping and the ability to work independently. Learners have access to high-quality work-related learning and develop excellent vocational skills, such as painting and decorating to precise specifications.
- Staff offer a useful short introductory course to learners aged 16 to 19 who need extra help to prepare for full-time study. These learners benefit from one-to-one coaching that builds their confidence and motivation, and enables them to be successful when they join longer courses.
- Learners on the 16 to 19 study programmes make good progress. They receive helpful feedback from their lecturers about how to improve their work. They are proud of their achievements and many experience success in education for the first time in their lives. Learners behave very well, and staff set them work which motivates and inspires them. A very high number of learners aged 16 to 19 complete their courses successfully.
- Leaders and managers have continued to ensure that apprentices receive high-quality training. Apprentices' achievement continues to be significantly above that at other similar providers. Current apprentices are making very good progress in developing their vocational skills. They undertake their jobs with a high level of confidence and are valued highly by their employers.

- The assessment of apprentices' starting points is comprehensive. Staff use this information very well to guide apprentices to the most appropriate programme. Consequently, the proportion of apprentices who stay and complete their apprenticeship is very high. Managers ensure that apprentices receive good-quality advice and guidance about future opportunities. Almost all apprentices remain in employment when they complete their apprenticeship, and many progress to higher level programmes or gain extra responsibility in the workplace.
- Staff monitor apprentices' progress very closely. They are very effective at identifying the specific skills that apprentices need to improve to make good progress. For example, business administration apprentices recognise that the good-quality support that they receive to develop their writing skills will benefit them at work.
- A well-qualified team of advisers provides helpful careers advice for learners. The advisers work with a range of external agencies to identify the needs and aspirations of learners as they join the learning and skills service. They also provide excellent ongoing advice and guidance to learners that prepare them effectively for their next steps.
- Most learners on study programmes progress to further study or employment. However, managers do not fully analyse the types of employment or courses that learners progress onto to enable them to evaluate fully the effectiveness of the programmes.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- managers and lecturers use information about learners' starting points more effectively to develop learning activities that meet the needs of all learners and apprentices and to ensure that adult learners enrol on courses at an appropriately challenging level
- managers continue to develop strategies to improve attendance
- managers collect and analyse information about the jobs or courses that learners on study programmes progress to so that they can evaluate fully the effectiveness of the programmes.

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

Yours sincerely

Rachel Angus
Her Majesty's Inspector
Information about the inspection

The inspection team included one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Ofsted Inspectors. We were assisted by the head of skills and employability. We met with managers and other staff. We observed teaching, learning and assessment and spoke to learners and apprentices. We looked at learners' work. We also scrutinised key documentation relating to safeguarding and quality assurance.