

Stoke-on-Trent Unitary Authority

Report following a monitoring visit to a 'requires improvement' provider

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

Stoke-on-Trent Unitary Authority was inspected in September 2021. At that time, inspectors judged the overall effectiveness of the provision to require improvement.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to evaluate the progress that leaders and managers have made in rectifying the main areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

The employment, learning and skills department (the service) is part of the housing, development and growth directorate. Approximately 80% of the funding is allocated to adult learners. There is a small cohort of learners on study programmes, traineeships and apprenticeships. At the time of the visit, there were 24 apprentices enrolled. The children and family services directorate provides quality assurance for the service. Both the director and assistant director in children and family services have been appointed since the previous inspection.

Themes

What progress have leaders and governors made in producing an appropriate education and skills plan?

Reasonable progress

Since the previous inspection, senior leaders have reviewed the lines of responsibility and created a clearer structure of accountability for the service. Senior leaders communicate more effectively with the managers of the curriculum. Service managers are better informed. For example, they are aware of the wider plans in the authority to use the Multiply adult numeracy programme to teach basic skills to adult learners. They make sure that these courses complement their current curriculum for numeracy.

Senior leaders have a good understanding of the local education and skills landscape. They have developed an overarching skills and employment framework. From their findings, leaders have created a range of appropriate priorities. However, these plans are still awaiting final agreement from council leaders before they can be fully implemented in the service areas. Curriculum managers are aware that they will need to refine their plan.

Curriculum managers have created an initial curriculum plan that broadly links to the priorities set out in the local education and skills landscape paper. As a result, they have incorporated some new vocational courses. For example, managers plan to put in place a new introductory warehousing course, as it has been identified as a local employment need. Managers have responded to the need to improve residents' digital skills. They have trained residents to use the NHS mobile phone application to help them access medical help and to request prescriptions more efficiently.

Curriculum managers rightly continue to offer courses in English and mathematics. They have sensibly adapted the timings and locations for teaching, in the light of learner feedback on the barriers to learning. They are responding to the needs of learners who have recently arrived in the area from Hong Kong and Ukraine. While some of these learners require courses for introductory English, other learners require very specific technical vocabulary.

What progress have service leaders made in ensuring that quality assurance measures provide an accurate overview of the service, from which they can make informed decisions on how to improve the quality of education?

Reasonable progress

Service leaders have swiftly developed a detailed and comprehensive post-inspection action plan. As part of the plan, they completed a review of their previous arrangements for quality assurance. This included discussions with other local authority providers. Service leaders have selected six appropriate indicators of quality.

Service leaders have clearly set out how they will set targets, analyse outcomes and report on these indicators across provision types. The quality team has clarified expectations under each of the indicators. However, managers recognise that there is further work to do in deciding the most effective method of collecting the evidence across the different quality strands. For example, the team is considering how to link work scrutiny with the learning visits to classrooms.

Managers are rightly planning to include the quality findings in the existing quarterly curriculum meetings. This will ensure that managers have sound and accurate information in a timely fashion.

Service leaders have already trialled some elements of the system, and as a result, curriculum leaders have improved curriculum design and teaching in mathematics. Following a trial activity in the summer, service leaders have improved the learning model for distance learning. It includes more time for initial advice and guidance, and now includes a blend of in-person and resource-based delivery. Initial feedback from learners has been positive.

While the plan for quality assurance is well conceived, managers have yet to implement all the quality strands. The full impact has yet to be seen.

Although service leaders have reported on elements of their quality assurance findings to governors, they have not yet produced a self-assessment report for 2021/22. As a result, they are unable to consider the full implications for the curriculum delivery for 2022/23.

What progress have service leaders made in ensuring that governors receive reliable and precise information, so that governors can support the service to improve and hold the appropriate leaders more fully to account?

Reasonable progress

Governors have strengthened their ability to hold leaders more fully to account by changing the terms of reference and the membership of the group.

Through the new terms of reference, governors have refreshed and clarified their purpose, aims and responsibilities. The board is rightly focused on providing insight, support and challenge for the curriculum managers. It has widened the membership to include appropriate external perspectives.

The new members include senior managers from the local college, employers and learner representation. Minutes from the regular bi-monthly meetings show that these members ask questions that hold leaders to account, encourage discussion and help shape thinking.

Governors provided helpful advice on the quality of the post-inspection action plan and monitored progress diligently. They sought clarity in the changes to the apprenticeship delivery. They gained assurance that apprentices were receiving more off-the-job training and regular and consistent teaching.

Governors receive clear and regular information about the provision, including on enrolments, funding, attendance, punctuality and positive destinations.

So far, governors have received information about the quality of the courses in a piecemeal fashion. This means that a small number of areas for improvement have been identified too slowly, for example the increase in withdrawals in mathematics. There are clear plans to introduce a more coherent, comprehensive and consistent series of reports, but these are not yet in place.

Governors receive information about skills needs in the area. Governors do not always challenge service leaders sufficiently to explain how the post-16 curriculum plan fits in with these wider developments. Governors have made this their next priority.

What progress have leaders made in ensuring that all apprentices receive the time they need away from work to study and have access to planned teaching sessions?

Reasonable progress

Managers have successfully implemented a new process to monitor apprentices' off-the-job learning hours. They produce a weekly report that swiftly identifies when apprentices have not logged sufficient hours. Once the report has been published, tutors contact the apprentices to investigate and understand the reasons for the shortfall. Where apprentices cannot find time in their job role, the tutor discusses this with the apprentice's manager. As a result of this intervention, nearly all apprentices receive the appropriate amount of time for off-the-job training.

Senior leaders instigated a survey of apprentices, and now have a clear understanding of barriers to off-the-job training. The director led a strategic response to the findings. Senior leaders developed a new apprenticeship strategy, and accompanying handbook, which they launched through a series of roadshows. At the start of the apprenticeship, managers now hold a briefing for employers and apprentices to articulate the commitments needed to complete the apprenticeship. Early signs are that more apprentices are now staying on their courses and complete the required training.

Tutors have put in place a new curriculum plan that identifies the teaching commitments of the employer, alongside the teaching commitments of the tutor assessors. Apprentices now record the learning that has taken place in the workplace. As a result, apprentices can see the link between on- and off-the-job training and make better progress.

Most apprentices now have access to formal teaching sessions. Each apprenticeship standard has a differing structure of teaching. For example, on the level 5 operational/departmental manager standard, apprentices attend group sessions every four weeks. This is then supported by more or smaller group sessions with tutors every two weeks. In other apprenticeships, teaching sessions are set weekly. Since these changes, seven apprentices have gone through to the end-point assessment. All these apprentices passed, with six gaining a distinction grade.

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