

Inspection of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

Inspection dates:

6 to 9 June 2023

Overall effectiveness**Good**

The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Adult learning programmes	Good
Apprenticeships	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Information about this provider

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's learning and skills service is part of the inclusive growth and development section of the council's finance, development and regeneration directorate. The great majority of the service's funding comes from the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA). At the time of the inspection, there were approximately 1,000 learners on adult learning courses leading to qualifications, and 300 learners on community learning courses. The main curriculum areas are English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), digital skills, English, mathematics, and a range of non-accredited courses in health and well-being and creative arts. There were 57 apprentices on standards in business administration, adult care and library assistants, predominantly for employees of the council.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Learners increase their personal confidence through participation on courses. They gain new skills and knowledge that enable them to try things for the first time, such as cooking meals from scratch for their families and speaking English to their children's teachers at school.

Learners and apprentices gain an appreciation of the values of equality and diversity and how they can apply them at work and in their wider lives. Apprentices, for example, know that they must adapt the services and care that they provide to take account of the needs of clients from groups with protected characteristics.

Learners feel safe when on the service's premises and appreciate the way that staff respond to any reported concerns. For example, one group of ESOL learners felt that they were being discriminated against on the buses that they used to travel to courses. Staff contacted the bus company and resolved the issue quickly.

Learners and apprentices respond well to the high expectations that staff set for them to attend classes, arrive on time and be ready to learn. As a result, they develop professional behaviours that will stand them in good stead when they apply for jobs or progress onto higher levels of study.

Learners who have struggled with the return to normal life after the pandemic or with the cost-of-living crisis benefit from the social interaction that they experience on courses, and the practical support that they receive from staff. For example, learners have been provided with one-pot cookers and taught how to prepare cheap and nutritious meals.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders and managers have designed an ambitious curriculum that addresses two of the main strategic priorities of the local authority and TVCA. These are the need to develop the skills required for economic growth, particularly in those sectors of the economy where there are labour shortages, and to provide residents with learning opportunities to build their mental and physical resilience so they can return to work, counter social isolation and integrate into the community.

Leaders' appointment of a new senior curriculum manager and three curriculum coordinators for each of the main strands of provision has resulted in an even sharper focus on making the curriculum meet the needs of employers and groups of disadvantaged learners. For example, new courses have been co-designed with employers in the adult social care sector on the administration of medicines in residential settings and a higher-level community interpreting course with a company that employs interpreters across the Tees Valley.

Managers rightly recognise that the stated social inclusion intent for a small number of community learning courses, such as modern foreign languages and some

creative arts courses, is not reflected in the profile of learners who are recruited onto these courses. They are currently reviewing alternative ways of funding these courses for the next academic year.

Leaders and managers use the information they collect through a wide range of quality assurance activities to enhance their teachers' general pedagogical knowledge and skills. They do not, however, provide teachers with sufficient opportunities to develop their specialist subject knowledge and skills.

The great majority of staff feel well supported by their managers and state that managers are considerate of their workloads. A minority of teachers, particularly those teaching on the ESOL provision, feel that managers have not provided them with sufficient administrative support to lessen their workload. Managers have recognised this and are recruiting additional staff to address the issue.

Members of the governance board effectively use their expertise and contacts with key stakeholders such as TVCA to help shape the strategic direction of the service and inform the content of its curriculum, particularly in response to the skills needed for economic growth in the region.

Governors have a good understanding of the strengths and areas for development of the service. After extensive discussions at board meetings, they arrived at the sensible decision to pause recruitment to apprenticeship programmes to give managers time to implement an improvement plan. They carefully monitor the progress of the plan, holding managers to account for their actions.

Teachers plan and design the curriculum effectively. They increase the complexity of curriculum content over time. For example, in ESOL teachers have introduced a pre-entry model for learners with very few literacy skills where learners start to develop their spoken English skills and learn relevant words and phrases that will help them in day-to-day life. From this, learners progress onto accredited ESOL courses at entry level, where they expand their vocabulary to enable them to read and write and converse in more demanding contexts.

Teachers demonstrate a mastery of their craft through the range of strategies that they use to develop learners' skills and knowledge. These include breaking concepts down into smaller chunks and the continual reinforcement of new words and phrases through repetition.

Most teachers use assessment methods skilfully to identify how well learners and apprentices are progressing. They deploy a range of in-class quizzes, mock examinations and questioning to help learners and apprentices recall and remember information from previous learning. Most teachers use the results of assessment to identify gaps in learners' and apprentices' knowledge and adjust their teaching to fill those gaps. For example, teachers observe learners practising technical skills in creative arts courses, suggesting improvements until learners can demonstrate sufficient competence.

Most teachers provide learners and apprentices with helpful feedback that helps them to improve the standard of their work. For example, learners on the community interpreting course benefit from written feedback on their weekly assignments that is followed up by one-to-one sessions with the teachers who explain what learners need to correct, including the accuracy of their spelling and grammar.

Learners develop their mathematical skills by applying them to tasks that are relevant in their everyday lives. They are taught about value for money through cooking on a budget. Learners on ESOL courses find out how to tell the time through exercises where they use both analogue and digital clocks.

Leaders and managers have strengthened the capacity of the support services that they provide to learners, including an increase in the numbers of qualified information, advice and guidance staff. Learners are prepared well for the demands of courses through initial advice and guidance. Teachers build structured time into the curriculum where they discuss with learners the next steps that they can take towards higher-level qualifications or into work.

A high proportion of adult learners complete and achieve their qualifications. The proportion of learners who progress from non-accredited courses to courses leading to qualifications is high. Adult learners, and those apprentices who complete their programmes, secure positive destinations into employment and further education.

Leaders and managers have identified and begun to implement actions that they need to take to improve apprenticeship provision. However, aspects of teaching and assessment are still not of a high enough quality. For example, assessors do not routinely tailor apprentices' learning plans to the starting points identified in their initial assessments, and there has been a lack of employer engagement in apprentice reviews. Apprentices have not had sufficient access to a structured personal development curriculum and careers advice.

The standard of teaching of functional skills mathematics is not consistently high. Teachers rely too heavily on standardised handouts and make limited use of other resources provided to meet the individual needs of learners. As a result, too many learners do not make sufficient progress in the development of their skills and knowledge, and too few achieve their qualifications.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

An appropriately trained and experienced safeguarding team ensures that staff are kept updated on new policy developments and provide them with information on relevant local risks in the region that staff disseminate to learners and apprentices.

Although the number of safeguarding incidents is small, those that do occur are dealt with quickly and effectively. Managers analyse lower-level causes for concern

and ensure that specialist support is provided to learners through their partnerships with other agencies. For example, staff refer female learners at risk of so-called honour-based violence to the Halo project, which specialises in this field.

Leaders and managers do not have sufficient oversight of staff completion of mandatory safeguarding training. At the time of the inspection, there were too many staff whose completion of the training was not recorded on the central list held by managers. There were a small number of staff who had to complete the training during the week of the inspection.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Ensure the implementation of the service's policy that all staff will complete mandatory safeguarding training within an agreed timescale, and that the completion of all safeguarding training is recorded promptly.
- Accelerate the implementation of the apprenticeship improvement plan so that the quality of teaching and assessment, and apprentices' access to a personal development curriculum and structured careers advice, improve rapidly.
- Review whether all community learning courses meet the service's stated social inclusion curriculum intent and remove any that do not or find an alternative way of funding them.
- Ensure that the quality of teaching of mathematics functional skills courses is improved so that a higher proportion of learners develop their knowledge and skills and achieve their qualifications.
- Provide teachers with opportunities to develop their subject-specialist knowledge and skills alongside the development of their general pedagogical knowledge and skills.
- Ensure that the workload of ESOL teachers is manageable.

Provider details

Unique reference number	54630
Address	Billingham Community Centre The Causeway Billingham Stockton-on-Tees TS23 2DA
Contact number	01642 527916
Website	www.slss.ac.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Craig Taylor
Provider type	Local authority
Date of previous inspection	2 June 2014
Main subcontractors	Not applicable

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the adult learning and skills manager, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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