

Inspection of Durham County Council

Inspection dates: 20 to 23 June 2023

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Education programmes for young people	Good
Adult learning programmes	Good
Apprenticeships	Good
Provision for learners with high needs	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Information about this provider

Durham County Council provides education and training, predominantly for adult learners, across the county. Most of its adult learning provision is delivered through subcontractors that provide both accredited and community learning courses. At the time of the inspection, there were 738 adult learners on a wide range of accredited and non-accredited programmes. There were 109 apprentices enrolled on a range of programmes, with over half on the level 3 business administration standard. Thirteen learners aged 16 to 19 were enrolled on a full-time study programme, and there were 12 learners with high needs.

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

Staff set clear and high expectations for learners' and apprentices' behaviour, and relate these to behaviours expected in the workplace. They develop learners' knowledge of different social environments so that learners understand clearly what is expected of them in public and when studying. For example, those studying on employability courses, such as a call centre operatives course, understand that it is important always to speak clearly and courteously.

Most learners demonstrate positive attitudes to their learning. Teachers have created calm and inclusive environments where learners feel confident to share their thoughts. They enjoy and value their courses. However, in a very few instances, such as on courses in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), learners use their mobile phones to answer text and social media messages during lessons, which distracts their attention and disrupts learning.

Staff develop learners' confidence and character very well. They recognise that many learners have had challenging personal experiences. Staff treat learners with respect and care during their courses. Learners, including adults who have been socially isolated for some time, recognise the benefits of their learning for their future opportunities and their well-being. Their confidence increases rapidly, and this helps them to become more actively involved in their community.

Adult learners, including those who have been unemployed for a long period of time, and apprentices enjoy learning new knowledge, skills and behaviours that prepare them well for working in areas where there are staff shortages. They quickly learn the skills that they need to gain and maintain employment, such as in residential care homes and in business administration. A high proportion of adult learners secure employment or have a guaranteed interview that prepares them better for work.

Almost all learners and apprentices have a secure understanding of how to keep themselves safe. Adult learners know the signs that someone might be radicalised, such as changes in their behaviour or becoming unusually anxious without a reason. Learners on study programmes know not to accept online requests from people they do not know and how to block strangers from accessing their social media accounts. However, a very few apprentices working in care homes are less clear why their workplace may be a potential target for radical extremists.

Most learners attend well. However, in a few subject areas, such as ESOL and functional skills English and mathematics, learners' attendance is well below the provider's target.

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

Leaders have a clear strategic intent for the curriculum. They have designed a curriculum that links well to council priority areas and includes programmes that

develop the skills that meet local employer needs, address social isolation in communities and broaden community partnerships across the county. For example, leaders have identified that many staff in business administration roles are coming towards the end of their careers. They have prioritised apprenticeship training to ensure staffing levels are sustained in such roles.

Leaders use a wide range of subcontractors to provide flexible and responsive adult education. For example, they have worked with subcontractors to provide ESOL courses at short notice in response to the increased demand from people recently arrived in the county. These courses enable learners to integrate effectively within their community. When employers indicate a need for trained staff, such as in call centres, leaders respond by adding training programmes to help employers recruit to specific staff vacancies.

Leaders conduct purposeful quality assurance activities, including of their subcontracted provision, and provide regular training to enhance staff teaching practice. They undertake observations of teaching and review learning plans and progress documents so that they have a clear oversight of their provision. Leaders use the information from these activities to identify thematic topics to improve the quality of teaching. They deliver training for teaching staff on topics such as how to write an effective individual learning plan.

Teachers are suitably qualified and use their expert knowledge to teach and assess effectively. Staff teaching on the level 3 business administration apprenticeship, for example, have a degree in a related subject and some tutors are qualified to master's level. All staff have a teaching qualification when they start work at the provider. Teachers use a range of assessment methods, such as effective questioning, group work, debates, practical scenarios and role play, to measure learners' progress. Learners particularly enjoy practical assessments, which help them to make good progress.

Teachers have developed a specific curriculum for learners with high needs that enables learners to improve their confidence and develop the communication skills that they need for work before they attend work placements. Learners are well prepared for and enthusiastic about attending work. They develop the interpersonal skills needed to progress into supported internships or employment in areas including business administration, and into volunteering roles such as working with animals.

Leaders use the funding that they receive for learners with high needs effectively. They secure specialist support to ensure that the goals identified in education, health and care plans are met. Leaders work with external agencies to provide signers to work with deaf learners and additional staff to support independent travel training.

Teachers accurately assess learners' and apprentices' starting points. They carry out initial and diagnostic assessments in English and mathematics to ensure that learners and apprentices are supported effectively to develop skills in these subjects.

Teachers provide good support for learners to help them remember key points, such as using images of bricks as prompts when dividing and calculating questions from past papers.

Teachers provide learners and apprentices with helpful feedback on how to improve their work. They correct grammatical errors and, over time, learners and apprentices make fewer mistakes and produce work of a higher standard. Learners on study programmes understand that they need to complete job applications without errors to ensure they have the best chance of being selected for an interview.

Staff provide most learners and apprentices with appropriate careers information, advice and guidance to prepare them well for their next steps. Teachers frequently discuss career plans with their apprentices during progress reviews. They practise interview skills with adult learners to improve their chances of securing employment. However, staff plan information sessions too late for learners with high needs, and this causes a few learners to be anxious about their next stage of learning. A few adult learners on community courses do not know what alternative options are available to them when they finish their course, including progression to accredited courses.

Teachers support learners to develop their knowledge of how to stay mentally and physically healthy. On programmes for those adult learners furthest from the job market, teachers skilfully help learners to understand the links between a healthy diet, exercise and good mental health, through a project in which learners create a recipe and well-being activity book. Staff help disadvantaged and socially isolated learners to improve their mental health by encouraging them to develop routines, manage their time effectively and practise therapeutic crafts.

Teachers provide adult learners on long courses and learners on study programmes with a range of enrichment opportunities to develop their interests beyond the main learning programme. Enrichment topics are planned throughout the year and link to well-known national events such as Pride Month, Mental Health Awareness Week and National Holocaust Day. Teachers organise cultural visits to museums, local cathedrals and art galleries, as well as supporting learners to contribute to local fund-raising projects. As a result, learners have a broad knowledge of different cultures, national heritage and community events.

Most learners and apprentices achieve their qualifications. On community learning programmes, learners complete their short courses successfully and a high proportion continue their studies. However, the proportion of learners who achieve their qualification on directly delivered functional skills English, mathematics and ESOL courses has been too low. Leaders recognised this and made several changes to the curriculum that included reducing the proportion of online delivery, increasing the frequency of training sessions and providing additional staff training on effective pedagogy. However, it is too early to determine the full impact of these actions.

Leaders and managers are considerate of staff workloads. Managers meet with teachers frequently and check on any well-being issues that teachers may have.

They have also adapted the curriculum to reduce the burden of marking and assessment for staff.

Leaders and managers have comprehensive arrangements for monitoring and measuring the performance of subcontractors, including in relation to learner attendance, progress and achievement. When leaders identify that subcontractors do not fulfil their obligations, they act decisively to cease contracting arrangements. In a small number of cases, leaders do not assure themselves well enough that subcontractors recruit adults to community learning courses appropriately. For example, courses designed for socially isolated people within the community, such as artisan crafts, are accessed by a few learners who only have a general interest in the subject and are not feeling socially isolated.

A governing body meets frequently to hold leaders to account. It is comprised of senior leaders from the council who have experience of education, business and local government. Governors use their knowledge to challenge leaders well about the quality of the provision. They know, for example, that leaders have previously been too optimistic about their predicted outcomes for learners, that there have been performance issues in ESOL and that apprenticeship achievement has been too low. Their support, challenge and guidance has enhanced the quality of provision.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Staff are appropriately trained in safeguarding. They attend frequent training that provides them with a contemporary knowledge of the risks to their learners and apprentices. Those responsible for safeguarding ensure that staff record appropriate and detailed information about concerns as soon as they are raised so that they can respond appropriately.

Staff have effective links with appropriate agencies and personnel such as social workers, key workers and housing support staff. They communicate well with these personnel to ensure that learners with any ongoing safeguarding concerns are supported effectively.

Leaders have suitable arrangements to ensure that staff complete mandatory safeguarding training. They carry out checks to ensure that staff are suitable to work in the United Kingdom and are safe to work with young people. Leaders have a clear oversight of the safeguarding arrangements within subcontracted provision.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Ensure that all learners at subcontractors are on programme that are designed to meet their needs.
- Ensure that all learners receive sufficient, high-quality advice and guidance about the progression opportunities available to them.

- Improve the quality of functional skills courses, including at subcontractors, so that a higher proportion of learners achieve their qualifications.
- Ensure that actions to improve ESOL provision are sustained, leading to a higher proportion of learners successfully completing their courses.

Provider details

Unique reference number	50219
Address	Civic Centre North Terrace Crook County Durham DL15 9ES
Contact number	03000 266115
Website	www.durham.gov.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Helen Radcliffe
Provider type	Local authority provider
Date of previous inspection	19 January 2015
Main subcontractors	Sportscape Training Limited Handcrafted Projects Release Potential Limited J and K Training Limited Groundwork North East

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the DurhamLearn 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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