

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: Learning Plus
Date of visit: 9 May 2007

Context

Learning Plus is a charitable company established in 2001, as a consortium for members within the voluntary and community sector in Devon, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. Its offices are in Saltash, on the Devon and Cornwall border. Learning Plus does not carry out training for learners itself, however, it does provide training for staff of member companies. Learning Plus is a registered centre for a number of awarding bodies. It has a board of trustees offering governance to a chief executive officer, supported by three managers and three other staff. Membership of the learning consortium comprises 31 not-for-profit organisations; during 2006-07, 12 received funding through a Learning and Skills Council (LSC) contract.

Learning Plus contracts with Devon and Cornwall LSC to provide mostly accredited training in preparation for life and work, including English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), community development, and literacy and numeracy.

Achievement and standards

What developments, since the previous inspection, are there in learners' achievements and standards?	Reasonable progress
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In the skills for life programme, most of the literacy and numeracy courses show consistently good results. As at the previous inspection, retention and achievement rates for most courses are high. The entry level numeracy courses were particularly successful, with 100% achievement at all three levels in 2005-06. Achievement rates for the level one and two numeracy courses declined in 2005-06, however, the current data for 2006-07 indicates that the achievement rate for level one is improving, although it is too early to judge the indicators for the level two numeracy courses.

The current retention rates for ESOL courses are improving, with the exception of level one. Although retention and achievement rates for ESOL entry level one and level two courses improved in 2005-06, the rates for entry levels two and three and the level one courses declined. However, there are a total of 38 learners who registered on these courses in 2005-06 but have not yet completed.

In 2006-07, Learning Plus ceased providing accredited training in horticulture and introduced a wider range of national vocational qualifications (NVQ) including those for cleaning, performing manufacturing operations, distributive operations, retail, care, information technology, customer service, management and business administration.

Learning Plus has introduced a new system to monitor learners' attendance and to follow up on learners who do not attend their classes. Overall attendance figures are not analysed.

Planning and delivery of learning

At the previous inspection, planning of learning and curriculum leadership for the ESOL provision were identified as weaknesses. How effectively have these issues been addressed?	Significant progress
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Since the previous inspection, the main ESOL subcontractor has appointed a curriculum manager to introduce and embed systematic processes, also to support staff in following these processes consistently. This has resulted in a more coherent approach to initial assessment and the planning of learning. Teachers now have regular in-service days and fortnightly meetings at which they are encouraged to share problems, solutions and examples of good practice. Six-monthly quality audits and development plans ensure all teachers use the new systems effectively. Teachers are invited to provide feedback on developments that are introduced; their views are used to modify any new initiatives which do not work effectively in practice. The curriculum manager works closely with the manager responsible for ESOL at Learning Plus. Since the changes to the provision were implemented, individual learning plans contain individual as well as group learning goals. The tutors use authentic materials wherever possible, these add relevance and interest. Tutorials have been introduced and learners have access to individual sessions with their tutors to review their progress regularly every four weeks. Current data indicate that retention is improving on all but one of the ESOL courses.

Planning and monitoring of learners' progress

What steps have been taken to improve the planning and monitoring of learners' progress in literacy and numeracy provision?	Reasonable progress
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Initial assessment and diagnostic assessment are carried out at the beginning of the learners' courses. The results are used to plan the learners' programmes. Some learners are aiming for qualifications at a lower level than their diagnostic assessment indicated, due to an identified mismatch between the demands of the

diagnostic test and those of the actual test for the qualification. The format of the individual learning plan used with skills for life learners is still under discussion. The main subcontractor is involved in a national development programme for individual learning plans. Learners' goals are recorded in their group's scheme of work. The tutors review and monitor the learners' progress towards their learning goals and their 'soft' achievements.

Building partnerships to widen participation

What progress has been made in continuing to build effective partnerships to widen participation?	Reasonable progress
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During 2005-06, Learning Plus worked with nine members of its consortium that received funding through a Learning and Skills Council contract. In the current year, these subcontracting arrangements have extended to a total of 12 consortium members through the successful recruitment of additional organisations. This development reflects Learning Plus' strategy to target provision geographically across Devon and Cornwall, to support widening and equality of participation. As part of this strategy, Learning Plus' close links with local community based groups continue to be developed effectively. The percentage of learners categorised as disadvantaged has increased from 66% in the previous year to 71%. Approximately a quarter of learners receive additional learning support.

Business planning includes consideration of the developments required for member support and sustainability. A draft business plan has been produced. Changes have been made to the structure of the trust and to avoid potential conflicts of interest, trustees no longer represent member organisations. New trustees have been appointed, however, the process has not yet been completed, with some vacancies to be filled. To support the involvement of member organisations, Learning Plus has established a partner provider group for consultation purposes, planning and development. During 2006-07, a range of member network events have been held for staff of the subcontracted providers. These events mainly focus on specific areas of the curriculum or aspects of delivery.

Development of quality improvement arrangements

How effectively have arrangements for quality improvement been established, across the whole consortium?	Reasonable progress
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The quality systems, procedures and materials have been updated. There is a comprehensive quality manual in place, which includes the addition of exemplar materials. The manual is made available to subcontractors across the consortium. Learning Plus uses a flexible approach to quality improvement with their partner providers of subcontracted provision. Some subcontractors adopt the quality

arrangements developed by Learning Plus, others use their own quality improvement systems provided these meet Learning Plus' requirements. An annual check is made on the centre file records maintained by each subcontractor. A quality audit is carried out by Learning Plus on new subcontractors and where necessary an action plan for quality arrangements and improvement is drawn up. Some subcontractors have only recently joined the consortium and are at an early stage of establishing their arrangements for quality improvement.

Learning Plus carries out regular monitoring visits to their subcontractors and these may be more frequent if the need for support with quality improvement is identified. Issues relating to quality are recorded as actions for the subcontractor on visit reports, although some actions do not have linked development planning for improvement. Quality improvement and standardisation are included at the Learning Plus continuing professional development network events for staff of member organisations, however, not all the subcontractors are represented at these events. A programme of observations of teaching and learning is in place, which provides useful feedback and support on improvement for tutors.

Self-assessment and post inspection action/development planning

To what extent does the self-assessment process and action/development planning support improvement?	Reasonable progress
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Since the previous inspection, Learning Plus has improved its arrangements for the use of feedback from learners to inform the self-assessment process. It is working closely with member organisations on this aspect of provision and learners' feedback is monitored and analysed. The feedback is collected at induction, the mid-point of the learner's programme and at the end of their course. Subcontractors are also requested, wherever possible, to obtain feedback from early leavers to provide to Learning Plus for information.

The post inspection action plan was used to form the basis of a detailed quality improvement plan for the current year which identifies a range of actions to address the weaknesses identified. Some target dates are in the future, however, progress has been made in most areas. The quality improvement plan is reviewed and updated regularly. The self-assessment report is revised on an ongoing basis and includes data on retention, achievement and success rates. Each subcontractor develops its own self-assessment report. These are used to inform Learning Plus' self-assessment and action-planning for improvement.