

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: Wokingham Borough Council
Date of visit: 25 September 2008

Context

This monitoring visit follows the inspection in May 2007 of Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC) provision for adult and community learning, when the overall effectiveness of WBC's provision was graded as satisfactory. Leadership and management were satisfactory, as was its arrangements for equality of opportunity. WBC's capacity to improve was judged to be good. The overall quality of provision was found to be satisfactory. Community learning was found to be good and family programmes were judged as satisfactory.

Adult and community learning (ACL) provision is funded by Thames Valley Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and managed within the WBC's Libraries and Lifelong Learning Division. WBC is a unitary authority and is an affluent region with low unemployment, although there are deprived areas. The ACL provision is planned on a project basis to address the needs of LSC and WBC priority groups. Learning programmes, split into community learning and family learning, are provided at three neighbourhood learning centres and at community venues such as schools and libraries.

WBC's strategy for ACL provision is based on partnership working, both within the borough council and with external providers. Internal partnerships exist across council services to ensure that targeted projects are meeting the needs of service users and to link with schools, extended services and children's centres. WBC continues to subcontract part of its direct LSC funded provision to Bracknell and Wokingham College as well as maintaining links with the voluntary and community sector.

Achievement and standards

At the previous inspection achievement and standards were good. Has this been maintained?	Strength maintained
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At the previous inspection achievement and standards were judged to be good and retention was particularly good for both community learning and family learning programmes. However, achievement data focused largely on learners' attendance and retention rather than on learners' success rates against learning objectives. Learners were developing personal skills and greater community awareness and those on family learning courses developed better parenting and social skills. The standard of learners' work was good and they made satisfactory progress. This strength has been maintained. Retention rates remain close to 100%, even for the longer courses. Achievement is now much better linked to learners' successful completion of their objectives. The data indicates that the overall success rate of 87% for 2007/08 has fallen, compared with 96% of the previous year. However, this drop almost certainly reflects the increasingly stringent assessment processes, and gives a better indication of what is still a good success rate. The success rates for the small number of accredited courses are high. The family learning success rate is 89% comparable to the community learning success rate of 86%. Learner feedback and observations of teaching and learning suggest that standards in lessons remain good.

Quality of provision

How well is the learndirect provision being used to meet the needs of learners in the community?	Reasonable progress
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WBC has had a learndirect provision for over three years but this was not directly inspected at the previous inspection. Over the years this provision has been used effectively to provide appropriate learning opportunities for a range of people that are not necessarily targeted by WBC's main projects. An unusually high proportion of females are on courses, 82% compared with the national learndirect average of 49%. The main centre at Wokingham library provides good resources in pleasantly refurbished premises. The town-centre location provides easy access for learners with opening hours into the evening and on some Saturdays. The provision has recently been better extended into the community, with effective use of tutors to support sessions in five other branch libraries. Enrolments in skills for life courses account for 75% of learners, with the remainder in ICT. The ICT programmes are well linked with the other WBC projects, particularly a college based programme, 'computer stepping stones', and the WBC 'my family matters' project. Success rates on the skills for life courses are just below the England averages and ICT success rates are at national levels. Withdrawal rates are encouragingly low. The learndirect provision is appropriately integrated with the WBC organisational and management structure.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in developing and implementing arrangements for observing teaching and learning?	Significant progress
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At the time of the previous inspection arrangements for observing teaching and learning (OTL) were not fully in place and procedures did not provide coherence. Insufficient observation had occurred to adequately develop improvement planning. WBC has made significant progress in improving its arrangements for OTL. A new policy and revised procedures have been introduced to give greater coherence across the provision. Partner organisations are now fully involved in the process and represented on the cross-provision observation team. Extensive training for observers has been provided by Bracknell and Wokingham College. New and comprehensive documentation has been written and introduced which provides clear guidance to observers and to tutors being observed. Detailed observation records provide feedback to tutors with clear indications of good practice, areas for improvement and suggested action plans. OTL arrangements include measures for standardising and moderating procedures and outcomes. An OTL policy forum meets to evaluate and improve the new procedures and takes account of feedback from observed tutors. WBC has carried out joint observations and joint training for observers in partnership with other Berkshire authorities as part of a good practice sharing project. The revised procedures have been welcomed by WBC's partners who report discernable benefits for tutors.

What has been done to identify and enrol into learning under-represented groups?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection targeting of provision at some under-represented groups was considered to be insufficient, especially for disadvantaged, and low achieving families and people with low skills levels. WBC has made reasonable progress in widening participation to under-represented groups. Information for analysis of participation levels for different areas in the borough has enabled providers to better target learning at disadvantaged groups. The work of community development officers in areas of social deprivation has been effective in highlighting 'gaps' in the provision. A family learning steering group now reviews the breadth of provision, progression opportunities and the marketing of programmes. Through targeted work, such as the 'my family matters' and 'engaging local communities' projects, WBC has extended participation in learning into three of five identified deprived areas. The number of engaged learners with skills for life below level 2 on target projects has increased to 53% which is well above the percentage representation in the local community. WBC has maintained effective partnerships. Work with schools' liaison officers from Children's Services has contributed to increasing learner numbers on target projects and its partnership with Community Care services is successful in engaging learners with disabilities, learning difficulties, mental health problems and

social vulnerability. Strong links with its partner learning centres is providing good provision to help learners to develop independent living skills and job skills.

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How effective is the self-assessment process and how well has the post-inspection action plan been used to improve the quality of provision?	Reasonable progress
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The self-assessment process was judged to be thorough and inclusive at the previous inspection. The views of all stakeholders were used to develop and regularly review development plans. The self-assessment report (SAR), however, was not sufficiently evaluative and failed to identify some key areas for improvement. WBC has made reasonable progress in improving procedures for self-assessment and quality improvement planning. Senior managers have attended training for inspection and effective SAR writing and new approaches to the structure and content of the report have been adopted. Revision procedures, including input from partners, have been completed in line with action planning. Partner organisations make a full contribution to the process and take responsibility for the corporate report as being accurately representative of ACL provision. The report now has a greater evaluative content, clearly identifying strengths and weaknesses. Judgements in the report relate directly to the key questions in the common inspection framework and these judgements are better supported by evidence. For example, better use is made of participation and achievement data. A planned annual quality cycle is in place which provides for quarterly monitoring meetings with each partner organisation to assess performance and draft actions for improvement.

What progress has been made in introducing procedures for collecting and using information on learners' achievement and progress to improve services?	Reasonable progress
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Arrangements to assess and record learners' achievement and progression were judged to be a key area for improvement at the previous inspection. Target-setting was poor and learners largely assessed their own progress. The achievement data in most programmes was considered to be unreliable. Much effort has been put into dealing with these aspects, and progress is certainly reasonable. Working closely with its main partners, WBC has developed a common and simplified individual learning plan, a 'passport to learning', to aid initial and final assessment. This still relies largely on learners assessing their own starting levels, although the course aims and targets, and learners' personal objectives are now clearly set out. Evaluation of learners' achievement now reflects not only their own self-assessment, but the formal assessment of their objectives by tutors. The precision of assessments is guided by WBC's partner organisation and closely monitored by WBC's quality officer. The achievement data is now well recorded, more reliable and more easily

analysed. Data is routinely used to support WBC management reviews during regular quality monitoring visits and meetings with the partner organisations. Some progression data is now available, but this is still recognised as an area for development by WBC.