MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: Suffolk County Council
                       Community Learning and Skills
                       Development Service
Date of visit: 19 March 2009

Context

This monitoring visit follows the inspection in November 2007 at which Suffolk County Council's community learning and skills development service's overall effectiveness and capacity to improve were satisfactory. Leadership and management and equality of opportunity were satisfactory. Information and communication technology (ICT), leisure, travel and tourism, arts, media and publishing and preparation for life and work were all satisfactory. Family learning provision was good.

The County Council's community learning and skills development service (the service) is based in the adult and community services directorate of Suffolk County Council. Courses are offered in 11 sector subject areas. In 2007/08 the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funded provision for 9,210 learners on courses in approximately 200 community-based venues. The head of service is responsible for adult and community learning. Managers for learning standards and curriculum development, learning localities, learning support and resources, support the head of service.

The service contracts with Suffolk LSC for the provision of accredited and non-accredited adult and community learning. The community learning and skills development service directly delivers about 90% of the provision, which is designed for specific target groups. The remainder is subcontracted to two schools.

Suffolk is a large county with a population of approximately 670,000. Some urban and rural areas include areas with the highest levels of deprivation in the East of England. The working population has relatively low skill levels. The county's minority ethnic population is relatively small.

What progress has been made in improving achievement and standards, particularly success rates in information and communication technology courses?	Significant progress

At the previous inspection, success rates on ICT courses were low. The service reviewed its ICT offer and increased the number of learners and courses from 386 in 2006/07 to 625 in 2007/08. Significant progress has been made in improving success rates on accredited courses, which increased from 48% in 2006/07 to 92% in 2007/08. Success rates on non-accredited ICT courses improved from 60% to 79% in the same period. In family learning, success rates remain high. In 2007/08, the success rate on family literacy, language and numeracy courses was 87% and in wider family learning, it was 92%. Success rates on preparation for life and work programmes have improved from 75% in 2006/07 to 90% in 2007/08. Since the previous inspection, the service has a stronger focus on monitoring retention and achievement rates on all courses. Skills for Life success rates fell to 67% in 2007/08 as retention rates dropped. Retention rates on English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programmes also dropped, particularly on non-accredited courses. However, overall success rates were satisfactory. Retention rates improved on money management courses from 57% in 2006/07 to 80% in 2007/08.

The quality of provision

How much progress has the service made in improving lesson planning and the range of teaching and learning strategies?	Significant progress

The service has made significant progress in improving the range of teaching strategies and planning for learning. A wide range of staff development activity has taken place and detailed guidance has been produced to raise tutors' awareness of available resources. Two pilot projects, one of which focused on peer observation and the other on developing a coaching scheme, have usefully identified good practice which is now routinely shared. Particularly useful resource banks have been established and a range of materials produced to help new or less confident teachers develop their teaching practice and add interest and variety to lessons. The use of the virtual learning environment has increased and schemes of work and training materials are readily available for staff to use. Cameras, video recorders and voice recorders are now used across sector subject areas. In Skills for Life programmes, termly curriculum meetings have focused on further developing teaching methods and using ICT in the classroom. The Skills for Life section of the virtual learning environment has been redesigned and tutors' use of it increased. E-guides helpfully coach tutors in using equipment and exploring software. The service's observation of teaching and learning process has noted that tutors' grades have improved after receiving coaching and support.

What progress has been made in improving the processes to recognise and record progress and achievement?	Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection, few tutors made effective use of processes to record learners' progress and achievement. The service has made reasonable progress in implementing a more robust system to do this. Staff training has refreshed tutors' awareness. Recognising and recording progress and achievement has become central to teaching and learning on non-accredited programmes. A very useful handbook has been produced which clearly outlines the process and how tutors can provide evidence of learners' achievements. A new individual learning plan for short courses has been introduced to capture learners' starting points and outcomes more accurately. Tutors now make appropriate use of ICT resources such as photographs and video to record achievement. Individual learning plans on long courses are useful in recognising and recording learners' progress and achievements, especially when combined with detailed and precise targets attached to accredited awards. However, some individual learning plans still contain generic goals which are hard to measure.

Leadership and management

How much progress has the service made in improving the effectiveness of strategies to promote equality and diversity?	Reasonable progress

The previous inspection painted a mixed picture in relation to the promotion of equality and diversity. The key area for improvement identified was the insufficient analysis and review of outcomes for different groups of learners. Reasonable progress has been made in tackling this area for improvement. The service places appropriate priority on equality and diversity issues. Although an equality and diversity group has been formed to oversee performance in this area, it is newly established and has not yet used outcome data at a strategic level to develop provision. However, the service continues to focus on priority groups and has extended provision in line with its strategic plan, for example, by developing learning programmes for vulnerable adults in adult social care services. Robust data are now collected on the performance of minority ethnic groups, males and females and across different age groups. Data on learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are also collected. Middle managers receive regular data reports and use them to reflect on and plan local provision, within the context of identified priorities

What progress has been made in improving the sufficiency and rigour of quality improvement processes, particularly the development of the observation of teaching and learning scheme?	Significant progress

Inspectors were highly critical of the observation of teaching and learning scheme at the time of the previous inspection. Significant progress has been made in tackling

this area for improvement. A complete overhaul of the observation of teaching and learning scheme has been carried out. Observers now have a clear focus on learners' achievements and standards of work. Useful guidance and grading criteria have been produced and managers trained to carry out observations which are now well recorded, sufficiently critical and contain clear actions to help tutors improve. The moderation of observations is regular and robust. Paired and peer observations bring greater rigour to the scheme and support observers and tutors. A greater range of staff development activities are now available to help tutors improve their practice following an observation. All tutors were observed during the last year. Managers now have good information to direct the observation of teaching and learning to where it is most needed.

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in improving the quality and accuracy of the self-assessment and post-inspection action plan/improvement plan?	Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection, inspectors judged the self-assessment to be incomplete and insufficiently critical. Reasonable progress has been made in dealing with this area for improvement. The service now takes a more critical and analytical look at its own performance. Managers are more prepared to identify areas where progress or performance is not sufficient. They focus effectively on evidence to ensure that judgements are secure. The self-assessment now makes judgements about all of the provision, including the subcontracted provision. A thorough approach to developing the self-assessment has been adopted. Evidence is used effectively to support judgements. The moderation process provides good challenge and scrutiny of evidence and judgements. Staff and learner views are routinely sought. Managers are fully involved in developing the self-assessment report. Data are used effectively to support judgements. The service understands its strengths and areas for improvement and accurately identifies these in the self-assessment report. Inspectors agree with the community learning and skills development service on the progress made since the previous inspection. However, the self-assessment report is too long and unwieldy for routine use as a quality improvement tool. It fails to succinctly identify the key judgements. Managers recognise that improvements need to be made in the structure and content of the self-assessment report.