

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: Swindon Borough Council
Date of visit: 19 May 2009

Context

This monitoring visit follows the inspection in May 2008, at which Swindon Borough Council (SBC) was graded satisfactory for the effectiveness of the provision, capacity to improve, quality of provision and leadership and management and for its arrangements for equality of opportunity. Achievement and standards were graded good. Provision was judged to be satisfactory in community learning and good in family learning. SBC still holds a contract with Wiltshire and Swindon local area Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to provide adult and community learning and neighbourhood learning in deprived communities (NLDC). Much of SBC's provision continues to be subcontracted to the voluntary sector, independent providers and New College and Swindon College of Further Education. SBC had recruited 2,485 learners in 2008/09, about 1,200 fewer than at the previous inspection. Since inspection, a new Head of Learning and Engagement has been recruited.

Achievement and standards

How much progress has been made in improving overall success rates?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection, overall success rates on accredited courses were satisfactory and retention rates on all non-accredited provision was at least satisfactory. Since then, SBC has maintained or improved these rates. The overall success rate for the small number of short accredited courses has increased significantly from 47% in 2007/08 to 82% in 2008/09 to date. This has been due to an improvement in achievement rates, with all learners who completed their course achieving their target qualification. The retention rates on non-accredited programmes have been maintained at 90% in 2008/09. Retention rates on family learning programmes in 2008/09 are particularly high at 96% in the current year. Many learners continue to progress from First Steps provision onto mainstream courses, some 40% progressed this year. SBC managers are not routinely able to use data to evaluate in-year success or retention. Management information systems do not always have complete or current data due to delays in receiving information from some tutors or subcontractors.

Quality of provision

How much progress has been made in developing tutors' use of processes for recognising and recording progress and achievement (RARPA)?	Insufficient progress
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At the previous inspection, tutors' use of RARPA processes was not well developed. Individual learning plans for community learning learners were too general and many did not include measurable goals. Since then, SBC has provided further training for tutors and held awareness raising sessions at learner group meetings. Programme co-ordinators, tutors and learner representatives have been involved in discussing issues and planning future developments for individual learning plans and progress recording. Not all tutors have attended the training and differences in the monitoring and recording of learners' progress persist. For many programmes the onus for recording achievement and progress is placed with the learner. Learners are encouraged to record progress within their individual learning plans, which they retain. Tutors do not keep an ongoing copy to record or monitor learners' progress, but collect this at the end of the course. Tutors and learners do not routinely record personal and social development goals or achievement. Where personal and social goals are achieved, they are not recorded centrally.

How much progress has SBC made in ensuring that all learners have a suitable assessment of their literacy, numeracy and/or language needs?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection, assessment of learners' literacy, numeracy and language needs was not routinely carried out, and not at all on First Steps provision. Initial screening of learners is now more widespread. Some of the initial assessment procedures vary for each programme. Most learners now receive an appropriate initial assessment and screening of their skills and support needs. Tutors use a variety of written and oral activities, rather than standard tests, to assess learners from disadvantaged groups, who often have low skills levels, language difficulties, mental health problems and social difficulties. Retention rates by learners in these particular groups are high and learners' evaluation surveys indicate a high level of satisfaction with their learning. Tutors are developing processes to complete initial screening of learners' skills, experiences and aspirations and they use the findings well to signpost learners to programmes that meet their need.

Leadership and management

How much progress has SBC made in collecting and using learners' feedback to effect improvement?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection, the collection and use of learners' feedback was insufficient to secure quality improvement. Since then SBC has introduced effective

initiatives to improve the collection and use of learners' feedback. Learner ambassadors gather learners' feedback through alternative methods, like telephone surveys. SBC has checked each subcontractor's arrangements for gathering feedback from learners who leave their course early or are absent on the last session. As a result of this, many tutors now telephone learners who are not present on the last session to gain their feedback. Learners' feedback is being used more productively towards improvement. In the past year learners' feedback has led to improvement in course durations, equipment, support and refreshments. The management of the feedback systems has improved. Managers analyse the proportion of questionnaires returned for each course, and the data is held on a database, along with learners' comments. The evaluation questionnaire, which some learners experienced difficulty completing at the previous inspection, has yet to be adapted.

How much progress has SBC made in establishing quality improvement arrangements?	Insufficient progress
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At the previous inspection, the quality improvement arrangements were insufficiently established. Since then, SBC has written a quality framework and revised the paperwork for monitoring subcontracted providers. The analysis and evaluation of data remains insufficient. One of the subcontracted provider reviews is thorough, but the others have insufficient detail. Accompanying actions plans are weak and managers cannot check progress since the previous year, as they do not have access to the previous year's review. All subcontracted provider reviews this year have taken place very recently.

The procedure for the observation of teaching and learning remains insufficient. SBC now contracts their observation system to two organisations. There is too much inconsistency between these organisations, who use different paperwork and criteria. SBC plans to moderate the grades, but this has not yet happened this year. A very small proportion of tutors have been observed in 2008/09, and these observations have taken place very recently. Observers do not refer to the previous year's observation reports or actions for the tutor. SBC does not use the results of observations to identify trends or the impact on the quality of teaching and learning. A spreadsheet for planning and recording the observations is incomplete.

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How much progress has SBC made in improving the self-assessment and action planning process?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection, the self-assessment process was insufficiently thorough or evaluative. Since then, the Head of Learning and Engagement has revised the format and process. The updated self-assessment report's judgements are based on judgements from the previous inspection along with feedback from learners, tutors and subcontracted providers. This provides an appropriate position statement that

includes areas for improvement and proposed solutions. However, SBC makes insufficient use of success rate data and observations of teaching and learning in the self-assessment process. The post inspection action plan is detailed and managers regularly review progress. Many of these actions are due to come to fruition in August 2009 through the revisions to the contracting and commissioning process for providers. At the previous inspection, the action plan was too focused on the volume of activity to be completed. The post inspection action plan is more detailed and contains expected outcomes and success criteria. Managers have prioritised actions and colour coded the progress they are making.