

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider: Plymouth City Council
Date of visit: 26 May 2009

Context

Plymouth City Council (the council) is a large unitary authority, created under the local government reorganisation of April 1998. The Plymouth Adult and Community Learning Service, PACLS, (the service) is located in the directorate for children's services and has an assistant director who is supported by a principal adviser and a principal adult education officer. Three curriculum managers have responsibility for curriculum commissioning and development, quality improvement and service performance. Core teams, which include learning development managers, quality, data, and assessment co-ordinators, learning advisers and team support workers provide local co-ordination and support at each of the nine learning centres. The West of England Learning and Skills Council (LSC) contract the service to provide adult and community learning programmes.

The service delivers its courses through nine learning centres which include the five community colleges of Eggbuckland, Estover, John Kitto, Lipson and Stoke Damerel. In 2007/08, the service provided engagement activities in a range of curriculum areas to learners amounting to a total of 6,345 learner enrolments. Of these, 2,006 enrolments were for further education (FE) funded courses representing 33% of the educational offer for 2007/08. The service offers programmes in 12 subject sector areas.

This monitoring visit follows the inspection in February 2007, when inspectors judged the council's overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, achievement and standards, quality of provision, and leadership and management to be satisfactory. Inspectors judged equality of opportunity to be good. Learning provision in information and communications technology, languages, literature and culture, preparation for life and work, and family learning was satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

How much progress has been made to improve achievement and standards since the previous inspection?	Significant progress
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At the previous inspection, achievement and standards were judged to be satisfactory. Retention rates were high, and remain so at around 85% for 2007/08. Success rates for the FE provision have risen from 68% in 2006/07 to 79% in

2007/08 for short courses. Success rates for the personal community development learning courses have risen from 75% in 2006/07 to 91% in 2007/08 for short courses and from 63% in 2006/07 to 78% in 2007/08 for long courses. Over the last three years this represents a significant improvement. The service has trained staff in assessment, and in providing constructive feedback to learners. Course documentation is good and reflects that the good standard of learners' work has been maintained.

The service does not analyse attendance data across the provision although data is collected for each course. Learners who fail to attend on three occasions are deemed to have left the course. The service has started to collect progression data across the provision and has plans to analyse this information. Progression on access to higher education (HE) courses is good at 80% for the year 2007/08. There are examples of good individual progression with several learners on family learning courses eventually becoming tutors.

How much progress has been made to improve the long course success rates?	Significant progress
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The service has shown poor performance on the FE funded long courses in particular. The success rates for these courses was 40% for 2005/06, 54% for 2007/07, and has now risen to 78% for 2007/08. The service took action to improve overall performance but with special attention to these courses. The service made use of the challenge, support, standards and intervention team. In the past tutors gave potential learners insufficient information, advice and guidance for them to make an informed decision about the correct course. Many learners enrolled on courses that led to qualifications which they chose not to take, lowering the course success rates. The service has now improved the quality and the amount of information, advice and guidance through the development of better initial assessment. They have better screening to ensure that those learners who do not wish to take a qualification do not receive government funding but are not discouraged from completing the course.

Quality of provision

How much progress has been made to improve the arrangements for recognising and recording learners' progress and achievement?	Reasonable progress
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The service has made reasonable progress in improving the arrangements for recognising and recording learners' progress and achievement. This was identified as an area for improvement at the previous inspection in most of the curriculum areas. Initial assessment of learners' needs was weak. Training for tutors has taken place. Assessment of needs is thorough and tutors use a range of approaches suitable for their subject area. Information and advice has improved and learners enrol on appropriate courses. The service has achieved Matrix accreditation.

The service has developed an improved document for target setting and recording progress, customised by tutors to suit individual courses. Tutors receive training in monitoring progress and setting suitable targets. Some targets set for learners are increasingly challenging, particularly in art and languages. However, the service recognises that some tutors require clearer understanding and continued training is planned.

Leadership and management

How much progress has been made to improve target setting for managing the provision?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection, target-setting for managing the provision was poor. Targets for curriculum areas were weak. The service has made reasonable progress in rectifying this area for improvement. Managers now agree targets with subject specialists, centre managers and tutors to improve teaching and learning, and the outcomes for learners. Quality co-ordinators monitor performance against targets and reports are provided for meetings at all levels. Discussions focus more on the learners' experience.

Targets for subcontractors were also weak. All the subcontractors had the same percentage targets for the development of Skills for Life and first steps provision. The service has now established a clear process for negotiating targets and monitoring performance. Subcontractors have a clearer understanding of targets and their role in working with PACLS. They work more closely. For example, subcontractors' tutors attend PACLS' staff development sessions. Quality improvement meetings to share good practice are regular and the PACLS' manager attends a subcontractor meeting every three months to evaluate progress and ensure targets are met.

How much progress has been made to improve the arrangements for monitoring performance?	Reasonable progress
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The service has made reasonable progress to improve arrangements for monitoring performance. The management of information has improved. The system is now centralised with a dedicated team to ensure data is robust. Reports are prepared for staff to analyse performance at more frequent intervals. Quality co-ordinators maintain a central database that records information gained in quality co-ordinator visits and observations.

New arrangements for the observation process and the checks made by quality improvement co-ordinators have been effective in moderating and improving tutors' teaching and assessment practice. The number of observations of sessions has doubled to 100% of tutors in 2008/09. The continuing professional development programme has broadened to provide greater focus on the quality of teaching and learning. Tutors awarded a grade 1 are observed by new or less experienced tutors.

Learner satisfaction is checked on a termly basis. Questionnaires provide increasingly critical responses. Early action is now taken when concerns are expressed. The recording of progress and target setting was an area for improvement at the last inspection. PACLS now makes regular checks of paperwork and samples files.

How much progress has been made to improve the self-assessment and post-inspection action plans?	Reasonable progress
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The service has made reasonable progress to improve the self-assessment process. The process is now more inclusive with staff from each curriculum area assessing performance and providing supporting evidence for judgements. Quality co-ordinators provide an overview of each centre's performance. Information on learners' progress and achievement by funding stream, curriculum area, centre and tutor is analysed for self-assessment purposes. PACLS has a thorough and detailed development plan that responds closely to the areas for improvement identified in inspection. The plan includes targets with dates for the achievement of actions. Staff understand targets clearly and are now fully informed of progress in meetings and by management reports. Actions are scrutinised in staff meetings and updated frequently. The analysis of an increased number of observations by a small, well-trained core team supports a staff development plan that focuses on improving the quality of the learners' experience. Improvement action plans are effective with overall success rates improving over a three-year period.