# MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of Provider:  Somerset Skills and Learning (formerly Somerset County Council)

Date of visit:  4 August 2009

## Context

This monitoring visit follows the inspection in December 2005 of Somerset County Council's adult and community learning. At the inspection the overall effectiveness of the provision was satisfactory. Leadership and management, and equality of opportunity were good. Quality improvement was satisfactory. Provision was good in two sector subject areas and satisfactory in another six.

Since the inspection the council has restructured and merged its adult and community learning provision and the training offered by its work-based learning arm, Somerset County Training, to form Somerset Skills and Learning (SSL). SSL sits in the resources directorate of the county council.

SSL recruits approximately 14,000 learners each year. Of these more than 10,500 follow learner responsive programmes under contract with the Dorset and Somerset Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Learner responsive programmes include adult safeguarded learning, further education, family learning and Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities (NLDC). These programmes are the primary focus of the visit and this report. SSL also provides employer responsive provision under LSC contracts for apprenticeship and Train to Gain programmes, as well as providing programmes financed through the European Social Fund. In all, it offers learning across 15 sector subject areas.

The group manager leads the service supported by four senior managers, 10 curriculum managers, and six team leaders. Programme leaders and lead tutors with specific curriculum expertise support around 300 tutors. SSL operates through 20 community-based centres across Somerset.

## Achievement and standards

| How much progress has been made with improving success rates since the previous inspection? | Insufficient progress |
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At the previous inspection retention and achievement rates were satisfactory in five areas inspected and high on most courses in a further two areas. Since then SSL has made insufficient progress in improving success rates

Over the three subsequent years for which data are complete, success rates in the mainly non-accredited adult safeguarded learning programmes have risen from 79% in 2005/06 to 85% in 2007/08. Retention rates have remained largely unchanged, dropping from 87% to 85% between 2005/06 and 2006/07 and rising to 88% in 2007/08.

By contrast, on further education funded courses, all of which lead to external accreditation, success rates declined significantly over the three-year period, from 74% in 2005/06, to 63% in 2007/08. These courses represent around half the guided learning hours of the provision. Most recent data suggests an improvement in 2008/09. However these data are not sufficiently complete to judge reliably.

| What is the position concerning long course success rates, and how much progress has been made in their improvement? | Reasonable progress |
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In 2006/07 a small but significant proportion of long course success rates were below minimum levels of performance set by the LSC. The position deteriorated in 2007/08, when 23% of this provision was below the minimum levels set.

SSL was made aware of problems concerning 2006/07 rates in March 2008. Senior managers took rapid remedial action from November, implementing an action plan and sourcing externally provided training. Managers identified significant failings in the quality of the service's data on learners' performance, but too late to make any substantial improvements to the accuracy of its 2007/08 statistics on learners' success.

SSL now uses newly purchased software effectively to analyse and report on learners' performance. It has remedied widespread shortcomings in data entry. It has ensured managers and staff across SSL have a shared understanding of service data, and provided useful training in data use at curriculum level. Data are now a routine topic at regular performance review meetings. Improved pre-course information and recruitment procedures match learners more consistently to suitable programmes.

Most recent in-year data for 2008/09 suggests a significant reduction in the proportion of provision below minimum levels of performance thresholds but data are not yet complete enough to judge this reliably.

Quality of provision

| How much progress has there been in improving the range of programmes in literacy numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)? | Reasonable progress |
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At the previous inspection the range of literacy and numeracy provision was narrow, mainly confined to courses leading to accreditation at level 2. SSL has made reasonable progress in improving the range of programmes. It now offers literacy and numeracy programmes at all levels from entry 1 to level 2. It continues to offer ESOL at these levels. On return to learn courses, it has improved the integration of literacy and numeracy and tutors' capacity to provide literacy and numeracy support, areas for improvement at the previous inspection. The proportion of learners on these courses working towards literacy and numeracy goals has increased significantly to around 80%. Additionally SSL has provided literacy and numeracy training in 2008/09 to more than 130 employed learners through Train to Gain, and to unemployed learners following employability programmes. All SSL's lead tutors of literacy numeracy and ESOL now have appropriate subject specialist qualifications at level 4 or 5.

The volume and spread of discrete literacy numeracy and ESOL provision in the community has reduced. Changes to contracts for 2009/10 will significantly reduce places available through Train to Gain. SSL has ambitious plans to integrate literacy and numeracy across its provision. However it is too early for this largely new initiative to demonstrate significant impact.

| How much progress has there been in improving initial assessment, particularly in those areas where it was an area for improvement? | Significant progress |
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SSL has made significant progress in improving initial assessment and remedying areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. It has resolved the lack of clarity in the initial assessment process for health, public services and care. Applicants now receive individual interviews which include effective assessment of vocational skills and routine initial assessment of their literacy and numeracy needs. For learners on courses in sport leisure and recreation the service has rectified areas for improvement in recording new learners' skills, and their completion of health questionnaires. A single document now usefully combines assessments with learners' individual learning plans.

On programmes for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities, significant improvements include the development of initial assessment in different formats catering well for the varied needs of different learner groups. SLL has remedied deficiencies in the recording of these learners' skills and competencies and uses the information gathered at initial assessment appropriately when setting individual learning targets.

Across the service as a whole, the arrangements for initial and diagnostic assessment of learners' literacy, numeracy and ESOL needs have improved, including those for learners on short family learning courses where they were previously insufficient.

| How much progress has been made in improving arrangements for recognising and recording progress and achievement on non-accredited provision | Significant progress |
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At the previous inspection the recording of learners' progress was ineffective in a number of curriculum areas. SSL has made significant progress in improving the recognition and recording of learners' progress and achievement (RARPA) across its provision. A strong management emphasis on change and improvement in RARPA practice has seen effective training for tutors and curriculum teams and the development of improved systems and practice for initial assessment, recording progress reviews and generating effective individual learning plans.

Written descriptions of each course now feature very specific and achievable learning aims and outcomes. SSL carefully measures learners' progress collectively and individually against these aims and outcomes, and against any additional aims agreed between the learner and tutor. Learners' progress reviews routinely include a written record of their experience of learning during a session, often recorded week by week. Tutors respond constructively, for example identifying possible strategies for the learner to use to overcome any barriers to learning. The written reviews focus clearly on problem solving and encouraging progress.

Managers assess the quality of progress reviews and individual learning plans regularly. SSL has identified a need to improve the quality of some tutors' target setting, action planning and recording, and to ensure more consistent embedding of RARPA practice in teaching.

Leadership and management

| What is the extent of progress in the quality assurance and improvement of teaching and learning? | Reasonable progress |
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SSL has made reasonable progress in improving its teaching and learning observation system and remedying areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. Planning and organisation of observations is now good. Very detailed guidelines for observers describe the observation methods well and indicate the characteristics of different grades. The number of trained observers has increased to 30 and subject specialists now carry out all observations. Around 80% of tutors had observations during 2008/09, a clear improvement over the three year cycle operating at the previous inspection. Action planning to improve practice following an observation is now routine and mainly appropriate.

Panels moderating observation grades suitably include a subject specialist. However, their moderation focuses too much on the process of observation rather than its outcomes. Moderation is not sufficiently timely or frequent.

The proportion of sessions receiving good or better grades has increased progressively year on year, and the proportion graded inadequate is very low. However grades in observation records do not always match the supporting evidence sufficiently closely. Observers do not always focus sufficiently on the quality of learning during sessions. SSL recognises observers need more training on evaluative reporting.

| How much progress has there been in improving the quality monitoring of Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities' provision? | Significant progress |
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At the previous inspection the quality of NLDC provision was good, but not sufficiently monitored. SSL has made significant progress in improving its quality monitoring, successfully remedying areas for improvement.

SSL first implemented new, comprehensive monitoring arrangements and has developed them further, year on year. Since 2006, thorough reviews of each project include clear evaluations of the quality of planning, finance and funding, the suitability of staff, vetting arrangements, resources and the quality of teaching and learning. Additionally, formal reviews now cover project scope, impact, and sustainability effectively. SSL has trained and developed project leaders in effective project management. Annual project evaluations now provide a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness and impact of each project. Communications and the sharing of good practice are now good.

The use of RARPA is good. Initial assessments form the basis for highly personalised approaches to learning. Project leaders match the format and content of individual learning plans specifically to the needs of each project. Assessment, the tracking of learners' progress and progression rates are good. SSL funds some community tutors to progress onto first level teaching courses. Recognising their effectiveness, SSL has awarded subcontractor status to some NLDC project groups.

Self-assessment and improvement planning

| How much progress has there been in improving the effectiveness of self-assessment and the quality improvement plan to improve the provision? | Reasonable progress |
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The self-assessment process was satisfactory at the previous inspection, when self-assessment covered only adult learning provision. Since then the adult learning and work-based learning functions of the Somerset County Council have merged. SSL has made reasonable progress in producing a self-assessment report and quality improvement plan which reflects the merged provision.

The current self-assessment report, completed in December 2008, is the first to fully integrate reporting of the different aspects of SSL's provision. It is more closely aligned to *The Common Inspection Framework* than previous reports. Regular quality improvement planning and reviews contribute well to the self-assessment cycle. The self-assessment process is highly inclusive; curriculum teams are closely involved in developing self-assessment at curriculum area level. The self-assessment report and quality improvement plan are comprehensive and detailed.

The self-assessment report contains too much description and background information and not enough evaluation. It does not provide an adequate analysis of key strengths or areas for improvement for SSL as a whole. The curriculum area sections are too long and too repetitive to be fully effective. The accompanying quality improvement plan contains much that is useful, but does not sufficiently prioritise or draw together common themes.