

Staffordshire County Council

Focused monitoring visit report

Unique reference number: 54584

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Last day of inspection: 3 February 2010

Type of provider: Local Authority

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Staffordshire County Council (the Council) contracts with Staffordshire Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to provide adult and community learning (ACL) and work-based learning (WBL). The ACL service has 15,436 part-time learners and is part of the Culture and Libraries division within the Communities directorate. Much of the personal and community development and family learning provision is subcontracted to five colleges, over 200 schools and voluntary and community sector organisations. It delivers directly first-steps, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) introduction to information technology (IT) and literacy and numeracy programmes. The Council's Quality Learning Service (QLS) work-based learning programmes are part of the School Improvement division within the Council's Children Young People and Families directorate. This includes 65 apprenticeships in supporting teaching and learning in schools and in business administration and law.

The Council was inspected in February 2009. Effectiveness of provision, capacity to improve, achievement and standards, quality of provision, leadership and management and equality of opportunity were satisfactory. Adult and Community Learning and WBL were satisfactory but Train to Gain (Education and Training) was inadequate. The Council no longer holds a Train to Gain contract. The report focuses on the themes explored during the visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

<p>What progress has been made to ensure self-assessment covers all aspects of the Common Inspection Framework makes good use of data and contributes effectively to quality improvement?</p>	<p>Reasonable progress</p>
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At the previous inspection in February 2009, the Council demonstrated satisfactory capacity to improve. Self-assessment was consultative and inclusive. The Council continues to consult widely to support the self-assessment process. The 2009 reports for ACL and WBL follow the new Common Inspection Framework and all aspects are appropriately graded. Self-assessment reports for sub-contractors and direct delivery are moderated to ensure consistency in their findings. The Council has improved the use of data in the self-assessment report. The report is sufficiently focussed and self critical.

The Council has maintained its strong focus on securing improvements following the full inspection in 2009 despite significant restructuring. A joint service post-inspection action plan was put in place primarily aimed at the successful completion of the Train to Gain contract. This was implemented successfully. Quality improvement plans (QIPs) are monitored effectively at monthly management meetings. However, data

are not used sufficiently to set measurable targets or to identify the level of improvements required. Identified actions for improvement are not evaluated systematically for impact or evidence of improvements. The Council recognises the need to embed further the new ACL management structure and improved quality assurance arrangements, particularly in the subcontracted provision.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made to improve or maintain outcomes for learners and overall success rates in 2008/09? Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection, achievement and standards were judged to be satisfactory overall. The Council has made reasonable progress to maintain learners' outcomes. ACL, ESOL and family literacy, language and numeracy (FLLN) learners' success rates in foundation qualifications remains high. Differences between the achievements of different groups of learners are minimal. Success rates for learners on non-accredited programmes are high according to the Council's own records. However, a few subcontractors have not used the stages for recognising and recording progress and achievement (RARPA) effectively. This is currently being improved.

Overall and timely success rates for apprentices are very good and well above national rates at 100% and 69% respectively. Overall and timely success rates for advanced apprentices were very good in 2008/09. The contract for Train to Gain ceased in July 2009 and most of the 87 learners still on programme at the last inspection completed their qualification successfully.

The Council has good arrangements to ensure learners feel safe. Learners spoken to during inspection felt safe and were confident that the procedures to prevent bullying and harassment were effective.

Quality of provision

What progress has taken place to implement the Skills for Life strategy? Significant progress

The Council has made significant progress in improving key skills provision for WBL learners. Key skills are embedded well into the curriculum, particularly with the technical certificate work. Arrangements for testing and referral are clear and those for certification of prior achievement are thorough. The increase in key skills pass rates is excellent. Over an 18 month period they have improved from 25% to 98%. The management of Skills for Life has been further strengthened with the appointment of two programme leaders for literacy and numeracy in ACL.

Actions to further develop Skills for Life provision are particularly well thought out. The analysis of community needs is thorough and plans to provide Skills for Life drop

in centres are well advanced. The service has been successful in developing a whole council approach. Arrangements for improving Skills for Life provision in ACL are clear. The restructuring has resulted in a better focus on testing and support, with managers having closer links with teaching staff. Staff awareness has been raised through a useful guidance booklet. The requirements of sub-contractors to provide Skills for Life lack clarity and reporting is insufficiently detailed.

What progress has been made in establishing effective arrangements to support learner’s understanding of equality and diversity in work-based learning? Significant progress

The previous inspection reported insufficient promotion and monitoring of equality and diversity. QLS has made significant progress and taken prompt action to rectify the issues identified in WBL. Equality and diversity issues are extremely well embedded into schemes of work and lesson plans and aspects of each topic are well documented. Training and development for WBL staff is now good and focuses well on maintaining and further developing their knowledge and understanding. An excellent range of detailed and thoughtful questions and scenarios are used well to reinforce learners’ understanding. These are linked well to workplace training activities.

Significant improvements have been made to ensure that equality and diversity are discussed sufficiently. The equality and diversity action plan is well structured and actions are detailed, time-limited and focus well on the outcomes and how they will be monitored. Documents, including the policy, have been improved significantly. The staff handbook is a good example of how to deal well with equality and diversity issues. Rigorous analysis of applicants’ data is used well to ensure this process is fair and free from discrimination. Links with ACL provision have been established and good practice is shared between the two services effectively.

What progress has taken place to improve the implementation of (RARPA) in non-accredited provision? Insufficient progress

The implementation of RARPA was an area for improvement at the previous inspection. The Council has made insufficient progress in improving this area. A new development is the audit process for reviewing individual learning plan (ILPs). Some initial analysis has highlighted areas for further improvement. However, the development is not sufficiently advanced to evidence measurable improvement. Staff training and development activities are appropriate and cover the process of recognising and recording progress and achievement. However, it has not yet dealt fully with practice at session level. In those ILPs examined, records are descriptive rather than evaluating the learning outcomes for each session.

The management of sub-contractors is insufficiently rigorous. The strategy for ensuring that class targets are appropriate does not include the requirement for sub-contractors to monitor and evaluate these or to submit summary statistics for the Council’s evaluation. The Council undertakes classroom visits but these are not

always carried out by subject specialists who are able to recognise the appropriateness of learning goals. The council has agreed with subcontractors a definition of achievement for non-accredited provision which is well below its present standard of performance. It has recognised the need to set more challenging contractual targets to maintain high standards.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in securing better management and quality assurance of work based learning? Significant progress

At the previous inspection the quality assurance of the work-based learning provision was informal rather than systematic for the relatively small number of apprentices. In WBL and Train to Gain, data were not used effectively to monitor the provision. The management of WBL has improved significantly. The WBL manager has implemented successfully a detailed post-inspection action plan and made particularly good use of data to bring the Train to Gain contract successfully to a close. Learners completed their qualification in the time available. This involved rigorous monitoring of subcontractors, effective monitoring of data and individual learners' progress and improved processing of individual learning records.

Following the inspection, the WBL team has made significant progress in establishing more formalised and systematic quality processes with improved delegation of responsibilities. Two new assessors have been appointed recently. The team now make good use of management information and data to track and monitor learners' progress and identify learners at risk of not completing their programme. The WBL manager recognises the need for more formal target setting and benchmarking.

What progress has the provider made in managing the restructuring process following the previous inspection? Reasonable progress

Following the inspection in 2009, the Council initiated significant changes in the proposed vision for Staffordshire's ACL and WBL. It is making good progress in delivering this new service. Senior managers have received training to better understand and manage the process of change and the new structure is supporting increased cross-directorate working. The new levels of reporting are contributing to an improved level of understanding of ACL and WBL within the Council. The self-assessment report acknowledges there is much still to do, but the actions already completed are within the proposed timescale.

The WBL team is now stable and strengthened by additional staff to support the work of the WBL manager. However, the ambitious increase in apprentice numbers will challenge the council to ensure a consistent approach across its services. The Council will face challenges to ensure a consistent approach across the council services. The quality manager has initiated a number of new initiatives to improve the management of subcontracted provision but it is too early to assess the impact

of these measures. Contractual agreements and monitoring visit records have improved. However, the Council is not fully successful in enforcing compliance when subcontractors fail to provide the relevant information. Contract meetings are not sufficiently rigorous in driving improvement in this area.

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