

Northumberland Adult Learning Service

Focused monitoring visit report

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Northumberland Adult Learning Service (NALS) is part of the Learning and Skills and Family Support Division within the People Directorate of Northumberland County Council. Provision is delivered across Northumberland in a range of venues and in fourteen subject areas. NALS contracts with the North East Learning and Skills Council (LSC), with around 90% of provision government funded. Learning where the main aim is a qualification represents 57% of the provision including further education provision for adults and Entry to Employment (E2E) for younger learners. Employer provision includes apprenticeships and Train to Gain programmes. A Head of Service manages NALS with support from four performance managers.

NALS was inspected in October 2008. Effectiveness of provision, achievement and standards, quality of provision, leadership and management, equality of opportunity and capacity to improve were all satisfactory. Of the five subject areas inspected: health, public services and care; information and communication technology (ICT); arts, media and publishing; preparation for life and work; business, administration and law; all were satisfactory. This report focuses on the themes explored during the visit, which include the two mandatory themes of outcomes for learners and self-assessment and improvement planning.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How effectively is self-assessment and improvement planning used to bring about improvements?	Reasonable Progress
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At the previous inspection, the self-assessment process was satisfactory overall, but teaching staff contributed insufficiently to the self-assessment process. Improvements include a good self-assessment cycle chart that details the continuous process of self-assessment. The process is now well managed and more inclusive of tutors' contributions. Staff attendance at focus groups generates feedback that contributes to the self-assessment report. Formal programme reviews, carried out by tutors, have been introduced and evidence from these is used to develop the report. However, some reviews are not fully completed and do not contain essential data on success rates which should contribute to an overall judgment about the success of the learning programme. The self-assessment report is too descriptive, insufficiently judgemental and refers insufficiently to supporting evidence. Comparison of NALS success rate data with national data is insufficient.

Good new arrangements have been implemented for the validation of the leadership and management and subject area reports. The quality improvement plan details clear actions, measurable outcomes, outcome completion target dates and clearly identifies staff responsibilities. However, it does not clearly indicate the impact of

actions on the learner and some outcomes are insufficiently detailed and specific. Arrangements for reviewing progress and updating the plan are appropriate.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving outcomes for learners? Reasonable Progress

NALS has made reasonable progress in improving outcomes for learners. At the previous inspection, outcomes for learners were satisfactory. During the period 2006/07 success rates on the largest type of provision offered by NALS, programmes leading to qualifications, have improved consistently and are currently satisfactory at around three percentage points below the national rate. A satisfactory proportion of learners on learning for social and personal development courses achieve their learning goals. Overall success rates in work-based learning are low; they declined in the period 2007/08 to 2008/09. Success rates for all apprentices declined by almost five percentage points and are significantly below the national rate. Advanced apprenticeship success rates in 2008/09 were around 5% below the national rate. The apprenticeship programme success rate is very low, nearly 17 percentage points below the national rate. Train to Gain success rates declined slightly between 2007/08 and 2008/09 to just below the national rate. Learners on E2E provision progressed satisfactorily during 2008/09 although their progression rate in the previous year was 10% higher. Managers are fully aware of the issues in work-based learning and have devised a range of appropriate strategies to deal with these. Current learners on work-based learning programmes are making satisfactory or better progress.

Quality of provision

What progress has the provider made in improving the quality of teaching and learning and the promotion of equality and diversity through teaching and learning? Reasonable Progress

The previous inspection team judged that whilst some teaching was good, particularly in preparation for life and work and ICT, too much teaching was satisfactory. Tutors insufficiently reinforced equality and diversity within teaching and training sessions. The provider has made reasonable progress in improving the quality of teaching. NALS has been successful in acquiring funding to deliver a good staff development and support programme clearly focused on improving teaching and learning. A range of useful resources have been developed and implemented to support staff and their understanding of how to more effectively use a variety of techniques to improve teaching and learning, assessment and the use of technology. Tutors and learners in many lessons are increasingly using technology to effectively develop skills and knowledge whilst in the classroom. A virtual learning environment has been implemented but its use is still underdeveloped in many subject areas. A strong focus is now placed on providing learning activities to meet the specific needs of individual learners. Whilst there is more reinforcement of equality and diversity

during teaching and learning, not all subjects are consistently using potential opportunities. The provider recognises that whilst teaching and learning is improving it still judges it to be satisfactory in the most recent self-assessment report.

What progress has the provider made in improving the quality and effectiveness of learner progress reviews and target setting? Reasonable Progress

NALS has made reasonable progress in improving the quality of learners' progress reviews and target setting. At the previous inspection initial assessment was judged satisfactory, but some staff failed to set challenging targets. The monitoring of learners' progress was satisfactory but in work-based learning some progress reviews were ineffective. The recognising and recording progress and achievement process was appropriate but inconsistently applied. Reviewing of progress and target setting has been a key aspect of staff development since the inspection. Processes to ensure the consistent application of procedures within different types of learning have been strengthened. Individual learning plans are complemented by the frequent completion of learning logs recording individual learner's and tutor's reflection on the progress made towards achievement of personal goals. For work-based learners links between individual learning plans, assessment plans and progress reviews are now clearer and much improved. Progress reviews are more effective but too often do not include comments by employers. Processes for the reinforcement of learners' understanding of equality and diversity through progress reviews have improved but the records of discussions are insufficiently detailed.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in improving quality processes to ensure that they drive continuous improvement? Insufficient Progress

At the time of the last inspection some aspects of quality improvement arrangements were incomplete. NALS has made reasonable progress in improving quality improvement arrangements. Although many new developments have been introduced, the arrangements for quality improvement remain incomplete. A good, new, quality handbook has been written and distributed to all staff. A new, appropriate process for the observation of teaching and learning has been introduced and staff have been trained in observation. The plan that all tutors would be observed during 2009/10 has not been achieved and insufficient observations have been completed. The observation schedule has not been adhered to and too few observations have been completed. Following observations, improvement actions are identified although these are not sufficiently followed up in a timely way to ensure that they have been completed. There is too much emphasis on teaching and insufficient emphasis on learning. Records of the observations do not sufficiently provide detailed feedback on equality and diversity and how the needs of individual learners are met. Arrangements to audit key stages of the learners' journey have

been devised and introduced, although feedback is not used effectively to contribute to quality improvement.

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