

London Borough of Waltham Forest Adult and Community Learning

Focused monitoring visit report

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

At the time of its last inspection in April 2009, the London Borough of Waltham Forest's Community Learning and Skills Service (the service), was funded by the North London Learning and Skills Council to provide adult and community, and work-based, learning in 12 subject areas. Nearly a third of the adult and community learning was First Steps provision. The service provided learning at 36 community venues and 34 school and pre-school settings. Some 3,500 adult and community learners and 94 work-based learners attended the provision.

The inspection judged most aspects of provision to be good. Overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, leadership and management, equality of opportunity and the quality of provision were good. Achievement and standards were satisfactory overall. In the subject areas inspected health, public services and care were good, as were family learning and community learning. Literacy and numeracy were satisfactory.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made, through self-assessment and improvement planning, in improving the provision? Reasonable progress

At the last inspection the service demonstrated good capacity to improve. Quality improvement arrangements were clear. Effective action was taken to share good practice. Reasonable progress has been made in consolidating the service's arrangements for improvement planning. Following the last inspection, senior managers quickly focused staff on areas for improvement. A wide-ranging review of the curriculum was undertaken in the summer of 2009. Analysis of 2008/09 success rates identified low success rates in accredited learning and thorough action planning took place. The service has appropriately targeted improvement in retention rates, better attendance at examinations and more systematic recording of learners' outcomes as key actions. Suitable strategies for improvement are detailed in the service operational plan and in individual curriculum improvement plans. Progress is being effectively monitored by managers at all levels with termly updates at curriculum and service level. Reasonable progress has been achieved in all the themes for improvement. The response to a survey commissioned by inspectors was impressive with almost 1,000 learners and 27 employers providing feedback. The great majority of returns were highly, or very highly, positive regarding the service. Less positive aspects related to the quality of learners' preparation for further progression and to aspects of teaching and learning in some curriculum areas.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving the low success rates for learners on accredited courses? Reasonable progress

At the last inspection, achievement and standards were satisfactory. Based on 2007/08 data, overall success rates had improved in many sector subject areas, although success rates for long courses had declined. Subsequent 2008/09 success rate data, however, showed low success rates for accredited long, short and very short courses. The service has made reasonable progress in redressing this area for improvement. A thorough review of the curriculum was undertaken soon after the inspection and both retention and achievement were targeted for improvement. Better pre-course advice and guidance are now provided to learners through open enrolment events. The mode of delivery and in some cases the qualifications offered have been changed to provide shorter, more intensive periods of learning. The service has worked hard to ensure that tutors are fully aware of the need to reduce the number of learners who did not take final examinations and there is now a greater focus on the timely completion of external verification. It is too early to judge the full effectiveness of actions taken, but incomplete 2009/10 data show an improvement in success rates on accredited courses of some 8 percentage points, compared to a similar period in 2008/09. Higher achievement rates account for much of the improvement.

How much progress has been made in improving learner retention rates? Reasonable progress

Retention rates at the last inspection were low in some areas. In 2007/08, retention rates had fallen below 80% on 11 of 91 courses. A similar pattern of low retention occurred in 2008/09. Reasonable progress has been made in improving retention rates. The service has taken a broad, wide-ranging approach to identifying the causes of poor attendance. Challenging improvement targets have been set for each tutor, based on a detailed review of achievement and retention figures for each course. These are closely monitored by curriculum coordinators during the year through improved management information reports, learner feedback, and targeted observations of teaching and learning. Revised course structures and modes of delivery have reduced the length of some courses and made them more accessible and responsive to learners who, for example, are employed or who have caring responsibilities. The delivery of some learning has become more flexible, with off-site and remote access to course materials, home visits, fast tracking for more able learners and weekend intensive courses. Learners' engagement and attendance are starting to improve. It is too early to judge the overall improvement in retention rates, but 2009/10 provisional data for accredited learning courses show a small improvement of 2 percentage points to almost 93%.

Quality of the provision

What progress has been made to better identify and support learners with specific learning difficulties? Reasonable progress

Although advice, support and guidance were satisfactory at the last inspection, the identification of learners with learning difficulties was not early enough. Reasonable progress has been made in resolving this. The service has taken appropriate action to promote more widely its support services for learners and to encourage them to declare their support needs. The number of self-declarations has increased by 69% in the current year. Skills for Life learners now undertake an initial assessment at the open enrolment sessions. Identification and subsequent action planning to address their additional needs have improved. Supporting dyslexic and autistic learners is now part of the mandatory training for all tutors as part of their continuous professional development. Learners who require support with specific learning difficulties are appropriately referred to specialist support. This is effective in addressing the needs of most learners. However, support is not always immediately available in a few cases. A newly appointed coordinator, with lead responsibility for learning difficulties and disabilities, will start in July 2010 to give greater focus and emphasis to this area.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in improving the services' accommodation? Reasonable progress

At the last inspection, whilst resources were satisfactory overall, accommodation in some locations was poor, with old buildings and rooms with insufficient environmental control. In addition to a wide range of community venues, the service has four of its own centres, the majority of which need modernising and improvements to their fabric. This is fully recognised in the services' self-assessment report and reasonable progress has been made in resolving this area for improvement. The borough is making a significant investment in a new-build primary school and community learning centre, due for completion in 2011. This will provide an up-to-date purpose-built main venue for the service with easy access for many learners. Whilst this new building is under development, appropriate investment is being made in some redecoration of current buildings, improved learning resources and relocating classes to provide better access for learners. The new centre remains, however, a key feature in providing suitable learning resources for the service.

Has the service made progress in improving its use of data to monitor the provision? Reasonable progress

Management information was well used at a strategic level at the last inspection, although there was insufficient information on overall attendance. Reasonable progress has been made in improving the availability and use of data in managing the provision. The service has worked hard since the last inspection to improve staff understanding of the importance of data as a tool for improvement. Particularly useful briefings were provided for all teaching and support staff in September 2009. Management information software has been updated. Useful reports are now more frequently provided, often on a weekly basis. Tutors are now expected to incorporate robust data into their end-of-course evaluations. Clear, data-based targets are now set and effectively monitored as part of the service's staff appraisal arrangements. Staff understanding and ownership of course-related data have improved. The service has sought to better understand course outcomes by, for example, including information on pending examination results into its success rate calculations. This work, however, requires further refinement and validation if it is to be credible and effective as a tool for improvement.

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