

The Learning Curve

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

The Learning Curve (LC) evolved in 1997 through the Councils for Voluntary Service in Wiltshire and Swindon and is based in Melksham. In 2002, LC became a charitable company limited by guarantee. The Skills Funding Agency (SFA) funds LC to provide adult and community learning services, learner-responsive, employer-responsive and European Social Fund (ESF) programmes. Wiltshire Council funds some programmes for learners aged 16 to 19. LC offers part of the provision itself and sub-contracts other provision to up to 20 members of the charity, which comprises 66 organisational members. LC focuses on workforce development for the voluntary and community sector and the direct provision of learning in the community. Learning takes place in a wide variety of venues across the South West region.

At the inspection in November 2009 the overall effectiveness of LC's provision was satisfactory. Leadership and management, safeguarding and equality and diversity were all satisfactory. Learners were supported well. Outcomes for learners were good. Information and communication technology was graded good and preparation for life and work was graded satisfactory. LC had satisfactory capacity to improve.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in developing clear and effective self-assessment and planning to improve the provision for learners?	Reasonable progress
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At the previous inspection managers used self-assessment effectively as a quality improvement tool and had identified many of the areas for improvement found during the inspection and put appropriate action in place. LC has strengthened its management structure to engage delivery managers more closely in quality development. Quality improvement is addressed more systematically. Objective setting is now clearer and cascades down appropriately through team and individual targets. Quality improvement planning is more rigorous, with clear lines of accountability, and effectively addresses the areas for improvement identified in the inspection. Teams use the quality improvement plan routinely to monitor and develop the quality of their provision. The exchange of good practice is an agenda item at tutor team meetings and partners value the improvement in sharing and developing expertise. Some quality work has made obvious progress, for example, in safeguarding arrangements and data management. However, managers recognise that much work is still required and they have a good awareness of the progress still to be made, including further harnessing the skills and expertise of the whole partnership in quality development.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving success rates across the provision? Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection outcomes for learners were good. Success rates overall were high. In the 2008/09 year the success rate across all provision was over 90% and, according to the provider's own figures, this is still the case so far in 2009/10. Learners enjoyed their learning and generally made satisfactory progress in lessons. Learner evaluations suggest that the great majority of learners are still very happy with the quality of their provision. Some National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) learners are making slow progress and timely success rates are too low, which was an area for improvement at the inspection. However LC has put several good initiatives in place to remedy this and to improve overall success rates. For example, it has improved tracking of learner progress and carefully identifies learners at risk of leaving early or not completing in a timely manner. Managers now discuss monthly profiling of learner achievement and detailed performance reports with providers at quarterly monitoring reviews. LC is developing closer working relationships with learners' line managers, has improved the learner contract and strengthened the review process. However, so soon after the inspection, it is too early to judge the impact.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in improving teaching and learning through further developing the observation system and continued staff training? Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection further development of the observation system and staff training were identified as areas for improvement. Clear planning arrangements are now established to observe LC staff. Four observations have taken place since the previous inspection and observations have been developed to routinely include sampling of session plans and schemes of work. Observations of teaching and learning of partners' teaching staff have been resumed. These observations have been carefully prioritised on the basis of risk assessment and performance, and forward planning is in place for the current funding year. The observation system has been further developed through refinements to the recording process. However, due to staff changes, no moderations of observations have yet been undertaken, although these are scheduled to recommence shortly. LC has continued to provide a range of relevant staff training and development. However, these sessions are not always well attended by delivery partners' staff. Since the previous inspection, LC has strengthened the internal quality roles and responsibilities of its delivery managers. Observation of teaching and learning is developing as a key quality improvement tool but is not yet fully effective.

What progress has been made in improving the use of learner targets to ensure that learners clearly understand what they need to do to meet challenging and appropriate individual learning goals in a timely way?

Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection on a few courses the use of targets to motivate learners was insufficient and in some lessons planning to meet the needs of individual learners was also insufficient. LC has developed a revised individual learning plan which is currently being piloted prior to implementation across adult and community programmes. This provides a more accessible approach for learners to identify their personal planning targets. It is effectively designed for easier use in setting detailed targets, recording outcomes and learner reviews. In work-based learning LC has introduced a comprehensive individual learning plan with a clear focus on target setting and learner ownership of their targets. Managers have implemented closer monitoring of learner progress effectively through improved data reporting.

The use of targets for learning objectives and outcomes in sessions, as seen during the monitoring visit, is appropriate and most targets for individual learners are sufficiently detailed and time bound. Planning to introduce individual tutorials for learners on learner-responsive programmes is at an early stage. A training day for LC and partner staff on the use of individual learning plans and target setting is arranged to take place shortly.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in improving the recognition and recording of learners' progress in non-accredited outcomes to motivate learners and reward learning?

Reasonable progress

At the previous inspection LC and its partners did not measure and record the improvements in the skills and achievements of learners where these were not part of course accreditation. In particular, the acknowledgement of improvements in personal development, such as self-esteem and confidence, was insufficient. Since the previous inspection LC has made progress on recognising improvements of learners' skills and achievements that are not formally identified and measured through accreditation. Relevant non-accredited potential outcomes have been identified for courses and learning sessions, although it is not always clear how these are systematically assessed. LC has recognised this and staff training in identifying and using appropriate evidence of non-accredited progress and achievement is planned.

However, tutors provide motivating feedback on learners' progress and achievement of these outcomes to learners and some key aspects are beginning to be clearly recorded in learners' portfolios. Learners are encouraged by the positive feedback provided and also by the recognition of their personal development.

What progress has been made in the use of data by improving analysis and presentation of management information to ensure that performance is monitored and managed effectively?

Significant progress

At the previous inspection LC had a management information system which was suitable. However, the analysis and presentation of data were insufficient to properly manage and monitor programme performance. Detailed data on individual contract performance were not routinely available and partners and employers reported dissatisfaction with some aspects of data management. It was recognised as an area for improvement. LC has planned the structure and resource required for good data management well and has significantly improved the range and relevance of management reports. Partners receive accurate, detailed and timely reports on performance including reports highlighting learners who are progressing too slowly. LC is working with partners to further customise reports to better meet their individual requirements. Analysis of data is much improved. For example, managers now analyse data on the performance of different learner groups well and use it more effectively to plan to reduce differences in performance. Managers use data routinely and effectively to identify issues in provision and discuss these at monthly management meetings. LC has a clear understanding of the work that is required to further refine its data management and has appropriate plans in place.

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