

Medway Adult & Community Learning Service

Focused monitoring visit report

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Medway Council delivers its adult and community learning through Medway Adult and Community Learning Service (MACLS/ the service), which is located in the Business Support Department (Corporate Services). MACLS is a direct provider of adult and community learning provision and operates from two main centres in Rochester and Gillingham, three school-based evening centres and around 70 community venues. Medway is the largest unitary authority in the south east. Minority ethnic groups make up 5.4% of the population overall and over 10% in some areas of Medway.

MACLS offers courses in 16 subject areas, including Train to Gain programmes, from pre-entry level to level 4. In 2008/09, some 5,570 learners were enrolled, a fall of 736 learners from the previous year. Around two thirds of the learners are on non-accredited courses. The previous inspection took place in January 2009. Achievement and standards were reported to be good, and the service's overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, quality of provision, and leadership and management were judged to be 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

What progress has been made to improve quality improvement arrangements, planning and self-assessment? Reasonable progress

The previous inspection reported that self-assessment was satisfactory and judgements were broadly accurate. A new Head of Curriculum and Quality was appointed in October 2009 and new procedures for self-assessment have been introduced. Data on learners' outcomes and other evidence inform judgments in the self-assessment report. Curriculum managers are involved fully in the self-assessment process, each producing a report for their subject area. A panel of senior managers provides challenge and moderation to these reports. Curriculum leaders and senior managers follow up areas for improvement in regular one-to-one meetings. However, there is inconsistency in the quality of self-assessment reports produced. While key areas for improvement are identified, the actions and targets required to remedy these weaknesses, and timescales for these improvements, are not always clear.

The service shows commitment to ensuring that all teaching and learning is of a high standard. Observations of teaching and learning are prioritised appropriately and a standardisation panel moderates judgements. Some records of observations are too

descriptive. A small number of observations have been completed under this new system and it is therefore too early to judge the impact of the new arrangements.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made to raise outcomes for learners? Reasonable progress

Outcomes for learners were judged to be good at the previous inspection. For programmes not leading to external accreditation, which comprise about two thirds of provision, the proportion of learners who achieve their learning goals shows an improvement on 2008/09. Current retention rates for 2009/10 are slightly better than for the previous year, and they are particularly high at 95% for arts and crafts programmes. Success rates for courses leading to qualifications show a consistent trend of improvement and are comparable to national figures. However, there is much inconsistency in learners' outcomes between subject areas. Overall success rates on information and communication technology (ICT) and preparation for life and work courses are significantly above the national averages, whereas education and training, and business and administration programmes are well below them.

Overall and success rates within the planned time, for employer provision, were low in previous years. They have improved in 2009/10 and are now above national figures, with very high success rates within the planned time for Train to Gain learners on level 3 programmes.

Information on the progression of learners is not collated systematically across the service, although managers in some subject areas, for example ICT, collect the intended destination of learners at the end of their course. The overall attendance of learners has continued to be satisfactory.

Quality of provision

What progress has the service made in developing and implementing a Skills for Life policy? Reasonable progress

A key area for improvement at the previous inspection was the slow development and implementation of the service's Skills for Life strategy. A Skills for Life group was established in 2009, comprising of relevant managers and led by the Head of Service. Actions by this group have improved the quality of literacy and numeracy programmes and have helped to establish a coherent, service-wide approach to Skills for Life provision supported fully by managers. Training is provided to staff, highlighting the key importance of literacy and numeracy skills to vocational learners. The teaching of literacy and numeracy is now integrated better into the main programme for vocational learners.

A recruitment drive to address shortages of Skills for Life tutors has led to the appointment of two part-time posts. However, other initiatives aiming to encourage staff to retrain and teach literacy and numeracy have not yet met with any success. A very high proportion of Skills for Life tutors hold specialist literacy and numeracy qualifications.

The Skills for Life policy is still in draft form and senior managers fully acknowledge the need for this policy to be adopted formally by the service. An overall quality improvement plan for implementing the Skills for Life strategy, with specific and time-bound targets, is in place for 2010/11. This will enable managers to monitor progress towards targets more systematically.

What progress has been made in improving the use of initial assessments in literacy, language and numeracy to plan for individual learning? Reasonable progress

The previous inspection highlighted that insufficient use was made of initial assessment to plan for individual learning and inspectors reported that learners' progress was insufficiently well recorded and monitored. Since then, the service has established initial assessments of the literacy and numeracy skills for all vocational learners. The results of these assessments determine the way in which learners are prepared for national qualifications. Success rates for these courses have improved steadily and they are now just below the national average for numeracy programmes, and comparable to national figures for literacy courses. However, the results of these tests are still not being used fully to enable learners to improve their literacy or numeracy skills. For example, individual learning plans contain few specific targets relating to literacy or numeracy weaknesses identified by initial assessment.

What progress has been made in improving the quality of provision in science and mathematics? Reasonable progress

The service judged science and mathematics provision to be inadequate in its 2008/09 self-assessment report. This judgment was based primarily on poor outcomes for learners, with low retention rates particularly in GCSE psychology and GCSE biology. A number of actions have taken place aimed at streamlining provision and improving quality. To improve learners' retention rates, an initial assessment of numeracy skills takes place to ensure learners can cope with this aspect of their course. Teaching and learning styles have been revised to encourage a more participative learning approach. Poor attendance by learners is followed up more actively by tutors. The assessment of learners' work is monitored more regularly and personal support is provided to learners who experience difficulties with aspects of the subject. Although staff have set up a number of actions to improve the weaknesses identified by self-assessment, no coherent quality improvement plan has been established to drive forward these improvements.

An encouraging sign of improvement is the increase in the retention rate of science and mathematics learners, from 64% in 2008/09 to 72% in 2009/10, with overall attendance, at 84%, remaining the same as the previous year. However, it is too early to judge the impact of these actions on the overall quality of provision.

Leadership and management

What progress has the service made in capturing and responding to the learners' voice? Reasonable progress

The previous inspection reported that learner surveys were carried out, but feedback to learners was not comprehensive. A new learner involvement strategy and action plan is in place. The service now captures learners' views in a number of ways, including learners' meetings, surveys and course evaluations. Managers respond well to the views of learners on a day-to-day basis. For example, lesson times are changed to better meet learners' lifestyles. New developments take into account the needs of local communities well. Provision has been developed at a local school in response to learners' requests. As a result of learners' views, managers raise issues such as safety and car parking with relevant council officers. An initiative to reduce bureaucracy is a result of feedback from learners and tutors.

The recent use of a commercial questionnaire package enables learners' views to be sought and responded to more efficiently. Managers respond well to individual queries and concerns raised by learners, telephoning and meeting them to discuss these as necessary. Notice boards in the two main centres provide feedback to learners on issues that they have raised. A relatively small number of learners attend learners' meetings, although it was intended that learners from all subject areas would take part. The service continues to explore further ways of involving learners in service development, for example through learner representation at senior management team meetings.

What progress has been made in further developing effective procedures for safeguarding learners? Significant progress

The previous inspection judged that staff took safeguarding seriously, but procedures were not thorough enough. Safeguarding learners is a top priority for the service. All staff have received appropriate safeguarding training, which is delivered in a variety of ways. All new staff receive training to raise their awareness of safeguarding during the induction programme. On-going training is delivered through termly tutor meetings held at each of the two main centres and online training has proved effective for approximately a quarter of staff. The content of training is appropriate and is adapted according to the role of each individual. For example, bespoke training on safe recruitment and selection practice was organised for managers and human resources staff.

Designated safeguarding officers are appointed and helpful information, including the contact details of these individuals, is distributed to all staff. Staff benefit from good support from the local authority's safeguarding coordinator. Staff report greater awareness of safeguarding issues as a result of training and they are clear on the pathways for action and referral should they have safeguarding concerns about learners.

What progress has been made in taking action to reduce the high cancellation rate of courses? Significant progress

A high rate of cancellation for courses was reported at the previous inspection. The existing course cancellation policy and its application have been reviewed and a more pragmatic approach to cancelling courses is now in place. The number of courses cancelled during the current academic year has been reduced by one half compared to the previous year. Managers have good information on which subject areas cancel courses and the reasons for this. The primary reason for course cancellation remains low enrolments. Although reduced dramatically, the number of learners affected by course cancellation is higher than the service would like and plans are in place to reduce the numbers of learners affected by cancellations even further.

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