

St Helens MBC Adult and Community Learning

Inspection report

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Name of lead inspector: Shahram Safavi HMI

Last day of inspection: 5 March 2010

Type of provider: Local Authority
St Helens MBC
Adult & Community Learning

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Information about the St Helens MBC

1. St Helens Adult and Community Learning Service (the service: St Helens ACL) is part of the chief executive's department, Public Affairs Division, Libraries and Learning of the local education authority (LEA) of St Helens Borough Council.
2. The service offers courses for adults where the main aim is social and personal development. Greater Merseyside Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funds all provision through the adult safeguarded funding stream.
3. An acting head of the service supported by a finance manager and three curriculum managers currently manage the service. There are 40 staff in total. Teaching staff consists of three full-time tutors who also coordinate the provision and 27 part-time tutors, some of whom have lead tutor roles.
4. St Helens ACL delivers this provision in six subject areas. At the time of inspection, classes were taking place in 57 venues: 30 schools, 11 Sure Start Children's Centres, 9 libraries, 6 community centres and one health centre. The service enrolled 2,953 learners on 342 courses. The service also offers training to a small group of Train to Learn learners. Approximately 2% of learners are from minority ethnic backgrounds, 81% are women and 16% have disclosed a disability. Most learners are aged 19 or over.
5. The specialist provision inspected represented 54% of provision for all learners. The areas which were not directly inspected and graded were language, literature and culture, education and training, preparation for life and work and community development.
6. Unemployment in St Helens is 5.3% compared to 6.9% nationally. Approximately 2.8% of the population are from a minority ethnic heritage compared to 7.9% nationally and represent a range of faith groups. Approximately 47.4% of pupils achieve five GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics, below the national average of 49.8%.
7. The service provides training on behalf of the following:
 - Halton Council adult and community learning
8. The service subcontracts some of its provision to:
 - St Helens District Council for Voluntary Service (CVS)
 - St Helens College

Type of provision	Number of learners in 2008/09
Adult learner provision: Learning for social and personal development	 2,953 part-time learners

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Grade 2
	Grade
Outcomes for learners	2
Quality of provision	2
Leadership and management	2
Safeguarding	2
Equality and diversity	3
Learning for social and personal development	
	Grade
Information and communication technology (ICT)	2
Family learning	2

Overall effectiveness

9. Overall effectiveness is good. Learners are very positive about their courses and develop a good range of skills and self-confidence. All learners say they feel safe and enjoy their learning. Most learners who join courses stay, complete and achieve their personal goals.
10. The quality of training is good. Most tutors use varied teaching techniques to make the sessions interesting and engaging. The service's partnership working with other providers, organisations and community groups is outstanding. Staff are very sensitive to learners' needs and support them well to progress.
11. The curriculum is well managed. The service has maintained the good quality of provision found at the last inspection. Safeguarding arrangements are good. St Helens ACL satisfactorily promotes equality and diversity and learners of different backgrounds achieve as well as each other. However, the promotion of equality of opportunity through teaching and learning processes and within some venues is insufficient.

Main findings

- Outcomes for learners are good. Retention rates are high and most learners achieve their learning goals. They develop self-confidence and a good range of practical and personal skills. The standard of learners' work is good.
- Learners from different groups such as those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, learners from different cultural heritages and female and male learners achieve equally as well as each other.
- Learners on ICT courses use basic aspects of computer software confidently to improve their lives. In family learning, parents and carers gain the know-how to help to improve the attainment of their children.
- Learners feel very safe and apply safe working practices well. They understand the service's code of conduct of professional and personal development. Learners who have had little experience of formal learning report that they are confident in reporting any safety concerns to the tutors.
- Teaching and learning are good. Tutors make very good use of a range of teaching and learning methods and keep learners fully motivated. In many lessons, tutors' use of information and learning technology is appropriate. The service is making good progress in using a computer-based learning environment.
- Procedures for recognising and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning (RARPA) are satisfactory. However, in some courses there is insufficient recording of learner progress in relation to the course learning outcomes or their specific learning goals.
- Partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others are outstanding. The service's partnership working is highly effective in providing suitable programmes at convenient venues, which are mostly in deprived communities.
- Leadership and management are good. The curriculum is well managed. St Helens ACL has set high standards for the service and has realistic targets which are set and met. The service has maintained its good quality of provision since the last inspection.
- Arrangements for safeguarding learners are good. Safeguarding has a high priority. Learners are appropriately informed and report that they are confident to raise concerns. Training offered for safeguarding when using internet or other technologies is very good.
- St Helens ACL satisfactorily promotes equality and diversity. The service has narrowed the achievement gap for all learners well and there are no significant differences in the achievement of different groups of learners. Whilst learners are treated with dignity and respect, the promotion of equality of opportunity in the classroom and within some venues is insufficient.

- The service works well with learners, staff, and partners in order to support and promote improvement. Quality improvement arrangements both within the service and its sub-contractors are very good.
- The self-assessment process is suitably inclusive of learner, staff and partners' views. Management information data are used well. The report is a thorough document. However, the narrative is far too extensive and not easy for the reader. Development planning is extensive and a very useful tool to bring about improvement. The service provides good value for money.

What does St Helens ACL need to do to improve further?

- Continue to maintain high retention and achievement rates.
- Continue to prioritise engaging learners who have had little educational attainment or are socially isolated.
- Improve the recording of learners' progress by consistently recording their progress in relation to their starting point and their completion target.
- Improve the promotion of equality and diversity to learners by ensuring greater focus on equality and diversity matters in lessons, in schemes of work and quality assurance processes.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- feeling safe and well supported by staff
- enjoying new learning and developing self-confidence and self-esteem
- lessons which are engaging with a good range of activities
- meeting other parents and learners.

What learners would like to see improved:

- nothing reported.

Summary of the views of partners as confirmed by inspectors

What partners like:

- very responsive organisation
- very good partner to address learner needs.

What partners would like to see improved:

- nothing reported.

Main inspection findings

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

12. The service's capacity to improve is good. St Helens ACL has taken a number of highly effective actions to sustain the good achievement of its learners since the inspection of its provision in 2005. Retention rates on most courses continue to be very good.
13. The service has maintained its quality of provision in information and communication technology and family learning, since 2005, as good. Leadership and management continue to be good and the curriculum is well managed. Safeguarding of learners is good and arrangements for equality and diversity are satisfactory. Quality arrangements are very effective in identifying areas for improvements. The observation of the teaching and learning process is reliable and is implemented well. The service uses its self-assessment process very effectively. Since 2008, St Helens ACL has developed very good working arrangements with a group of adult learning providers on quality improvement. The most recent self-assessment report is accurate although it overstates the effectiveness of its equality and diversity arrangements.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 2

14. Outcomes for learners are good. Most learners, the majority of whom have had very little experience of successful education or training, achieve their learning goals. Retention rates are generally high at over 90%. Learners gain a good range of skills and improve their self-esteem and confidence in their ability to progress to other courses or employment. The standard of learners' work is good. Learners enjoy their courses and many report that they prioritise attending courses in their daily activities.
15. Learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, learners with different cultural heritage backgrounds, female and male learners all achieve equally as well.
16. Learners on ICT courses confidently use basic features of computer software in their day-to-day living and work. In family learning, parents and carers gain the know-how to help to improve the attainment of their children.
17. Learners feel very safe and apply safe working practices well. They understand the service's code of conduct of professional and personal development. Learners who have had little experience of formal learning report that they are confident in reporting any safety concerns to the tutors.

18. Most learners report that they can make appropriate choices about their health and well being and highly value the social aspect and contact with other learners which the courses offer.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

19. The quality of provision is good. Teaching and learning are good. Teaching is well planned with detailed schemes of work. Tutors use a wide range of teaching and learning methods well to keep learners fully motivated. Individual learner coaching and support is highly effective in building learners' confidence and skills. In many lessons, teachers make appropriate use of information and learning technology and the service is making good progress in using a computer-based learning environment more extensively.
20. Procedures for recognising and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning (RARPA) are satisfactory. The service works with a number of providers to improve the RARPA process so that learners can progress to other providers' non-accredited provision. Learning objectives are generally realistic and incorporate achievable outcomes, although some are not sufficiently specific. Tutors do not always sufficiently record learner progress in relation to the course learning outcomes or learner-specific learning goals.
21. Programmes meet the needs of learners, stakeholders and partners well. St Helens ACL develops its courses following extensive research into the range of courses which learners value and the courses which are offered by other partners. Having identified any gaps in the local provision the service develops and offers its courses in partnership with other stakeholders.
22. Partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others are outstanding. The service's partnership working is highly effective in delivering programmes at convenient venues, mostly in deprived communities. St Helens ACL also delivers a number of courses jointly with other organisations to encourage learners to progress to further education or paid or unpaid employment.
23. Care, guidance and support for learners are good. Learners, many of whom have had little successful experience of schooling and are often anxious about engaging with education and training, are supported well to stay on their courses and achieve. Monitoring of learners' attendance is particularly good. Tutors generally respond very well to learners' demand for information on progression options into other courses, or employment. However, on some courses there is insufficient focus on career guidance during and at the end of the course.

Leadership and management

Grade 2

24. Leadership and management are good and the curriculum is well managed. St Helens ACL has set high standards through the setting, and meeting, of challenging but realistic targets for key areas of performance. The service has maintained and improved its quality of provision since the last inspection. Quality assurance arrangements have successfully improved the provision. Supervisory bodies direct and monitor the provision satisfactorily.
25. Arrangements for safeguarding learners are good. Safeguarding has a high priority. Safeguarding policies and procedures are detailed and annually reviewed. Appropriate Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for staff are in place, which includes CRB checks every three years. There are clear roles for staff who understand their responsibilities, which are supported by a clear flow chart of actions and responsibilities. Staff have undertaken training in safeguarding and the service has offered safeguarding training to its partners and stakeholders. Tutors are highly confident in identifying and reporting potential safeguarding issues, which are recorded well and effectively followed up. Learners are appropriately informed and report that they are confident to raise concerns. The service has a close working relationship with the Independent Safeguarding Authority. The service's arrangements for safeguarding when using the internet and other technology are comprehensive and well developed. Internet safety training is offered to all staff and to parents and carers in partner schools.
26. St Helens ACL satisfactorily promotes equality and diversity. The service has successfully narrowed the achievement gap for all learners and there are no significant differences in the achievement of differing groups of learners. The service has successfully attracted learners from the most disadvantaged wards in its community. Equality impact assessments have been undertaken for the programmes. The authority closely audits the equality and diversity practices of the service with sound action planning for improvement as an outcome of this process. The service sets and increases annually the targets for participation of groups of learners who are currently under represented on its programmes. Managers and other staff monitor closely these targets very frequently. The impact of the work of the service is examined routinely at the end of the course review process. All staff are trained in equality of opportunity and diversity. Whilst learners are treated with dignity and respect and most venues are accessible, the promotion of equality of opportunity in the classroom and within some venues is insufficient. Schemes of work and lesson plans do not identify how equality and diversity will be promoted within sessions and this aspect does not form part of the observation of teaching and learning criteria.
27. The service engages well with learners, staff and partners in order to support and promote improvement. Quality improvement arrangements are very good. Strong networks ensure that the work of St Helens ACL is strategically placed to meet the needs of all of its users. The service routinely collects and

analyses learner feedback and makes good improvements for the benefit of service users.

28. The self-assessment process is suitably inclusive of learners', staff and partners' views. St Helens ACL uses management information well to monitor analysis and improve its provision. The quality improvement measures at subcontractors are very good. The use of management information in the self-assessment report is particularly comprehensive. The report is thorough but the narrative is far too extensive and not easy for the reader. Development planning is extensive and a very useful tool to bring about improvement.
29. St Helens ACL provides good value for money. Learners' achievement and progress are good. The service routinely seeks the views of users in order to identify how physical and financial resources are best deployed for the benefit of learners. The management arrangements for the selection of venues and their suitability, for instance in terms of safety, are very good and all venues are frequently risk assessed. The provider is working well to ensure resources are sustainable by, for example, the promotion and the use of electronic communication and documents and reducing paper resources.

Learning for social and personal development

Other learning for social and personal development provision considered as part of the main findings but not separately graded: language, literature and culture, education and training, preparation for life and work, and community development

Information and communication technology

Grade 2

Context

30. One hundred and fifty one learners are on 18 ICT courses. Courses are offered in five libraries, five community centres and two schools. Fifty-four, ten-week computer courses are held in community venues. Thirty-five of these courses are introduction to computers and nineteen are at a more advanced level. The service also offers a number of taster sessions in ICT during the summer term. Weekly 'drop in' sessions are also offered. Eight tutors and one learning support tutor deliver the courses, which are coordinated by a lead tutor.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are good. Achievement and retention are good. The achievement in the non-accredited courses for the last two years has remained high at 99%. Retention has increased, from 84% in 2007/08, to 90% in 2008/09.
- Learners make good progress. They acquire good personal, social and employability skills. Learners enjoy their learning, achieve their outcomes and gain confidence in their ability to adapt their computing skills to their requirements. Tutors encourage learners to achieve and progress. Learners' standard of work is generally good.
- Learners feel very safe. All learners receive an induction, which includes health and safety rules and anti-bullying policies. Policies are consistently shared with learners across the provision. Tutors pay good attention to health and safety in lessons.
- Teaching and assessment are good. The planning of teaching sessions is generally effective. Tutors are well qualified and experienced. Initial assessment and on-course assessment are good. Learners produce neat and good quality portfolios. Tutors offer 'drop in' sessions for learners to catch up, if they are unable to attend the regular classes. However, recording of individual learners' progress is insufficient and in some sessions, there is little focus on differentiated teaching methods.

- Programmes and courses meet the needs of the users very effectively. St Helens ACL has developed a good range of first-step courses, which offer good progression routes to other providers' provision. Courses are conveniently located. The prior learning and achievement of learners are assessed at the start of the course to help learners to start their learning at a level at which they can enjoy and progress.
- St Helens ACL engages very well with a wide range of partners, including schools, libraries and other community provision. New partnerships have been developed over the last year and these have strengthened and broadened the provision for ICT learners.
- Learners receive good care, guidance and support. Counselling and pastoral support for learners is good. Initial and diagnostic assessments are effective. Learners are signposted to career guidance and other services such as counselling services as appropriate. St Helens ACL delivers a good range of taster sessions to help learners make informed choices about joining their courses. However, some learners feel that they are too short to familiarise them sufficiently with the course's contents.
- Leadership and management are good. Managers provide good leadership, raise expectations and promote ambition for learners many of whom have had little benefit through education until this point in their lives. St Helens ACL is particularly effective in seeking funds to offer new courses for the benefit of the whole community, particularly for disengaged people and those with a disability.
- The arrangements to safeguard learners are good. Policies and procedures are in place and readily accessible to staff, partners and learners. Risk assessments take place regularly. All staff are CRB checked.
- Equality and diversity arrangements are satisfactory. Equality and diversity impact measures are used well to improve equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap for learners. However, the promotion of equality and diversity is insufficient and males are under represented on most courses.
- St Helens ACL engages well with learners and users of the service to support and promote improvement. Quality assurance is good, systematic and leads to improvement. The service uses data well to manage and improve the quality of the provision.
- The self-assessment process is very effective and improves the quality of the ICT provision and outcomes for learners. The self-assessment process is very inclusive, engaging the views of partners, stakeholders and learners. The self-assessment report is comprehensive and appropriately critical. The quality improvement plan, which is based on the self-assessment report, is detailed and provides a good tool for further improvement.

- The service is very effective at using its resources to secure value for money. Achievement rates are high. Learners develop good confidence and self-esteem. Resources are used very effectively.

What does St Helens ACL need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that in all teaching sessions, individuals' learning and progress is recorded.
- Improve the effectiveness of single session tasters to cover all of the learning outcomes.
- Improve the promotion of equality and diversity to learners through teaching that increases learners' awareness of equality and diversity matters.
- Increase the number of males on most courses by widening the distribution of course information to attract the male population.

Family learning

Grade 2

Context

31. Currently 312 learners are on family learning programmes. The provision offers 36 courses, which cover both wider family learning and family language, literacy and numeracy programmes. Courses range in length and structure from short workshops and short courses to longer twenty-week courses. Accreditation is mainly at level 1 but opportunities for accreditation up to level 3 and at entry level are available. The majority of learners are female.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are good. Retention rates are high at around 98% and all learners who are retained achieve their personal learning goals. They develop the knowledge, understanding and skills to support their children's learning and development. Many parents and carers report that they have developed improved relationships with their children as a result of their learning. Many learners gain confidence and develop other personal skills and progress to other courses, or take on voluntary roles.
- Learners enjoy learning and have fun during sessions, many of which involve activities for different generations. Learners feel safe and feel their children are safe. Learning on courses such as healthy eating enables them to make informed choices about their health and well being.
- Teaching and learning are good overall. The initial assessment process is thorough and effective in supporting individual learning. Assessment of learning is regular. Learners receive regular clear guidance about how to improve their learning. Teaching and learning methods and resources engage learners and make learning fun. Target setting on accredited courses is specific to learners' needs and interests.
- The process of recognising and recording progress and achievement of non-accredited outcomes is satisfactory overall. However, there is insufficient recording of monitoring of learner progress. Tutors very often do not formally evaluate and record progress in relation to learning outcomes or specific learning goals.
- The provision is highly effective in meeting the needs and interest of learners, communities and partners and responds well to national and local priorities. Most courses offer the opportunity to gain accreditation or to take national literacy and numeracy tests. St Helens ACL has specifically developed courses to meet demands from schools, partners or interest groups such as teenage mothers. Progression routes for learners are clearly identified.
- Partnerships are very productive and used highly effectively to develop the curriculum and to meet local and national priorities. St Helens ACL trains staff

from partner organisations to deliver some of the provision. The relationship with partners is very good and partnership working to develop the provision is particularly effective. Learners receive good personal support from tutors. Guidance on opportunities for further learning or employment is satisfactory.

- Management of the programme is good. The strategy for family learning is clear and well understood by staff and partners. Regular effective meetings are held by the manager and lead tutors. Very effective processes monitor the quality of courses and identify improvement actions. Observation of teaching and learning is effective in identifying strengths and areas for improvement.
- The promotion of safeguarding is good. Safeguarding is integrated within the curriculum and is well promoted. For example, an internet safety course has been developed in response to both local and national concerns.
- Arrangements for equality and diversity are satisfactory overall. However, St Helens ACL does not sufficiently focus on the promotion of equality and diversity through teaching and learning activities. The self-assessment process is robust and the report identified most of the findings that emerged during inspection.

What does St Helens ACL need to do to improve further?

- Ensure the monitoring of learner progress in relation to learning goals and agreed targets is sufficiently evaluative and recorded.
- Ensure the promotion of equality and diversity is integrated within the curriculum and train staff so they recognise opportunities for promoting equality and diversity.

Information about the inspection

32. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two additional inspectors, assisted by the service's acting head as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding bodies, Framework for Excellence indicators, the previous inspection report, reports from the inspectorate's monitoring visit and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
33. Inspectors used group, individual interviews, telephone calls and emails to gather the views of learners. They looked at questionnaires learners and employers had completed on behalf of the provider. They also visited learning sessions, assessments or progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subjects the provider offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

St Helens MBC, Adult and Community Learning

Learning types: 14-16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; 16-18 Learner responsive: FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; 19+ responsive: FE full- and part-time courses; Employer responsive: Train to Gain, apprenticeships. Blank column: insert DWP employability programmes (including Workstep), or Judicial Services or nextstep as appropriate

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	Social and personal development
Approximate number of enrolled learners		
Full-time learners	0	0
Part-time learners	823	823
Overall effectiveness	2	2
Capacity to improve	2	
A. Outcomes for learners	2	2
A1. How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	2	
A1.a) How well do learners attain their learning goals?	2	
A1.b) How well do learners progress?	2	
A2. How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2	
A3. Do learners feel safe?	2	
A4. Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*	3	
A5. How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*	n/a	
B. Quality of provision	2	2
B1. How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2	
B2. How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	2	
B3. How well do partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	1	
B4. How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2	
C. Leadership and management	2	2
C1. How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2	
C2. How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*	3	
C3. How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2	
C4. How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	3	
C5. How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	2	
C6. How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	2	
C7. How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2	

*where applicable to the type of provision

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