

# London Borough of Brent Adult and Community Learning

Focused monitoring visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Bill Shepley HMI

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Address: 1 Morland Gardens  
Stonebridge  
London  
NW10 8DY

Telephone number: 02088 380808

## FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

### Context and focus of visit

The London Borough of Brent Adult and Community Learning service (BACES) is Brent Council's direct provider of adult education. BACES is located within the council's children's and families' directorate.

BACES was last inspected in May 2009. The overall effectiveness of the provision, capacity to improve and equality of opportunity were satisfactory. Achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management were also satisfactory. Three sector subject areas were inspected and were satisfactory.

At the time of the last inspection, West London Learning and Skills Council funded the provision. The service is delivered, in partnership with local voluntary and community groups, at five council-owned venues, three secondary schools and some 60 other venues. In 2008/09 there were 2,774 enrolments on accredited courses and 4,228 on adult safeguarded learning courses. Approximately 78% of learners were from minority ethnic groups.

### Themes

#### Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in managing improvements in the provision through self-assessment and post-inspection action planning? Reasonable progress

At the last inspection, self-assessment was good. BACES was judged to be in a satisfactory position to make improvements. Reasonable progress has been made in continuing to build BACES' capacity to improve in the last year. Following the inspection the service carried out a thorough analysis of its outcomes. Managers have worked hard to achieve a common sense of responsibility and purpose towards improvement. The latest self-assessment report, published in December 2009, is suitably self-critical and rich in judgements. The associated quality improvement plan (QIP) is well considered and clearly focuses on appropriate targets and actions for improvement. The QIP is seen as very much a working document by senior and curriculum managers. It is frequently reviewed and updated with effective use of data which continue to improve in their quality and timeliness. The service has revised its cross-service roles and senior managers are now specifically identified to lead on key aspects of the provision. All the themes considered at the monitoring visit show reasonable progress towards improvement. However, there is a realistic and shared view within the service that, while clear progress has been made in many areas for improvement, further work needs to be done to secure ongoing improvement across all the provision.

## Outcomes for learners

What progress has BACES made in improving the retention of learners? Reasonable progress

The last inspection drew largely on 2007/08 success rates, together with provisional 2008/09 data, to form its judgments. Overall, achievement and standards were satisfactory. Full 2008/09 data showed, however, a significant decrease in retention rates. BACES has made this a key area for improvement in the current year and reasonable progress has been made. The service has introduced a 70% minimum attendance requirement as part of a useful 'learner agreement' document which emphasises to learners the importance of completing all course-related examinations. Pre-course assessment has been introduced to guide learners to the most appropriate level of learning. In the case of counselling courses, for example, learners are now better informed about the level of writing involved in their learning. In some cases, changes have been made in accreditation bodies to better accommodate the needs of particular learner groups. A much sharper focus is now applied to monitoring learner numbers to ensure the viability of courses. Although it is too early to judge the overall success of these improvement measures, in-year data for the first two terms show that the decline in retention has been halted. Average retention across the service shows a modest improvement from 87% in 2008/09 to 89% in 2009/10 to date.

## Quality of provision

What progress has the service made in redressing the insufficient proportion of good or better teaching noted at the last inspection? Reasonable progress

At the last inspection teaching and learning were satisfactory. Very few learning sessions were inadequate but the proportion of good or better sessions remained too low. BACES has taken a strategic decision to focus upon improving the rigour of its observation of teaching and learning (OTL) arrangements as a key to driving improvement. Reasonable progress has been made. Improved guidance and OTL processes are now in place. All teachers are now observed at least once each academic year and 'early warning' visits are made to the classes of all new teachers. OTL reports are focused well on actions required to improve the experience of learners. The resulting action plans guide effectively appropriate professional development and are tied closely in to the appraisal system. A good system of tutor mentoring is in place to ensure support is effective. BACES has increased opportunities for continued professional development, including professional qualifications, and this is valued by staff. The increased rigour of the observation process and its initial focus on tutors whose classes were previously judged to be satisfactory has, however, reduced the proportion of sessions graded good or better in the current year. BACES recognises that learners' views on the quality of teaching and learning are not analysed sufficiently to support improvement. Suitable arrangements are in place to measure the impact of the revised OTL system.

What progress has been made in improving the arrangements for recognising and recording the progress of learners on non-accredited courses? Reasonable progress

At the last inspection procedures for recognising and recording learners' progress and achievement (RARPA) were insufficiently established. Although BACES had made some improvements, tutors did not consistently comply with the service's requirements across different programme areas. BACES has made reasonable progress, using a sound action plan, in establishing more robust arrangements and in developing good guidance on RARPA across its provision. A senior manager now has responsibility for the development of RARPA across the service. Tutors have taken up appropriate additional training and development in RARPA. Tutors' awareness of the benefits of RARPA to learners and to the service, as it demonstrates the added value gained from courses, has improved. The RARPA process is now effectively monitored through the OTL arrangements. Initial progress has been achieved in the development of effective internal verification arrangements, and external verification of RARPA outcomes is being developed. Some tutors are, however, still resistant to applying the new arrangements and the refinements required in setting appropriately tight achievement targets across the service.

What progress has been made in implementing e-learning? Reasonable progress

While insufficient use of e-learning to develop learners' skills was identified as an area for improvement in one subject area at the last inspection, the service concluded in its self-assessment that there was insufficient progress in most areas of the provision. Reasonable progress has been made in resolving this area for improvement. Significant resources have been made available since the last inspection to improve the hardware available through well-targeted purchases of equipment. The service has placed a particularly strong focus on staff development, with e-learning champions identified to support projects within the subject areas. Particularly interesting work has been undertaken by staff working with learners who have disabilities and learning difficulties (DLD). An on-line learning environment has been developed and this has been well received by DLD learners who are beginning to use digital photography and a specially developed 'social networking' site. Currently some 50% of DLD learners are users. Staff throughout BACES report examples where the confidence of individual lecturers and tutors to use e-learning has been improved. The work is, however, still at an early stage of development and it is too early to judge its full effect.

## Leadership and management

What progress has been made in the promotion of equality and diversity in teaching sessions? Reasonable progress

At the last inspection equality of opportunity was satisfactory. The service engaged effectively and promoted achievement for learners with few or no previous qualifications and targeted appropriately under-represented groups. However, the promotion of equality and diversity within teaching sessions was insufficient. Reasonable progress has been made since the inspection in redressing this area for improvement. BACES has established senior manager accountability for improving the promotion of equalities in its provision. An active equality and diversity group is supporting the drive to raise awareness and establish good practice. A carefully considered equality and diversity action plan has been developed, including structured training and development for staff. The service has introduced a well-received newsletter containing an interesting equality and diversity quiz. Promotion of equality is now a specific aspect of the observation of teaching and learning, with challenging targets for its implementation. The service recognises that progress is still not consistent across all courses. Not all tutors take advantage of naturally occurring examples of diversity to enrich the learners' experience.

What progress has been made in improving the use of management information? Reasonable progress

At the last inspection, managers made insufficient effective use of management information to review and improve the provision. The service has made reasonable progress in improving both the quality of information available, and the way in which managers use it. Since the last inspection a useful new suite of monthly reports has been developed. Presentation of reports is significantly better and managers who are less confident in the use of data comment favourably on the clarity of the information provided. Managers now use data better in course planning. In one case, the timing of courses has been changed in response to a drop in the progression of learners from taster to main courses. In another example a manager is now able to plan the 'infilling' of learners with greater accuracy. Managers are now using data on learners' achievements in a more timely way to recognise the work of staff and to identify more quickly areas for concern. The service recognises, however, that while the capacity to use robust data has improved, there is still work to be done in ensuring that all managers are making full use of the information it provides.

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Royal Exchange Buildings  
St Ann's Square  
Manchester, M2 7LA

T: 08456 404040  
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