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Mr T Patterson
Interim Head of Service
Birmingham Adult Education Service
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Dear Mr Patterson

Ofsted 2010-11 survey inspection programme: numeracy - tackling the challenge of ensuring that young people and adults gain the numeracy skills they need for their careers and personal lives

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 25 and 27 May 2010 to look at your work in numeracy.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with senior staff, tutors and learners; six observations of numeracy teaching and learning sessions; and a review of the supporting documents you provided.

Overall, Birmingham Adult Education Service is satisfactory at tackling the challenge of ensuring that young people and adults gain the numeracy skills they need for their careers and personal lives.

Key findings

- The scope of numeracy provision has increased over the past three years. The service now offers a comprehensive programme of courses that take place at different times and in various locations, with good opportunities for learners to progress to further learning. Programmes are based on local need and target areas of perceived disadvantage. Enrolments in discrete numeracy courses have increased significantly over the three-year period to 2008/09. A good proportion of classes now offers learners opportunities to work towards relevant qualifications.
- Learners interviewed said location, small class sizes and supportive and patient tutors were the main reasons for their taking up and continuing with courses. A significant majority of learners take up numeracy courses

either to meet specific work requirements or to enhance general employment prospects.

- An extensive and well-planned family learning provision gives parents their first engagement with formal adult numeracy courses. Just over half of parents completing family learning courses at the time of the visit were considering further learning.
- Over the last year, the service has developed a 'whole organisational approach' towards embedding language, literacy and numeracy teaching and learning in vocational courses. This has involved comprehensive research, pilot schemes, and a well-structured implementation plan. Vocational tutors have already improved their own skills in numeracy and their understanding of how it relates to their subjects. The service has also improved the numeracy teaching and learning resources, tutor and specialist support for learners.
- Teaching and learning observed during the visit were satisfactory. In the better lessons, tutors struck a good balance between the wishes of learners hoping to pass an examination and the need to instil a genuine competence in numerical applications. Tutors used a good variety of methods to engage learners and relate mathematical concepts to everyday life. Peer support among learners was very good, and successfully encouraged by tutors. Simple but effective end-of-session reviews aided some tutors' lesson planning. They planned and used volunteers very effectively to ensure that individual and small groups of learners received good additional support.
- In the less effective lessons observed, tutors' explanations of learning activities and tasks were often too rushed and complicated. They tended to provide too many prompts, failed to use sufficient open questions and simple examples to explain a difficult mathematical operation.
- Qualification success rates have improved overall over the three-year period up to 2008/09. However, they have fluctuated for some individual qualifications, such as the certificate in adult numeracy at Entry level and level 1, and still lag behind national averages. The main problem appears to be retention, as the pass rates are generally good.
- Staff have appropriate generic teaching qualifications but too few staff have the specialist qualifications in teaching numeracy. The service is making arrangements for approximately half its numeracy tutors to join a scheme designed to help them gain a diploma in teaching numeracy at level 5. Arrangements for sharing good practice and supporting numeracy tutors are satisfactory.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- continuing to improve retention by ensuring that potential learners have sufficient information and guidance before they start a programme, and that managers use data and additional information effectively to review the likely reasons why learners leave programmes early
- improving the quality of teaching and learning in numeracy through:

- the continued use of thorough observations of learning sessions
 - subject-specific staff training and development
 - increased sharing of good practice and support for tutors by their peers and managers specialising in numeracy
- developing tutors' expertise in relating learners' numeracy skills to real-life situations and vocational contexts, and in developing learners' understanding of mathematical concepts, as well as their ability to carry out basic numerical operations
 - continuing to implement the whole organisation approach to embedding language, literacy and numeracy teaching, learning and assessment into all vocational programmes
 - developing specific strategic objectives and targets for numeracy to raise its profile and impact across the organisation and to support self-assessment and quality improvement planning.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop numeracy skills at Birmingham Adult Education Service.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to the Skills Funding Agency and will be published on the Ofsted website under the URN for your organisation. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Andy Harris
Her Majesty's Inspector