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Ms L Hayward-Smith
Principal Officer for Adult Community
Learning
Essex County Council
PO Box 11
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Dear Ms Hayward-Smith

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 16, 17 and 18 June 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 staff and learners, scrutiny of relevant documents, analysis of learners' work and observation of six learning sessions.

Overall, Essex County Council's Adult Community Learning Service is good 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 council has good arrangements for meeting local numeracy needs and managers work closely with a wide range of organisations to develop the provision. Take-up of existing numeracy courses and courses set up specifically to meet the needs of communities or identified groups of learners is good. Examples of target groups include ex-offenders, learners not in employment or training and army personnel. Direct marketing of the council's own numeracy provision is also effective. In 2008/09, after an emphasis on promoting numeracy provision, enrolments on numeracy courses rose by about 25% compared with the previous year and this increased level of recruitment has continued in 2009/10.
- The council is developing online numeracy resources well. Tutors make good use of these materials to support learners attending courses and

have successfully encouraged many learners to continue their learning independently online in their own time. Tutors provide learners working online with a good induction on how to use the resources and they assess learners' progress frequently. Staff continue to develop course materials to ensure they cover all levels from entry level 3 to level 2.

- Teaching and learning are good. In the better learning sessions observed, learners enthusiastically took part in a wide range of challenging activities. Tutors provided effective support and successfully encouraged good peer support through groupwork. Learners built on their prior knowledge well and reflected on alternative approaches to solving mathematical problems. In the less effective sessions, tutors did not relate the numeracy topics to real life events sufficiently well. Overall, learners do not have sufficient access to computers to support their learning.
- Staff receive good opportunities for continuing professional development. Numeracy tutors interviewed said they particularly welcomed meetings with other local numeracy tutors across a range of remits to share good practice and learning materials. Significant work over the past few years to embed numeracy skills in vocational courses is beginning to have an impact. Good examples of this work include analysis of where numeracy occurs in a curriculum area and the teaching and learning of relevant numeracy skills on courses in hairdressing, woodworking or fashion. However, the council has not fully embedded numeracy in all of its vocational provision across the service.
- The council successfully promotes numeracy as part of its Train to Gain provision with good initial assessment of learners' numeracy needs. Take-up of accredited numeracy courses is good, at approximately 25% of all Train to Gain learners. A specialist tutor provides training in the workplace and success rates are outstanding.
- Success rates for discrete numeracy courses are satisfactory, at around national averages. Retention of learners is generally at or above national rates, but achievement of qualifications was slightly below the national average in 2008/09. The council has improved the use of individual learning plans to review learners' progress towards achieving identified learning goals, with the aim to increase learners' achievement of qualifications. Learners' progression to courses at higher levels of numeracy is good.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- reviewing the impact of recent initiatives to improve success rates and continuing to evaluate the provision to identify the specific areas for improvement required to help ensure more learners achieve the qualification
- continuing, to improve the availability and effective use of information and communication technology, enhancing internet connectivity and increasing the number of data projectors
- encouraging further vocational tutors to help learners develop the numeracy skills relevant to their future careers and developing a more

detailed county-wide strategy to support the embedding of numeracy into vocational courses.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop numeracy at Essex County Council.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your 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