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Mr J Farquharson
Managing Director
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Dear Mr Farquharson

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 26 and 27 July 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; review of online training and learning materials; scrutiny of relevant documents; and visits to four centres that provide learndirect courses.

Overall, the Exchange Group 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 Exchange Group has good procedures to identify and meet learners' numeracy needs. Staff identify learners' numeracy needs very effectively through rigorous, standardised initial assessment for all learners, whichever course they are on. Staff use the results of this assessment well to direct learners to take a full numeracy qualification, or to agree individual programmes of numeracy support relevant to their main learning programme, as required.
- The Exchange Group markets its numeracy provision very effectively. Specialists promote the full range of numeracy provision to all learners at each centre. In addition, learners take part in successful marketing events in conjunction with Jobcentre Plus, community groups, schools and

particularly libraries. Learners are attracted to learndirect provision located in libraries, high street venues, schools and other community-based centres. The take-up of courses has increased recently, particularly by learners who require numeracy provision at entry level. However, some of these centres do not have sufficient space to provide confidential areas for individual progress reviews or to enable learners to work on paper-based materials while sitting at a computer.

- The provision meets learners' needs very well. They are enthusiastic about the flexible approach to learning which offers them course start and finish times that suit their individual needs and personal circumstances, and a good choice of attendance patterns at each centre. They use the online learning system flexibly, working at their own pace with the option of repeating learning activities or exercises as they wish. Although a minority of learners welcome the opportunity to use the system remotely, for example from home, the vast majority of learners prefer to work in the centres where they have access to good tutorial support.
- Curriculum management is satisfactory. The small teams manage their centres well and they maintain appropriate standards of provision. Managers use observations of staff at work well to drive up standards of support and training in numeracy across the company. Staff development has also included some innovative development of web-based material, as well as staff training events to increase the proportion of staff with specialist qualifications to meet company and national requirements.
- Learners make good progress using the well-developed computer-based training materials. Tutors provide additional individual coaching to help learners grasp numeracy concepts, such as the rounding of numbers, or to explain problems that learners encounter in the course material. The tutors also work well with learners to review their progress and agree a learning plan for each visit. The Exchange Group and staff at individual learning centres supplement the learndirect programmes well with useful teaching and learning resources. Arrangements to share these resources and other examples of good practice are satisfactory. However, managers do not check that all staff are aware of the full range of materials available to help reduce duplication of effort across the sites.
- Outcomes for learners are good overall. Success rates for those working towards the certificate in adult numeracy vary across the 38 centres but they are mainly high and improving. Success rates for learners taking the individual learndirect modules are slightly lower, but they are around the national average for learndirect. Learners show significant improvements in their confidence in applying basic numeracy techniques such as using percentages or understanding metric units.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- continuing to implement the staff professional training programme to maximise the availability of specialist numeracy support at all centres
- improving accommodation where necessary; particularly the availability of private areas for confidential interviews and the space available for each learner to use paper-based material when working at a computer

- developing the systems for storing and sharing learning resources.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop numeracy at the Exchange Group.

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