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Ms C Berrevoets
Performance and Quality Manager
Northamptonshire County Council Adult Learning
John Dryden House
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Dear Ms Berrevoets

Short inspection of Northamptonshire County Council Adult Learning

Following the short inspection on 27 and 28 September 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The inspection was the first short inspection carried out since the provider was judged to be good in June 2010.

This provider continues to be good.

- You have developed an effective self-critical approach and culture to assess the quality of the provision that includes good use of benchmarking to evaluate overall standards. This has allowed you to identify and address key areas for improvement and has resulted in rising standards for adult learners and apprentices.
- Senior leaders and managers have a strong commitment to providing a good quality of adult learning that successfully meets the needs of its users. You have ensured that actions to solve the areas of weakness noted at the previous inspection have been effective. Good leadership and management have addressed the identified performance shortfalls in apprenticeship training, which is now of a consistently good standard.
- Since the previous inspection, managers have developed the provision so it better meets the development needs of both individuals and specific groups. Managers make good use of partnership working so relevant adult learning is available in the appropriate areas of need across the county. This has ensured it more effectively meets council, regional and national strategic priorities.
- You and your managers have a sound awareness of what further work needs completing so the provision's quality is further improved. Relevant and realistic plans are in place to improve the provision and raise standards for all groups of learners.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and managers have established an organisational culture that prioritises the protection of all apprentices and adult learners. Staff have received relevant training to raise their understanding of safeguarding, fundamental British values and their responsibilities under the 'Prevent' duty. Managers effectively supplement this using a rolling programme of staff briefings and updates. This helps to keep all staff abreast of developments and allows them to successfully identify and deal with any causes of concern.

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and action is taken to safeguard apprentices and adult learners. A designated safeguarding officer closely monitors the recorded log of reported incidents to ensure that the response is fully effective. Managers make good use of the council's specialist advisers and relevant external bodies to develop safeguarding arrangements. They understand and have responded well to local and regional priorities designed to keep learners safe. Managers use the 'Prevent' and safeguarding action plan well to enhance and develop the effectiveness of current practices. All staff are subject to an adequate vetting procedure prior to commencing their duties.

Apprentices and learners receive an appropriate introduction to safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty during their induction. Where relevant, tutors subsequently revisit topics to reinforce learners' understanding. Learners interviewed during the inspection demonstrated a good understanding of how to take responsibility for their personal safety. Adult learners' appreciation of how fundamental British values applied to them varied but was generally good; this was also the case for apprentices. Managers are introducing improvements to the promotion of fundamental British values, including more emphasis on relevant topics during induction, but it is too early to judge their impact. All learners receive useful guidance on how to protect themselves when using the internet. Relevant procedures are in place to both restrict and monitor the use of websites by learners and staff.

Inspection findings

- Since the previous inspection, senior managers have made good use of national and local data to develop the provision. Managers have refocused the adult programme so it makes a valuable contribution to addressing the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged residents of Northamptonshire. This includes the development of nationally recognised expertise in helping people with mental health difficulties to improve their life chances. Managers have also appropriately tailored the apprenticeship offer to raise skills in key sector areas. They recognise that the recruitment of apprentices aged 16–18 years needs to increase to best support businesses in Northamptonshire.

- As most tutors and teaching assistants work part-time, the service has rightly expended much effort to ensure good internal communication. A virtual learning environment (VLE), available to all staff, ensures they have access to a broad range of high-quality learning resources. This and other development activities have contributed to the more effective sharing and use of good practice to enhance the learning experience. Managers have planned further work to make the VLE a more useful vehicle for staff development. They are currently trialling a VLE telephone 'app', with early positive feedback received from users.
- As part of self-assessment, managers use a high degree of self-critical analysis to identify and address areas for improvement. For example, managers identified the need to improve information, advice and guidance for adult learners. As a result, managers appointed an information, advice and guidance adviser who met all the challenging and ambitious targets for improving the progression rates of disadvantaged learners following career-planning courses. The inclusion of information, advice and guidance in the development of all courses has improved programme relevance, as has the scheduling of information, advice and guidance sessions in the penultimate week of learners' courses.
- The self-assessment quality improvement plan is detailed and managers effectively use it to improve the provision. However, this and other action plans do not routinely include measures of how completion of stated activities will improve the learning experience. Since the previous inspection, managers have developed greater use of learner feedback data to inform changes to curriculum design and delivery. In addition, they have changed the questions used during surveys to capture the impact of actions on the development of learners' employability skills. Improvements in raising the survey response rate have been successful. Managers have introduced other improvements but it is too early to make judgements on their effectiveness. Managers recognise the need to use the views of learners and employers better to inform self-assessment judgements.
- Senior leaders, curriculum managers and coordinators work effectively together to agree and take the necessary actions to improve learners' outcomes. They closely monitor the quality of taught sessions by direct observation as part of a successful quality improvement strategy. In particular, managers have made good use of assessment records, themed learning walks and data to drive up the quality of adult learning. Managers use an appropriate range of quality assurance processes for effective performance management of both learners and staff. All staff receive a relevant appraisal that supports improvements in their performance.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good. This leads to adult learners and apprentices making good progress. Tutors plan engaging lessons and training activities that promote effective learning. Taught sessions usually include very effective individualised learning. Tutors make good use of appropriate and well-designed materials to enhance the effectiveness of learning sessions. Both adult learners and apprentices receive sufficiently detailed feedback to help them succeed. Adult learners enjoy completing the

appropriately challenging level of stimulating homework tutors set for them. Tutors focus appropriately on promoting learners' English and mathematics skills during taught sessions. Tutors do not sufficiently encourage apprentices to pursue a higher level of English and mathematics if they already meet the minimum framework requirement.

- All learners benefit from receiving good personal and learning support. In particular, learning support assistants work effectively alongside tutors to provide adult learners with good-quality help so they can work more independently. Support staff have built trust and respect with adult learners, who often have significant barriers to participating in education. This has made a major contribution to learners' stated improvements in self-confidence and self-worth.
- The adult learning venues used across the county provide suitable teaching rooms that are well equipped and maintained. In a few instances, rooms are either too small for the number of learners or not suitable for the subject taught. Learning in a small minority of cases is impeded as technology, such as projection equipment and access to the internet, is not always available.
- Tutors place learners on the right level of course and ensure they benefit from impartial advice and guidance to plan their next steps. Learners have a good understanding of the nature and expectations of the course for which they have enrolled. Partnership working with the National Careers Service is good.
- Adult learners and apprentices attend regularly and punctually. They are motivated, work collaboratively and demonstrate mutual respect. Most develop their employability skills well. For example, learners make good gains in developing their curriculum vitae and learn to use technology to enhance their job-seeking activities.
- The process for recognising and recording progress and achievement for non-accredited programmes is robust. It both captures and promotes learners' achievements well. Achievement rates for adult programmes are high. A very large proportion of learners who commence a programme are retained. The provision is appropriately helping adults achieve their short-term goals. Data presented during our visit indicates that a range of programmes, particularly family and community learning, are successful in helping learners progress to employment. The service is particularly successful in recruiting learners from minority groups. Managers do not collect data that allows an evaluation of how effectively the service is addressing the needs of the Eastern European community that has grown since the previous inspection.
- Managers have reduced the number of subcontractors from eight in 2013/14 to two in 2015/16. This rationalisation has resulted in the termination of contracts with the weaker performing providers. All apprenticeship training is subcontracted and subject to effective performance management. Apprenticeship completion rates are high and show an improving trend. Current apprentices are making good progress and are on track to achieve by the planned completion date. Progression rates to employment or a higher level of apprenticeship are

also high. In part, the improvement in rates reflects the decision by managers to stop offering poorly performing subcontracted engineering provision. In addition, early completion of functional skills qualifications has raised apprenticeship achievement rates. Assessors set realistic targets that maintain a good pace of development. They ensure that apprentices know how to achieve their frameworks in a timely manner. Employers are fully involved in target setting and are supportive and encouraging to their apprentices. Apprentices who have support needs due to their dyslexia are not performing as well as the main cohort of learners. No other significant achievement gaps exist.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- planned improvement actions are clearly linked to measureable outcomes stated in terms of their impact on learners
- they collect sufficiently detailed data to allow them to evaluate the service's success in engaging with, and promoting learning in, the Eastern European community
- they use the views of learners and employers fully to produce self-assessment judgements
- they challenge all apprentices to raise their existing English and mathematics skills levels beyond their individual starting points.

I am copying this letter to the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Nigel Bragg

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the short inspection, the performance and quality manager, as nominee, assisted us. Inspectors met with senior leaders, managers, staff, employers, apprentices and adult learners. Key documents, including those related to self-assessment, performance and safeguarding, were reviewed. Inspectors visited adult learning classes and apprentices' workplaces to discuss with learners/apprentices their experience. A range of completed work was scrutinised. In addition, we observed teaching, learning and assessment.