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4 April 2016

Ms Helen Ellison
Lead Officer (Learning and Skills 11–19)
Darlington Borough Council
Coleridge Centre
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Darlington
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Dear Ms Ellison

Short inspection of Darlington Borough Council

Following my visit on 9–10 March 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 January 2012.

This provider continues to be good.

Elected members and your senior leadership team set a clear strategic mission for the service to provide stepping-stone learning to re-engage young people and adults, whose circumstances have made them the most vulnerable, in education and training. You communicate this mission to your staff particularly effectively, with the result that they are highly committed and ambitious about its implementation.

You and your leadership team plan your provision effectively in partnership with other key providers and support agencies based on a thorough analysis of the economic opportunities and social barriers that residents face in the borough. Your development of the new study programme was a direct response to the reduced opportunities for young people to enter training after other providers withdrew from the borough.

After a difficult first year, when too many young people left the study programme early or failed to achieve their qualifications, your managers' rapid and decisive interventions have resulted in many more learners completing their qualifications and progressing into employment or apprenticeships. Your apprenticeship programme develops very good technical and vocational skills, which adds value to employers' businesses and ensures that the majority of apprentices secure sustainable employment. However, elected members and senior leaders have shown a lack of ambition in growing the apprenticeship programme at a time when it has

been a high priority of central government. As a consequence, many young people have been denied access to this successful provision.

Your managers and tutors have sustained the high quality of the community learning programme since the last inspection, with your family learning programmes having transformative effects on the lives of many parents and their children. Adult learners on family learning courses not only develop in personal confidence, but they also acquire the skills and knowledge to support the educational development of their own children, particularly in literacy and numeracy. Many parents go on to achieve qualifications in English and mathematics. Your community learning programme is designed very effectively to enable learners to develop their skills through various levels of progression, rather than being recycled through repeat courses.

You and your managers have a good understanding of the strengths and areas for development of your service. Your self-assessment process is highly inclusive of all levels of staff within the organisation and uses the views of learners and key stakeholders effectively to improve the provision. Your resulting quality improvement plan is therefore an accurate picture of what you need to do to improve. Your managers implement improvement actions decisively, as demonstrated by the rapid improvement in retention and achievement rates on the study programme.

You have made good progress in addressing the majority of areas for improvement since your previous inspection. Your systems for monitoring the progress of apprentices on programmes, and for identifying and supporting those at risk of leaving are now effective. As a consequence, apprentices' success rates within planned timescales are above the national rates. The quality of teaching, learning and assessment seen on inspection remains good. You and your managers have empowered your tutors and assessors to take greater responsibility for sharing good practice among themselves, through such initiatives as the teaching and learning hub and the network of learning champions. However, in their observation reports, managers are still focusing too much on teaching techniques and procedures, rather than their impact on learning, thus inhibiting tutors' understanding of how to improve further. Your self-assessment and quality improvement planning processes are now much more effectively informed by good-quality data, and your staff, at all levels, now use these data to help them identify what they need to improve.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are effective and it takes appropriate actions to safeguard learners. The designated safeguarding officer for the service takes a strong lead in promoting a culture of safeguarding across the whole service. A comprehensive and up-to-date single record is in place for all staff, which details the status of their employment and disclosure checks, and the training they have undertaken. All staff, irrespective of role, receive level 1 safeguarding training, with managers and those working with children and young people completing training at level 2. As a result, managers and tutors have a good

understanding of the anxieties and concerns of their learners which give rise to safeguarding incidents.

The designated safeguarding officers have effective links with the local authority's safeguarding boards, and a good practical knowledge of how their referral mechanisms work. Managers have dealt with the small number of incidents swiftly and appropriately. Learners feel safe, and are confident about how to report any safeguarding incidents or concerns.

Managers have implemented the 'Prevent' duty, but the impact is not yet evident among learners, whose understanding of the risks associated with extremism and how to protect themselves is shallow. Managers have developed resources to promote fundamental British values, but the majority of tutors and assessors do not have the confidence to embed them seamlessly into lessons and reviews.

Inspection findings

- The governance of the service is good. Elected members hold managers to account for the service's performance through regular reports at the council's scrutiny committee. The portfolio holder is updated on developments through briefings from the director. Elected members have been particularly supportive of initiatives to reduce the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training, such as the transfer of the service's study programme into town centre facilities. The senior leadership's focus on adult provision has been less effective. There have been delays in getting a new post for employer engagement in place, which has held back the expansion of the apprenticeship programme.
- Managers' planning of the curriculum is highly effective. They conduct an annual review of the curriculum based on local labour market intelligence, the priorities of the local enterprise partnership, and the views of partners and learners. Managers work effectively with partners to design bespoke courses to meet the needs of specific groups, or to make changes to the way they deliver courses to make them more accessible. For example, staff developed entry level programmes for a group of people recovering from drug and alcohol abuse, and made courses available for the homeless in their hostel. A level 3 course was designed for the volunteers on a restorative justice project, while the borough's newly appointed family support workers were all trained by the service. Partners value the great care and support that tutors give to their vulnerable clients, and appreciate the way they are kept informed of their learners' progress on courses.
- Managers have successfully implemented changes in the way the study programmes are delivered. They have invested in an additional training facility in the town centre, making it more accessible to learners. They have improved tracking of learners' progress, alongside increased levels of support for learners at risk of leaving early. These changes have had a very positive impact on the proportion of learners who successfully achieve their qualifications. Retention improved by 19 percentage points between 2013/14

and 2014/15, and has been sustained into the current year, with achievement rates improving by 18 percentage points, and outcomes for learners are now good overall. The majority of learners develop good English and mathematics skills based on rigorous initial and diagnostic assessment. However, there is some inconsistency between tutors in the embedding of individual targets in English and mathematical skills, which prevents a minority of learners from progressing in all aspects of the programme. Teachers have organised a comprehensive range of enrichment activities, and the quality and quantity of work placements have increased which helps learners to develop good employability skills. Over half of learners now progress onto apprenticeships and into employment.

- Managers have effectively addressed the low rates of completion within planned timescales on the apprenticeship programmes since the previous inspection. Across all age groups, and at both intermediate and advanced levels, the great majority of apprentices achieve within their planned timescales. Managers now rigorously monitor the progress of apprentices, with any who fall behind being supported by a mentor. Initial information, advice and guidance ensure that apprentices are placed on the right level course that suits their needs and vocational aspirations. Apprentices develop good practical skills and technical knowledge, such as in the use of power tools and how to apply health and safety principles to plan their work. Employers are confident that the skills developed by apprentices add value to their businesses, such as the joinery subcontractor who says he is two days ahead of schedule due to apprentices fitting skirting boards so skilfully. Tutors and assessors support apprentices to develop their English skills through the routine correction of their written work and engaging activities such as 'homophone bingo'. Managers have invested in new resources, such as modern vehicles and diagnostic testing kits, so apprentices can work on current industry standard equipment.
- Staff use the system for recognising and recording progress and achievement effectively to underpin the high success in the large community learning programme. Tutors conduct thorough initial assessments to ensure that learners are on programmes that match their aspirations and prior levels of learning. Tutors plan learning for individual learners based on specific and measurable targets, such as practising auto-focus techniques on a digital photography course. Tutors monitor learners' progress against their targets effectively. Managers audit learners' files to ensure that learners' targets are challenging enough. Although moderation takes place, the arrangements for this are not sufficiently consistent across all subjects within community learning.
- Managers have effectively empowered their tutors and assessors to share good practice in teaching, learning and assessment among their peers. A group of tutors and assessors who have received good and outstanding grades in observations have been recruited onto the observation team and appointed as learning champions. Through a learning and teaching hub, they support tutors and assessors to improve their practice, both through formal

training sessions and informal support. As a consequence, the percentage of tutors and assessors who have achieved good or outstanding grades in observed lessons in the service has gradually increased over the past two years. However, managers recognise that their system for grading tutors and assessors may be overgenerous, and they are in the process of revising the system. Observers' reports do not focus sufficiently on the impact of teaching on learners' progress, being overly concerned with teaching techniques and procedures. This is preventing tutors and assessors from understanding how to move from good to outstanding.

- Quality improvement planning in the service is highly effective. Based on an evaluative and accurate self-assessment report, managers set challenging but achievable targets in the quality improvement plan. Actions are all specific and timed, and managers take full responsibility for overseeing their implementation. The senior management team provides effective monitoring for the progress of the plan, updating actions as required. The effectiveness of the process is evident from the concerted way in which learners' completion rates on the study programme radically increased in the space of a year.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- tutors effectively integrate activities into study programmes to help all learners achieve their individual targets in English and mathematics, so that they are well supported to progress in all elements of the programme
- managers in community learning consistently apply moderation arrangements across all subject areas in relation to records of learners' progress against their individual learning targets
- observers focus on the impact of teaching on learning and learners' progress in their observation reports and the actions for improvement
- managers support tutors and assessors to deliver sessions on the 'Prevent' duty and the promotion of fundamental British values so that their learners can better understand the different types of extremism and how to protect themselves against radicalisation
- managers increase the number of employers the service engages with, so that the volume of apprenticeships can be grown.

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

Charles Searle
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors were assisted by the learning and skills manager as nominee. Inspectors met with senior directors within the corporate directorate where the service is located. They held meetings with a range of service managers, tutors, assessors, apprentices, learners and employers. Inspectors carried out observations of teaching, learning and assessment, and conducted walk-throughs of courses to explore particular themes. They scrutinised learners' work and assessment records and key documents relating to the service's strategy and implementation plans, self-assessment and improvement plans, and safeguarding records. Inspectors considered the views of learners through discussions during learning sessions visited and through responses received through Ofsted's online questionnaire.