

**FURTHER EDUCATION  
COMMISSIONER ASSESSMENT  
SUMMARY**

Norfolk County Council

MARCH 2015

# Assessment

## Background

1) Norfolk Adult Education Service is the County Council's Adult and Community Learning service and offers Community and Leisure Learning, Apprenticeships and Classroom Based Skills provision. The service delivers this provision in over 300 urban and rural community venues across the county and through eLearning. Most of the provision is Adult Skills and Community learning, with the remainder comprising learning programmes for a small number of 16-18 learners and a small but growing number of Apprenticeships.

2) Following the Skill's Funding Agency's notification that Norfolk County Council Adult Education Services had been graded as 'inadequate' by Ofsted at its most recent inspection in January 2015, the Minister for Skills decided that the FE Commissioner should assess the position of the County Council in line with the government's intervention policy set out in '*Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills*'.

3) The FE Commissioner's report is intended to advise the Minister and the Chief Executive of the Funding Agencies on,

a) the capacity and capability of Norfolk County Council's Leadership and Governance to deliver quality improvement within an agreed timeframe;

b) any further action that should be taken by the Minister and/or the Chief Executive of the funding agencies to ensure the delivery of quality improvement (considering the suite of interventions set out in '*Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills*'); and

c) how progress should be monitored and reviewed, taking into account the Agency's regular monitoring arrangements and Ofsted's monitoring visits.

## Assessment Methodology

4) The FE Commissioner and an FE Adviser visited the Norfolk County Council over the period 31<sup>st</sup> March to 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015. They received briefing information in advance from the Skills Funding Agency. They met with the County Councillor who now chairs the newly developed Steering Group responsible for overseeing the governance of the Service, and with the Council's Executive Director who is the Senior Council officer accountable for service delivery. They also met with the Assistant Director with responsibility for Adult Education, Assistant Heads of Service, Programme managers, Subject managers and Tutors. Learners were not available as the visit took place during the service's Easter break. They visited the main Adult Education centre at Wensum Lodge in Norwich and examined documentation provided by the Council on the service

## **Governance arrangements**

5) Structural changes in the operation of the County Council, as it moved from a Cabinet to a Committee system in 2014, meant that the Adult Education Service was left without any overall governance monitoring by elected members for a period of seven months between May and December 2014. A governance Steering Group has now been developed and has met three times since January 2015, led by the Vice Chair of the Children's Services Committee and supported by four other cross party councillors.

6) It is important now that there is continuity in this approach, and the Council should be encouraged to seek to maintain the current elected representative membership when the committees and steering groups come up for renewal in the summer. Building up the expertise and knowledge of the members is crucial in ensuring that the main problems in the service are dealt with urgently and appropriately.

7) Overall there has been insufficient scrutiny of what the service offers and how it aligns to Council priorities. It is important to recognise the contribution that the service does, and can, make to addressing both the legal responsibilities and strategic priorities of the wider Council, including family learning and widening participation for those living in areas of deprivation. The newly formed Steering Group can play a key role in determining where the Adult Education service fits into the Council's overall strategy and focus the council's resources on the core provision that will enable the service to give best value to local communities.

8) One of the urgent needs will be to develop a more strategic level approach to clarify the priorities for the 15/16 curriculum and commissioning plan, which flows from the overall strategy before the Adult Education senior officers finalise the offer. The current aim of providing 'something for everyone...' may need to be adjusted to improve outcomes for key communities.

9) It is evident that the Council values the impact the adult community learning service has on individuals and disadvantaged communities and there is much support for that activity. However, there are a number of concerning funding issues around the current provision for 16-18 year olds and Apprenticeships, which will require strategic decisions around the way that these educational programmes are provided in the future.

## **Leadership and Management**

10) Reductions in government funding and also in the council's budget in recent years have undoubtedly been one of the causes of the current problems of the Adult Education service in Norfolk. It is understood that the Council in prioritising its legal and social responsibilities has had to look to non-statutory provision to make financial cuts. Consequently, there was considerable financial pruning leading to uncertainty in the Adult service during 2014, which contributed significantly to its capacity to maintain and improve standards. In order to save money, the Head of Service post was removed and there was a lengthy political debate about the future of the main Adult Education Centre in Norwich at Wensum Lodge, which created insecurity, and a lack of clarity and focus. As a result, for some time there was a question mark over the future of the service, and this has in turn made it difficult for the remaining leadership and management to set a clear way forward for staff and students. Some of this uncertainty remains, although now

there is clear intent on the part of elected members and the Executive Director and senior officers to reshape and invest in the service.

11) There is a commitment from senior officers to seek increased investment in order to appoint a new Head of Service and ensure that the Adult Service becomes an integrated part of the Council's work and future strategy.

12) There is also an acceptance amongst senior officers that there is a further need for investment in a new Assistant Head post to lead on data management and the provision of intelligence reports for officers and elected representatives. Systems and processes are currently inadequate and the Ofsted visit clearly identified a requirement to have more effective means to track the attendance, retention and achievements of learners. There is no doubt that this is a difficult task across so many Adult Education venues and the current processes and systems are not fit for this purpose.

13) There have been two major restructurings of management and staff in quick succession in recent years as a result of the pressures of funding changes. This has contributed to the lack of continuity and focus, and ultimately a deterioration in standards of teaching and learning. However, the most recent changes have put in place a middle management tier of seven Programme managers, who work with two Assistants Heads of Service, and it is their role now to introduce a range of initiatives to provide greater stability and improve the quality of learning.

14) The individuals appointed are clearly committed to the task and recognise the urgency of taking appropriate actions. There are already signs of improvements in communication with staff and a recognition and understanding of the speed and direction of travel. Similarly, the Subject managers interviewed had a realistic view of the shortcomings noted in the Inspection, and a clear view of the importance of swift action and change. This commitment combined with new strategic leadership from the Steering group and a new Head of Service are the key ingredients needed to make the necessary improvements, but there still needs to be a greater sense of urgency to focus on the actions needed to improve the learner experience *now*, rather than debating policies and procedures and assessment processes with a view to getting it right at some future date.

## **Teaching and Learning**

15) Ofsted's inspection of Norfolk Adult Education Service on 19-23 January 2015 was confirmed on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2015 as overall Inadequate (Grade 4) Ofsted's comments included significant criticisms of teaching and learning

16) Interviews with managers and tutors demonstrated that they understood the shortcomings of the current Teaching and Learning observation systems, where often-untrained managers were grading inconsistently. They have now taken the first steps to move to a completely different way of operating, with the decision to appoint qualified specialist observers (two full time equivalent posts) to cover the full range of the curriculum offer, and to focus on learner progress rather than pedagogy.

17) There also remains a need to develop a more effective process of performance management. Current evidence suggests that this is neither comprehensive nor conclusive in identifying inadequate performance in teaching, administration or

management. In the past, there have been a low number of completions of performance appraisals due to complicated and lengthy paperwork, but also due to the lack of a culture where assessment of staff performance has been seen as a priority. However, early evidence suggests that managers have already started to take action and reports seen during the visit suggests that a system is now in place for focusing on performance and capturing concerns.

18) There is acceptance amongst the officers that the current Information systems, originally established to report on the individual records of learners for completion of funding data, are not fit for the purpose of tracking learner progress and capturing timely attendance and retention intelligence. A commitment to invest in developing a new approach and dealing with the hardware network problems at the main Adult centre at Wensum lodge now needs to be acted upon urgently. This will be essential if learners are to be monitored effectively, so that action can be taken swiftly to improve their chances of success.

19) There is a passion and commitment amongst the newly appointed manager and the tutors on the 16-18 STEP programme, and a belief that it is the responsibility of the Council via the Adult Education service to provide a service to these otherwise NEET learners in the area. However, the course is heavily resourced with 7 vocational areas of teaching for 38 students as well as a general education programme. The question to be considered is not whether the 16-18 provision meets a local need but rather one as to whether this work could be more effectively undertaken by others or in partnership with others.

20) A detailed Post-Inspection Action Plan has been prepared to address the issues raised by Ofsted and there is a desire amongst staff interviewed to take steps to work hard to make the improvements needed. It includes time-lined actions for the Steering Group, appointments of new posts to strengthen the leadership and management, improvements to the observation of teaching and learning and performance management, and a review of management information. It is now essential for the Steering group and senior officers to prioritise and cost key actions so that these foundations for speedy improvement can be put in place with some degree of urgency. In the current desire for improvement there is a danger of trying to introduce too many new initiatives.

## **Conclusions**

21) The Norfolk County Council has acted swiftly in response to the OFSTED report to identify the changes that are needed to provide a high quality adult education service. Translating these ideas into action, however, will require both a significant investment in the IT infrastructure and management information systems and new posts to lead and develop the service. The Council needs to be clear that it is prepared to support these changes, without which it is unlikely that the necessary improvements will be made and alternative providers will need to be sought.

# Recommendations from Further Education Commissioner

- On the basis that Norfolk County Council wishes to continue its commitment to delivering an adult education service it should, through its Steering Group of elected members, take a more strategic view in setting the mission and deciding the key objectives of the service in order to concentrate resources more effectively on its core provision and market. Significant investment will be required to improve organizational culture, introduce new information systems and raise the quality of teaching learning in order to strengthen the offer to learners.
- Governance and oversight from a Council perspective has been extremely limited in the past, and whilst a new Steering Group of elected representatives has recently been established, it now has to develop more effective means of monitoring the quality of the provision, and providing strategic leadership.
- Leadership and management has been inadequate, and there is an immediate need to appoint a dedicated Head of Service to inspire staff and deliver the changes required within a clear timescale. There is also a need for one of the current Assistant Head posts to focus entirely on Quality Improvement, and for a new Assistant Head post to lead on data management.
- The current Management Information System is not fit for purpose and does not provide adequate timely intelligence reports for managers or Steering Group members. An investment needs to be made to ensure that key performance measures are available to monitor student progress. Learner attendance, retention, achievement and, progression should be regularly monitored and challenged.
- There are insufficient 16-18 year old learners to provide the best quality and best value experience for these learners within the resources available. It is recommended that the Council work with the EFA and other local partners to see if there are alternative ways of ensuring that their needs may be better met.
- There are plans to overhaul the approach to teaching and learning observations, with a dedicated resource of a number of new specialist observers. This should be introduced as soon as possible as a significant and essential step towards improving the quality of learning.
- The arrangements for the performance management of the service need urgent improvement. A particular emphasis needs to be on improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.
- An FE adviser should continue to monitor and review progress on a regular basis, with a stock take assessment by the FE Commissioner in September 2015.
- The Council should comment on how they intend to respond to these recommendations

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