

**FURTHER EDUCATION
COMMISSIONER ASSESSMENT
SUMMARY**

Wakefield District Council Adult
Education Service

FEBRUARY 2016

Assessment

Wakefield District Council Adult and Community Education Service (ACES, the Service) is run directly by the Council. It is part of the Council's Children and Young People directorate, reporting to the corporate director through the service director for Education and Inclusion.

The Council is very supportive of ACES, significantly subsidising its income from the funding agencies and providing very good premises in the areas of greatest social deprivation in the District.

Nevertheless, the oversight of ACES has been weak and student success rates have been declining for a number of years. The new service manager has sought to address shortcomings by redefining the strategy of ACES as providing foundation level studies aimed at preparing people from deprived backgrounds for sustainable employment and productive citizenship, and reshaping the staffing of the Service accordingly. This process has entailed the cessation of many purely recreational classes which have often run unchanged for many years, and termination of many short-duration staff contracts which were similarly long-standing. The resulting staff structure is based on a fall from some eighty teachers to around twenty five. The Service operates from twenty three centres.

These reforms are strongly supported by the Council Cabinet Member who chaired the Advisory Board for ACES, but there was no formal endorsement for them at the most senior officer and political levels. As a result, they met with stiff resistance from both displaced teachers and learners and from Councillors acting on their behalf. Structural change has therefore taken longer than it might have done, had it been led from the top, while student outcomes have continued to slide. An Ofsted inspection in early November 2015 judged every area of the ACES curriculum as requiring improvement (grade 3) and the effectiveness of leadership and management as inadequate (grade 4), leading to an overall grade 4 and intervention by the Commissioner.

Provision for 16-18 year olds in particular delivered by ACES was strongly criticised by Ofsted and the EFA concluded that its substantial investment in better teaching and learning over a number of years had not been well used. As a result, EFA funding is being withdrawn.

Curriculum

ACES offer part-time classes to learners in a wide range of accredited programmes. There is an equally broad range of client groups including people from the disadvantaged communities where the ACES three main learning centres are situated

As a result of the recent restructuring, a number of subject areas have been discontinued. An informal agreement, however, has been reached with Wakefield College so that ACES will concentrate on teaching up to level 2 in community settings and on building confidence, preparing learners to progress to more advanced study in the college. This appears to be a sensible and efficient use of resources which should be made secure by formal agreement.

With few exceptions, success rates for learners have been declining for at least the past three years and, according to staff, for much longer. Many of these success rates are well below national averages, sometimes by as much as 10-12 percentage points. Progress towards modernising the structure of ACES and focussing it on an appropriate vocational agenda has undoubtedly been made but the delay in translating a better organisation into better results for students is regrettable.

Ofsted were sharply critical of the quality of service offered to students from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds. The success rates among students from African, Arab and Chinese origin backgrounds have all declined significantly and are well below the national averages. An explanation was given by ACES staff that these results were caused by poor initial assessment of capability, weak monitoring of retention and an absence of timely action to investigate and respond to early drop-out. Both managers and governance arrangements must deal more effectively with these issues.

The Performance of the Service in apprenticeships is much more positive. At the time of our visit there were 136 apprentices in total. Among these apprentices, 82 are employed by the Council itself and undertake all their off-the-job studies with ACES. Another 54 apprentices study with ACES and work for other local employers predominantly SMEs. The 2014-15 success rate among all apprentices is 89.2 per cent which is significantly above the national average. The new emphasis on structured progression in the ACES service suggests therefore that apprenticeships should be more strongly promoted as one of the opportunities open to learners from disadvantaged communities who start at the bottom of the ACES ladder.

Overall there has been significant progress against a number of the areas for improvement identified by Ofsted and in some it is clear that work was in hand before the inspection. But, two months after publication of their report, there is a great deal still to be done and there is no concrete evidence that student outcomes in 2015-16 will reverse the steady decline of previous years.

Finance

The Council's financial information systems show that the adult education service has required significant additional funding from the Council in recent years. The Council plans its ACES provision on the basis of a minimum group size of eight students constituting coverage of direct costs. Compared with average class sizes of about 18 or 19 emerging in colleges as they work towards viability against current funding norms, it seems likely that many ACES classes are heavily subsidised by the Council. Work to establish real levels of cost is required in order to plan realistically for the future.

Analysis of additional efficiency measures such as room utilisation is also under-developed. The Service should introduce a dashboard reporting system in order to both manage its own efficiency and progress and to work effectively with the emerging arrangements for governance.

Management and governance

Ofsted were critical of the Council's arrangements for governance of the Service which they characterised as 'weak'. Such governance as did exist was exercised by an Advisory Group consisting entirely of elected Councillors and Service staff. The minutes of this Group confirm, and its former chair fully acknowledges, that it concerned itself largely with marketing and recruitment and exercised no oversight of quality or productive challenge to the Service.

The Council has taken the fact that Ofsted's criticisms were centred on the inadequacy of its oversight of ACES very seriously. The former chair of the Advisory Group told us that there had been no strategy and no challenge to managers and that the members had "taken their eye off the ball"; a conclusion repeated by the Council Chief Executive. The Council commissioned a 'Review of Governance' conducted by two of its senior officers which concluded that a 'framework for governance...is in its infancy' and 'the Advisory Group lacks a clear understanding of its role, function and lines of accountability, particularly in relation to monitoring, challenge and the strategic delivery remit for community learning in line with government legislation and guidelines.' It has since been discontinued.

The Review proposed that a Board of Governors should be established, with a defined remit, membership, terms of reference and standing orders. It also proposed that, in order to tackle without delay the issues that had been raised by Ofsted, an Improvement Board should be set up as a temporary entity, and that it should 'support' a 'Shadow Governing Board' which would evolve in due course into the Board of Governors.

We recommend strongly that the Shadow Board stage should be eliminated from the planned progression towards an established Board of Governors. We suggest that, as planned, the Improvement Board should start its work immediately but that the membership and formal procedures to establish the Board of Governors should begin in parallel, aiming to hold the first meeting of the Governors no later than May 2016.

We also have some concerns that there is too much reference to the structures, practices and preoccupations of schools in the arrangements that the Council is putting in place. This is not to decry schools practice and connections in any way, but we emphasise the wider objectives which ACL should address in relation to employability, employment, health, wellbeing into old age, and community cohesion. In our view, the operating framework of the new Board of Governors should refer more directly to the published recommendations of the Association of Colleges (AoC), the 'UK Code of Corporate Governance' and the useful guidance to trustees issued by the Charity Commission than it does to schools practice in governance. Furthermore, the membership of the Board of Governors should have more representation of employers.

The management structure of ACES is new and all of its six members, including the service manager, are new in role or nearly so. The steps they have taken to shape the strategy for ACL for the District, to reform and improve staffing, and to reshape the curriculum are radical and they appear to be well-conceived.

ACES have prepared a Post-Inspection Action Plan (PIAP) that we understand has been accepted by Ofsted. It also has a continuing Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) and Self-

Assessment Report (SAR) based on last year's performance, and a Business Plan which describes the developing new strategy. We had some difficulty, however, in determining which plan was which and which was the current version. Notwithstanding Ofsted's approval, we suggest that the PIAP could with advantage be more precisely worded, clearer about targets, responsibilities, completion dates and fulfilment criteria.

Conclusions

The Council has accepted fully that Ofsted was right to classify its ACL provision as inadequate. It has begun to act decisively to correct the shortcomings, with ambitions to achieve a more favourable judgement within a year. That may be possible but it should be recognised that very long-standing deficiencies, as these are, are likely to take some time to redeem.

It is a very positive development that the Ofsted inspection has highlighted the issues in this small area of the Council's provision for the most senior levels among officers and Councillors, and that they are taking a positive stance towards resolving them. In particular, it has been helpful that Ofsted commented that the relatively new service manager 'has identified many weaknesses that were not previously recognised (and that) the culture within the service has begun to change and there is greater awareness of the need to review and evaluate the curriculum offer to meet government funding priorities and local employment skills needs better.'

The changes in governance which the Council has adopted after having taken expert advice are positive. There needs to be an unbroken line of policy, oversight and responsibility from the strategic leadership of the Council in its Cabinet to education and skills delivery to Wakefield citizens by ACES. In particular, the new Board of Governors should see itself as being accountable to the Cabinet and Council if it is to be an effective instrument of change. Whether ACL is best delivered by the Council in-house as at present, or whether some more arms-length approach would be better, bearing in mind the breadth of the constituency that the Service has to cover, is a matter for further consideration.

While there are undoubted strengths within the ACES curriculum, notably in apprenticeship, performance is generally poor and still declining. Whilst acknowledging the good work that has been done to reform strategy, curriculum, data and staffing within ACES, there is no proof so far that these changes have benefited learners. There is very little time to achieve that if hopes of more favourable judgements from Ofsted are to be realised in the near future. More attention is undoubtedly being paid to better management of teaching, learning and assessment, and of the performance of teachers and learners. These activities clearly need to be at the centre of the ACES leadership team's efforts.

Recommendations from Further Education Commissioner

We recommend that:

- The Council should reconsider the priority it has given to emergency action by establishing an Improvement Board before a permanent Board of Governors, and move directly to launching the governing Board in April 2016 without passing through a 'Shadow Board' interim phase. The Council should include private-sector employers in the membership of the Board of Governors, reflecting the role of the Service in helping people from deprived backgrounds into work, as well as the wider representation already proposed.
- The Council should consider whether the new governance arrangements for ACL might offer a valuable means of bringing together quality oversight of apprenticeships.
- The Council should work with the Service to refine its draft high-level strategy for ACL and ratify it at the most senior political level.
- The Council should seek to provide stable leadership and intra-directorate and inter-directorate reporting lines for the Service which properly reflects its role in issues such as health, ageing and community cohesion as well as education and skills.
- The Council should consider its long-term aspirations for the future structure of the Service, reviewing the range of models which exist across the country.
- The Service should urgently review its Post-Inspection Action Plan, Quality Improvement Plan and Self-Assessment Report, making targets precise and achievable through use of the improved performance data now becoming available, and introducing systematic document control to ensure that a number of versions do not remain extant.
- The Service should urgently optimise its learner-tracking software to reduce the number of separate reports.
- The Service should roll out across the curriculum the systematic approach to quality improvement which has delivered good results in such areas as the ESOL Pilot.
- The Service should quickly pursue its approach to learner progression based on provision of foundation-level work locally for priority groups and organised pathways to more advanced study and work delivered through formal partnerships with others.
- The Service should seek advice and support from comparable organisations elsewhere which are delivering high quality.

- The SFA should be given Observer Status and attend future Board meetings
- SFA and FEC team should monitor the impact of the new governance regimes as it develops
- The Commissioner should undertake a Stocktake when 2015-16 results are finalised and the new governance arrangements are in place.



© Crown copyright 2016

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3 or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk. Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication available from www.gov.uk/bis

Contact us if you have any enquiries about this publication, including requests for alternative formats, at:

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET
Tel: 020 7215 5000

Email: enquiries@bis.gsi.gov.uk