



Department
for Education

FE Commissioner Intervention Summary Report: Stoke-on-Trent City Council

September 2019

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FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment Report

Stoke-on-Trent City Council

Name and address of council	Stoke-on-Trent City Council City of Stoke-on-Trent One Smithfield Leonard Coates Way Hanley Stoke-on-Trent ST1 4FA
Assessment undertaken by	Josephine Nowacki – FE Adviser Louise Twigg – FE Adviser
Chair of the Council	Councillor Abi Brown – Leader Councillor Janine Bridges – Cabinet Member Economy and Education
Chief Executive of the Council and senior leaders	David Sidaway – City Director Mark Barratt – Interim Director of Children’s and Family Services Jen Lomas – Assistant Director Learning Services Julie Obada – Strategic Manager Employment, Learning and Skills
Date of assessment	10 to 11 September 2019

Background to FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment

Stoke-on-Trent City Council was referred for an FE Commissioner-led (FEC) assessment following notification that the council had received an Inadequate grading after its Ofsted inspection in June 2019.

The FEC report is intended to advise the Minister and the chief executive of the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) on:

- The capacity and capability of Stoke-on-Trent Council leadership and governance to deliver quality improvement within an agreed timeframe.
- Any action that should be taken by the Minister and/or the chief executive of the ESFA to ensure the delivery of quality improvement; and
- How and when progress should be monitored and reviewed taking into account the ESFA's regular monitoring arrangements and Ofsted monitoring visits.

Overview of the Council

Stoke-on-Trent is a city built on a history of industrial prominence and creative artistic flair. It is still a key centre for fine ceramics development, despite the pottery industry being affected by the decline in British manufacturing. There are numerous sporting venues (it has two professional football league clubs) and arts and tourist attractions within easy reach. Deemed a cost-effective place in which to set up a business by KPMG (it has good rail and road links via the A500 and nearby M6 and rail links) there are over 9,000 firms, notably bet365, Michelin, the Co-Op, Vodafone, Premier Foods and the Royal Stoke Hospital. The council is a large employer and there are hundreds of smaller employers.

Nevertheless, Stoke-on-Trent is ranked as the 14th (out of 326) most deprived local authority area in England. Over half the population live in areas categorised as being among the fifth most deprived in England. Around almost a third of households in Stoke-on-Trent have two or more indicators of disadvantage, which is higher than the national rate. A fifth of households with children have no adults in employment and 13% of adults do not have any qualifications. To help address such social mobility challenges, the government has designated Stoke-on-Trent an 'opportunity area' for funding.

The employment, learning and skills section of Stoke-on-Trent City Council is part of learning services in the children and family services directorate. Learners study on 16 to 19, apprenticeship and adult and community learning programmes which are funded by the ESFA. Because of local demographics, the council does much of its work with those who are harder to engage in education and training.

There is a very small cohort of learners enrolled on study programmes and traineeships. Over three quarters of the council's £1.175 million funding is spent on adult learners; a quarter of this provision leads to formal qualifications. The service offers courses at 150 venues throughout the city, although the majority of learners are taught in council headquarters in the new business and mixed-use quarter of the city.

The majority of further education 16 to 19 learners in Stoke attend Stoke-on-Trent College, Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College or Newcastle and Staffordshire Colleges Group (formed from merger of Newcastle-under Lyme and Stafford Colleges).

Leadership and Governance

Role, Composition and Operation of the Board

The city council operates a leader and a cabinet system. Its 44 elected members govern through a coalition. The cabinet leader has appointed 9 cabinet members, each with an individual portfolio of responsibility. The member for children and young people and the member for education and the economy are also chair and vice chair of the children and young people's strategic partnership (CYPSP) board. The board's aim is to improve the lives of children, young people and families. It reports to the health and wellbeing board.

Governance, leadership and management of adult learning provision in the service was judged Inadequate at its education and skills Ofsted inspection in June 2019, although apprenticeship provision was judged as Good. The council's children's social care service provision was also judged Inadequate in February 2019.

From the FEC Team's discussions with the cabinet members and senior leaders, it is clear that the council recognises the need for change. This is, in part, driven by budget reductions, and also in response to its' poor social care services judgement. Consultations on making the wider service more effective and efficient to allow significant investment in children's services, including recruiting more social workers, are nearing a close. This has taken up a large amount of members' time.

There are clearly good working relationships between senior leaders and the elected member, who is a strong advocate for the service. All agree that more discussion of performance is required at board level. For example, there appears to be no formal record of elected members being involved in the validation of the over-optimistic self-assessment report, nor of evaluating improvement actions following the recent education and skills Ofsted report.

Agendas and minutes show membership of various committees is diverse and includes carefully selected external educational specialists, where appropriate. However, there are too many boards, committees and other scrutiny groups. This means that there is no clear line of accountability from the bottom to the top of the service for the education and skills provision.

The FEC Team agrees with Ofsted that council leaders need to urgently improve their oversight of the service. They acknowledge that there has been a recent strong steer from the vice chair and chair of the CYPSP board to improve governance arrangements to ensure wider and consistent accountability. This needs to include all adult provision to ensure the service prioritises supporting adults who need to gain skills and experience to be successful in their family units, at work and in their communities.

Leadership and Senior Management team

While senior leaders were aware of the differences in quality between apprenticeship provision, which is Good, and the adult learning provision, which has been judged Inadequate, they agree that they were unaware of the extent of this gap.

As a large employer the council is a levy payer and as such, senior leaders have devoted a significant amount of time (up to city director level) in developing, monitoring and evaluating the quality of apprenticeship provision. As a result, managers have successfully increased the proportion of apprentices who complete their programme to above national rates. However, there has been little attempt to disseminate this good practice within the adult learning service, as both areas were managed by different people.

Leaders now also see that the strategic measures for reporting and performance monitoring on which they previously relied, were not fit for purpose. Leaders' own assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of the service and of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment were not accurate.

Many of the revisions to the management structure now in train were being planned before the recent Ofsted inspection. Although the changes are largely at middle manager level, responsibilities of senior leaders have also been adjusted to reflect these changes.

Indications are that the new structure, which brings together the leadership, management and quality assurance (QA) of apprenticeships and adult education are logical and will allow more consistent and rigorous performance management. Roles and responsibilities have also been thoughtfully redistributed to take advantage of individual strengths. Four new lead tutor roles are being created for English and mathematics, additional learning support, the use of IT in the classroom and in teaching, learning and assessment. Team managers and tutors are pleased about the changes; they say that they feel an increased sense of empowerment and welcome the greater accountability it brings, especially if it extends to everyone.

Plans are also in place so that managers and tutors benefit from meaningful and regular continuous professional development (CPD) activities that should improve the quality of provision. A wide range of evidence is being used more effectively in their more regular performance meetings with tutors. This includes using data on attendance, retention and achievement, feedback from learners and the outcomes of lesson observations in discussions.

A more robust and comprehensive lesson observation process to evaluate the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is being introduced. This process will use information from observations, learning walks and learner feedback to challenge tutors to improve teaching and better monitor the progress of their learners.

It is clear from our discussions that leaders are aligning the curriculum well to meet local priorities, including those identified by the local enterprise partnership (LEP) and the careers service. The interim director of children's services and assistant director of learning services, both sit on the Stoke-on-Trent opportunity area partnership board.

Managers have anecdotal evidence that a high proportion of adult learners' progress into employment or further training, but their collection and analysis of this information is too brief. As a result, they are unable to evaluate fully the impact of the training that tutors provide or use the information to plan future learning opportunities. Managers recognise this but clear plans are urgently required to improve this aspect of their work.

The FEC Team's visit to the council identified clear examples of best practice – especially in cross agency working, meeting the needs of employers, the unemployed, those under threat of redundancy and in careers guidance.

From discussions with leaders and managers, it appears that the poor Ofsted inspection result is beginning to bring about a much-needed revision to the service, with a focus on improving quality and individual accountability, although it is too soon to see the impact.

Curriculum and Quality Improvement

Curriculum overview

The council has productive links with the LEP and other stakeholders, including the national careers service, and this ensures the curriculum offer is matched closely to local needs and interests. Managers are very responsive to the needs of local employers. There are many good examples of how managers and staff have delivered successful programmes, often at short notice, to employees who are about to be or have already been made redundant.

The curriculum comprises adult and community provision, apprenticeships, and 16 to 19 study programmes. Around 75% of the council's learning services are in adult and community learning programmes and of this provision, a quarter are accredited courses. High-quality apprenticeship programmes are delivered by the council's learning services for Stoke-on-Trent unitary authority. Council managers are adept at recruiting apprentices in skills areas that are required by the local authority. A very small number of young people aged 16 to 18 follow study programmes and traineeships under the umbrella of the council's newly branded 'apprenticeship academy'.

Ofsted inspections

The council was inspected in June 2019 and received the overall judgement of Inadequate. Apprenticeships were judged as Good, with many examples of best practice.

Quality improvement

Plans for a staffing restructure that were in place before the Ofsted inspection have largely been implemented. Responsibility for quality assurance has been streamlined and, in line with other changes, the roles have been redefined and responsibilities reallocated. There is now one overall quality manager who will oversee the whole of the council's learning services. In addition, responsibility for the adult part of the council's learning services is no longer managed separately. This has now transferred to the manager responsible for the successful apprenticeship programme, where there will be opportunities to share best practice.

The FEC Team considers this to be the right move to secure the quality improvements needed in adult and community learning. Staff teaching adults, both in the community and on council premises, report that they now feel a renewed sense of purpose, and most welcomed the increased accountability and clarity around what is expected of them. All tutors have been observed in the new academic year.

Compared with the previous system which relied on sampling a few lessons, this is a step in the right direction to improve quality. However, the impact is yet to be seen in terms of better achievement rates for adults and young people aged 16 to 18. In response to Ofsted's criticisms, the tracking and monitoring of learners' progress is being revised and the plans will ensure that learners at risk of underachieving can be supported as quickly as possible.

The post-inspection action plan (PIAP) is comprehensive and covers all areas for improvement identified at the inspection. The FEC Team suggests that this could be revised further to include more quantitative data and more precise targets, so that improvements can be measured more accurately.

Attendance

The Ofsted report identified adult learners' attendance as too low. This was particularly evident in the attendance of learners aged 16 to 19 English, mathematics and theory lessons. This was a weakness identified during the previous inspection that managers had not tackled. More robust attendance monitoring is now in place, but it is difficult to identify any trends as some courses have begun only recently.

Outcomes

Ofsted judged overall outcomes for learners as Inadequate, but they judged apprenticeship outcomes as Good. Unvalidated data received during the FEC Team's visit shows that in 2018/19, achievement rates for learners aged 16 to 19 remained broadly the same as the previous year. Adult achievement rates increased by just under six percentage points to 83.38%. Both rates are below 2017/18 national figures – significantly so for the small number of learners aged 16 to 19.

Overall and timely achievement for apprentices dipped slightly in 2018/19 but are still well above the 2017/18 national average.

Teaching learning and assessment

Ofsted judged the quality of teaching, learning and assessment as Inadequate.

Managers at the council have responded to the criticisms set out in the Ofsted judgement of teaching, learning and assessment of the adult and 16 to 19 provision within its learning services. For example, the process of lesson observation has been revised and strengthened, the use of data to track and monitor learners' progress has been increased, and routine initial assessment is now in place for all learners. These and other actions are recent and therefore it is difficult to assess whether they are having an impact on improving provision.

Student views

The FEC Team met with around 20 learners from across the council's learning services. Invariably, all learners, including apprentices, spoke highly of the provision. Several learners recounted how the programmes they were on had changed their lives and given them the confidence they needed to progress to employment or pursue another course. There were no negative comments.

Staff views

Tutors and managers the FEC Team met with displayed enthusiasm and excitement, and are happy to embrace the many changes, despite the greater accountability. Staff felt a renewed sense of purpose and welcomed the revised roles and responsibilities arising from the recent changes. They see the amalgamation of the management of adult and 16 to 19 provision with apprenticeships as positive as it will promote the sharing of best practice and team working. The FEC Team agrees with this.

Effectiveness of the council to manage and improve quality

Planned changes to the management of quality improvement have largely been implemented. The FEC Team view these changes as appropriate and provide a degree of confidence that the quality of learner services will improve. However, there are a number of caveats. First, some poor practice in adult and 16 to 19 learner services has been left unchecked for too long. It is important that this is stopped quickly, and that best practice is embedded across all provision. Secondly, although accountability is much stronger up to [tier 3] senior management level, beyond that the picture is unclear. For the changes to quality improvement processes to work, lines of accountability need to be clear and simple.

Conclusions

The FEC Team visit to Stoke-on-Trent City Council learning services (part of the children and family services directorate) has shown that there are clear examples of best practice, especially in cross agency working, meeting the needs of employers and the unemployed, those under threat of redundancy and in careers guidance.

Governance, leadership and management of adult learning in the service was however judged Inadequate at inspection in June 2019. The FEC Team agrees with Ofsted that there has been insufficient oversight of the quality of provision and a lack of effective arrangements to properly monitor the adult service and measure its impact.

Indications are that the new management structure gives greater clarity to roles and responsibilities, which have been redistributed to take full advantage of individual strengths. Team managers and staff welcome these changes. Structural changes have also been made higher up in the council structure.

In contrast to the changes made largely at an organisational level, there are an excessive number of boards, committees and other scrutiny groups. This means that there is no clear line of accountability from the bottom to the top of the service. The FEC Team acknowledges that there has been a strong steer from the vice chair and chair of the CYPSP board to improve governance arrangements to ensure widespread and consistent accountability. This now needs to extend quickly and urgently to include all adult provision.

Quality assurance arrangements have not been effective in driving improvement, notably the use of data to better inform decision making, checking and monitoring of students, teaching and learning and performance management of staff. Quality assurance is now strengthened through bringing together the management of apprenticeships and adult education provision. The revised structure has narrowed chains of command and shortened the length of line management control. There are early signs that this is improving communication, making decision-making quicker and raising morale amongst staff.

In addition to the flatter management structure, revised arrangements for QA, including the observation of teaching, learning and assessment (OTLA) have been introduced e.g. managers have moved from sampling to swiftly observing all tutors; to date nearly all have been observed. Performance management has been tightened and non-compliance with systems is not acceptable. All tutors are now expected to attend CPD, and where appropriate they are paid so to do. The PIAP needs to make more use of targets, milestones and quantitative data.

In general, the use of data to inform decision making is improving e.g. in the progress of individual students. Tutors can provide anecdotal evidence about the positive progression of many learners; however, the FEC Team agrees with inspectors that there

has been insufficient formal capture of destination data. It is important for the council to better evidence this aspect and agree responsibilities for its recording and analysis. Tracking and monitoring needs to become routine and embedded. Tutors need to take responsibility for their own performance and for the learners they teach. For this to happen, a culture of low expectations in a few areas of the provision needs to be overturned.

Recommendations

1. The council should as a matter of urgency create a clear line of accountability at governance level for the whole service, including adult provision.
2. The council should revise and improve the clarity of the PIAP to include more concise objectives, targets and timelines, linked to quality improvement and better use of data to monitor that improvement.
3. The council should quicken the pace of implementing consistent QA procedures. To include: set targets for tutors across the service, ensure staff are aware of the consequences of non-compliance, ensure tutors take responsibility for scrutiny and actions relating to their own data.
4. Council officers should share best practice in apprenticeship provision across the whole of the service.
5. The council should ensure better clarity around the capture and collection of data and specify who is accountable for its interrogation and resulting actions.
 - Leaders and managers should implement plans to collect better information following adult learners completion of their programme. This information should be used to evaluate the courses offered and plan future training.
 - Tracking and monitoring of all learners needs to become routine and embedded.

The FEC Team will liaise with the ESFA following the agency's regular case conferences with the council, where the service will report on its progress, especially in relation to the PIAP and the above recommendations. A monitoring/stocktake visit will be undertaken by the FEC Team in 2020 to review progress.

Annex A - Information reviewed

Structure charts (current and proposed)

Minutes of relevant council meetings

Ofsted inspection report – July 2019

Details of curriculum offer

Details of delivery venues

Subcontractor details

Apprenticeship employer details

Self-assessment report (2017/18)

Quality improvement development plan 2018/19 (now PIAP 2019)

3 years trends in numbers, levels and achievement, including provisional QAR data 2018/19

Observation of teaching, learning and assessment (OTLA) procedures

Tracking by programmes - summary

ILP documentation

Performance appraisal review documentation

Safeguarding policy and implementation documents

Annex B - Interviewees

Interim director – children’s and family services

Assistant director – learning services

Strategic manager – employment, learning and skills

Elected member – portfolio holder for education and economy

New team managers – i) quality and curriculum ii) employment and skills development

Group of team managers from i) adult learning ii) careers iii) employment support

Group of tutors from i) adult skills ii) community learning iii) apprenticeships and iv) vocational provision

Subcontractors - direct and by telephone

Employers - direct and by telephone

Group of learners (16 to 19, apprentices and adult learning)



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