

Plymouth Adult and Community Learning Service (On Course South West)

Local authority

**Inspection dates**

26–29 April 2016

Overall effectiveness**Good**

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for learners	Good
Adult learning programmes	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings

This is a good provider

- Senior leaders have managed a major reorganisation of the service well, ensuring that learners' experience of the service has remained positive and productive.
- Senior leaders are honest and self-critical in their assessment of the quality of provision, clearly identifying weaknesses in leadership and management and putting in place the improvement actions needed to further improve the quality and outcomes of learners' experience.
- Managers work closely and productively with subcontractors; they have developed very effective community and employer partnerships which have extended the good range of provision and ensured that the curriculum is well developed to meet local need.
- Learners make good progress from their starting points; the vast majority gain their qualifications and realise their potential to achieve their career aims and life ambitions.
- Learners benefit from the good teaching, making good progress as a result.
- Learners increase their personal confidence and self-esteem, developing employment skills well, which helps them to make well-considered life choices.
- Learners with physical disabilities make particularly good progress to further courses and activities at higher levels.

It is not yet an outstanding provider

- The achievement of a minority of learners in English and mathematics functional skills qualifications has declined over the past three years; managers' and teachers' actions to support the progress and achievement of learners on these courses have not been timely enough.
- Managers do not use up-to-date attendance data consistently to monitor learners' attendance.
- Teaching staff do not provide learners, including the most able, with targets or written feedback which stretches them to achieve their full potential.
- The senior management team has not focused sufficiently on implementing the overall quality plan to sustain improvement; new senior managers' work has yet to have full impact.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Plymouth Adult and Community Learning Service (PACLS) is the contract holder. However, since the previous inspection in 2013, community learning has been contracted to a new community interest company called On Course South West (On Course) which, in turn, contracts with a number of subcontractors. The senior leadership and management team has mostly been transferred directly from the former PACLS team. On Course delivers and manages the vast majority of the adult learning and all apprenticeship provision from its head office, and from community locations across Plymouth and regionally. A subcontractor offers a study programme for 16- to 18-year-olds and other subcontractors run courses for learners who have not been in learning for some time and have specific barriers to learning or need support to return to employment.
- The population of Plymouth is predominately White British. The city has areas of affluence and relative deprivation and a mixed and growing maritime economy.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that new senior managers with specialist expertise implement the overall quality improvement process successfully to ensure that the good quality of provision is sustained and further improvements are timely.
- Managers must ensure that learners receive the level and type of specialist learning support which will best help them achieve their functional skills English and mathematics qualifications.
- Ensure that data on learners' attendance on all courses is up to date and readily available online so that managers have a clear idea of the current rate of learners' attendance.
- Ensure that teachers set learners demanding targets and provide them with incisive written feedback so that learners can develop their skills to the highest level and be well prepared for their next steps in education, training or employment.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- The chief executive officer (CEO) and management team have been resourceful and resilient in managing the complex and operationally challenging transfer from PACLS to On Course. In this often turbulent period, they have worked hard and generally very successfully to make the day-to-day operation of the provision as effective as possible and to maintain the good quality of teaching and learning. The CEO has established thorough and effective systems to monitor the quality of subcontractors' work.
- Managers' self-assessment of the provision is highly evaluative, accurate and rigorously self-critical in its judgements, including identifying the aspects of leadership and management that require improvement and how to resolve them. Subcontractors, learners and employers are actively involved in the self-assessment process. Inspectors agreed with all the strengths and weaknesses detailed in the self-assessment report.
- The CEO promotes an ambitious culture for high-quality teaching and learning which is shared by all staff. Managers use an accurate lesson observation system well, including undertaking joint lesson observations with subcontractors, which has increased its rigour. Observation records provide appropriate development points for individual teachers, but some observers focus too much on evaluating teaching techniques and classroom management rather than the impact of teaching on learning. A comprehensive staff development programme is in place following a very limited amount of staff training during the past 18 months. The programme meets clearly assessed priorities and includes updates for staff on effective teaching and learning strategies, equality and diversity, and safeguarding.
- Managers use data charting learners' performance very well to gauge how well learners are making progress in their studies. Leaders and managers use bi-monthly course performance reviews well, for example to monitor whether courses are attracting and retaining targeted groups of learners. A small minority of the data used by managers to provide information about learners' performance is not up to date. For example, data for learners' attendance at functional skills English and mathematics lessons is incomplete and their attendance at these lessons is not as high as managers believed.
- Managers' identification, targeting and recruitment of potential learners, including those identified as having greatest need of education and training, are highly effective. Managers have increased further the number of partnerships and collaborations with local and regional partners, and subcontractors, which has helped further expand the wide range of courses and options available to learners. Valuable work experience for learners on the study programme is also provided through these links. Managers are increasing substantially the proportion of courses targeted at specific groups of learners, such as single parents and the long-term unemployed, in line with Plymouth Council's key priorities.
- Teachers promote and incorporate aspects of equality of opportunity and diversity, including promoting effectively the importance of British values during lessons. The effectiveness of teachers' approaches and the sharing of good practice in these aspects are discussed productively and routinely at regular team meetings.
- Managers recognise that there has not been enough support for functional skills learners in the past year. Specialist classroom support teachers for GCSE and functional skills lessons were being put in place at the time of inspection but these actions have not been timely enough. Managers' improvement actions are appropriate; collectively, they provide a well-informed response to the problems identified but are at an early stage of implementation.
- The CEO, managers and governors recognise that a strong focus on ensuring that the day-to-day operations are effective has been at the expense of thorough attention to implementing the overall system and processes for continuous quality improvement, further complicated by a lack of senior managers with appropriate expertise. New senior appointments with the appropriate expertise have been made recently and others are planned, but the work of these new managers is at a very early stage.
- **The governance of the provider**
 - Governance arrangements are good. The board is provided with detailed, accurate reports and information about the provision's performance and provides a high level of rigour, scrutiny and challenge to the CEO. The board members have relevant expertise and include senior-level managers from subcontractors. Monthly meetings are well attended and the agendas are focused closely on performance monitoring and management. The board asks probing questions to which the CEO responds confidently, using accurate evidence. The CEO maintains a close working relationship with the contract holder at Plymouth City Council.

■ The arrangements for safeguarding are effective

- Safeguarding arrangements are effective and include appropriate checks on staff and subcontractors. Staff and learners know how to raise and report any concerns. Learners feel safe and are safe. Managers, including subcontractors, pay very good attention to ensuring the health and safety of all learners.
- On Course's staff have received safeguarding training within the past three years and all new staff receive substantial safeguarding training during their induction. Subcontractors' staff who are responsible for learners aged 16 to 18 and vulnerable adults have all received thorough safeguarding training.
- Staff and the great majority of subcontractors' staff have had training in the 'Prevent' programme, but teachers are not communicating their knowledge consistently well enough to all learners to help develop and extend their understanding of the 'Prevent' duty, including the risks of radicalisation and extremism.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Teachers, including those working for subcontractors, are well qualified, appropriately experienced and very enthusiastic. They use their knowledge and experience well to make learning stimulating and interesting in most lessons. They use their professional experience thoughtfully, for example to explain theory using relevant and practical examples. Dressmaking and digital photography learners gain benefit from often inspirational teaching which helps them develop high-quality photographic skills. Teaching of modern foreign languages is consistently vibrant, varied and much enjoyed by the learners who participate enthusiastically and confidently using the foreign language.
- Most teachers have high expectations of their learners and challenge them to achieve high standards; learners enjoy responding to this challenge. Teachers are patient and most have the skills to support learners well if they experience difficulties during learning.
- Teachers use a good range of teaching methods and high-quality resources which help learners make good progress in their studies. Teachers on the study programme make good use of video clips to stimulate discussion and use well-researched examples of formal and creative writing to promote learners' understanding and use of written English. The professional, purpose-built hairdressing salon provides a very good environment for learning, and good teaching develops learners' practical hairdressing skills very well.
- Teachers use constructive challenge and very effective questioning in lessons to test and develop learners' understanding. Assessors ensure that individual apprentices develop useful industry-relevant skills and knowledge during off-the-job training.
- Teachers plan well to meet learners' individual learning needs in the majority of lessons. The majority use detailed assessment and diagnostic information about each learner's starting point effectively to plan individual learning and set personalised learning goals for each learner. Teachers use the outcomes of learners' English and mathematics assessments well to ensure that learners are placed on the right English or mathematics course so that, for example, study programme learners can make good progress from their starting points.
- Apprentices develop particularly good independent learning skills. They research knowledge that deepens their understanding and improves their skills very effectively. For example, exercise and fitness apprentices produce detailed commentaries to explain their understanding of the impact of fitness techniques, and activity leadership apprentices practise extensively to develop their skills in kayaking and paddle boarding.
- Teachers provide good support which helps keep learners on track to complete their course. For example, teachers provide learners who have to miss occasional lessons with learning materials and class notes by email and freely offer extra help when needed. Teachers and managers make sure that learners with learning or physical disabilities are able to attend lessons and can be accompanied by a family member to provide reassurance and support. A particularly high proportion of learners with learning and physical disabilities go on to be successful on further courses at higher levels of learning.
- On a small minority of courses, teachers' assessment of learners' skills development is not ambitious enough because they base their assessment on the minimum expectations of the qualification. Consequently, learners, including the most able, are not challenged to achieve their full potential. On the study programme, teachers do not routinely correct all learners' work for spelling, punctuation and grammar, which slows some learners' understanding and correct use of these fundamental skills.
- Teachers are adept at giving learners good verbal feedback on the standard of their work and progress,

which helps learners understand what they need to do to improve. However, written feedback on learners' marked work is too often scant and provides insufficient guidance or challenge to help them develop and extend their knowledge or understanding. The quality of individual learning plans, reviews and target setting is not consistently good enough to ensure that all learners have a clear idea what they need to do to achieve at the highest level of which they are capable.

- A minority of the teaching and learning in functional skills English and mathematics requires improvement. In particular, too many level 2 functional skills mathematics and a few GCSE mathematics learners are not making the progress needed for them to be confident about passing their exams because they have had the specialist support they needed.
- Managers are at an early stage of implementing an online system which provides learners and teachers with a useful and well-populated central resource of teaching and learning materials, including e-portfolios for apprentices. Very few learners are aware of the system and very few teachers are using it to develop their learning and research skills.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

- Learners' attendance is consistently good in the vast majority of lessons.
- Learners are well behaved. Their confidence and self-esteem grow as a result of their learning programmes. Learners on a course about managing stress and anger quickly came to appreciate and understand very well why they need to control negative emotions, how to do so and the likely consequences of not doing so. Learners receive good preparation for employment skills, including writing curriculum vitae and interview skills; many obtain useful additional skills or qualifications as part of their programmes.
- Learners are enthusiastic about their courses and take great pride in their work. They behave cooperatively and attentively during lessons. They enjoy gaining knowledge, understanding theory and applying these in practice. A generally good standard of learners' work in classrooms and the workplace is a reflection of learners' strong commitment to personal learning and development.
- Learners' experience of On Course programmes is frequently transformational and highly positive, especially for those who have had particular barriers to learning.
- A high proportion of learners on introductory-level family or community learning courses move on to take courses leading to qualifications such as functional skills and GCSEs. Learners who have had no formal education and little or no English language or writing skills participate actively in their lessons and develop useful skills including basic writing techniques and communicating in spoken English.
- Learners on the study programme develop good personal and social skills, and learn well about moral and social values that help them to be thoughtful and respectful of others.
- Apprentices apply their new skills and understanding well in their working environments. Apprentices' skills, for example in customer services, are very effective and well developed.
- Learners receive helpful careers guidance that ensures that they attend relevant courses which support their career aims and future plans. Study programme learners have good access to impartial careers guidance, job fairs and external speakers from industry, training providers and the armed forces.
- Learners demonstrate a good understanding of how to stay healthy and safe at work and in life.
- Learners' views are listened to and improvement actions are taken when needed, but learners are not always made sufficiently aware that their views have been noted and have led to improvement.

Outcomes for learners are good

- The vast majority of learners who start an accredited course complete it and obtain their qualifications. Learners' achievement of qualifications has been very good for the last three years. The number of apprentices completing their apprenticeship successfully and in the time expected is very high.
- Study programme learners' work meets the requirements of their qualification. They make good progress from their starting points and a very high proportion attain their learning goals, including mathematics and English qualifications. However, the number of learners gaining a grade C or higher in GCSEs in English or mathematics is low.
- Learners' attendance and the number who have remained on their courses in the current year are high on the majority of courses. However, the number of apprentices not continuing on to complete their programmes has risen slightly this year.
- A very high proportion of apprentices either move on to a higher level of study or into sustained

employment. Almost all apprentices in 2014/15 achieved relevant English, mathematics and information and communications technology qualifications.

- Adult learners' work is frequently of a high standard, notably in dressmaking, photography and languages. Learners on business programmes develop and use very effective time-keeping and teamworking skills. Most learners are successful in meeting their individual learning goals on non-accredited programmes.
- Learners are often successful in achieving additional qualifications which enhance their employment prospects. Learners on sports courses obtain refereeing qualifications and become skilled at sports coaching. Business administration apprentices complete team leader courses; horticulture apprentices complete chainsaw operation and aerial rigging courses; and exercise and fitness apprentices complete lifeguard training.
- Male and female learners and those from different ethnic groups achieve equally well. However, English and mathematics functional skills learners with a declared learning difficulty achieve less well than learners without a learning difficulty. The number of learners obtaining their functional skills qualifications in English and mathematics has fallen over the last three years to around national rates.

Provider details

Type of provider	Local authority
Age range of learners	16–18, 19+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	3,000
Principal/CEO	Tracy Hewett
Website address	www.oncoursesouthwest.co.uk

Provider information at the time of the inspection

Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 and above	
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	49	364	20	264	18	43	0	0
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16-18	19+	16-18	19+	16-18	19+		
	21	13	2	4	0	0		
Number of traineeships	16-19		19+		Total			
Number of learners aged 14–16	N/A							
Funding received from	Skills Funding Agency and Education Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ YMCA ■ Mount Batten Watersports Centre ■ Shekinah Mission ■ Open Doors International Language School ■ Lynher Training ■ North Prospect Community Learning 							

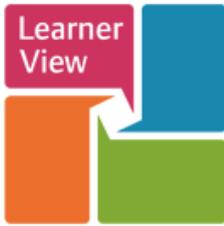
Information about this inspection

Inspection team

Nick Crombie, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Charles Clark	Her Majesty's Inspector
Penny Mathers	Ofsted Inspector
Laurie Brown	Ofsted Inspector

The above team was assisted by the On Course CEO as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report, development and improvement plans and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected within the report. Inspectors observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

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