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4 May 2017

Mrs Vanda Bailey
The Learning Partnership – Bedfordshire and Luton Limited
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Dear Mrs Bailey

Short inspection of The Learning Partnership – Bedfordshire and Luton Limited

Following the short inspection on 22 and 23 February 2017, 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.

Since the last inspection, leaders and managers have continued to ensure that standards remain high. They are ambitious and ensure that their staff and subcontractors' staff set high expectations for their learners. Board members have strengthened their role in overseeing the quality of courses and are well informed about the performance of subcontractors. As a result, learners achieve very well. The partnership has succeeded in engaging with an increasingly wide range of vulnerable learners. Good progress has been made against the few areas for improvement identified at the last inspection.

The provider's leaders subcontract effectively with charities and voluntary and community organisations to engage local residents in meaningful educational activities. Leaders and managers have been highly effective in building the expertise of staff from these organisations, for example a housing trust providing courses to help residents learn how to maintain their tenancy, a company working with carers who provide end-of-life care for dementia patients and a Bengali women's project aimed at promoting citizenship. Subcontractors recruit learners from the most socially deprived backgrounds. A large proportion of learners who make good progress are unemployed and over half have a learning difficulty and/or disability or health condition.

Managers have introduced useful new initiatives to improve the provision, such as all learners receiving specialist information and guidance that enable them to make good progress.

Managers' approach to monitoring the performance of subcontractors is effective and enables subcontractors to improve the quality of their provision for the benefit of learners. They secure the views of learners and subcontractors to ensure that the partnership's annual self-assessment is rigorous in making accurate judgements about overall performance.

Safeguarding is effective.

Managers have clear pre-contract safeguarding requirements which potential subcontractors are required to meet. Service agreements specify clearly the expectations upon subcontractors and this requirement is monitored regularly by managers. All staff have current Disclosure and Barring Service checks in place. Accountable lead staff follow through all safeguarding concerns appropriately to full resolution. Managers require subcontractors to incorporate safeguarding and the dangers of extremism into their planning and practice, which they do with increasing confidence. A minority of tutors, however, do not sufficiently promote these topics in their teaching. Safeguarding permeates the broad range of monitoring processes that managers employ. Managers ensure that all monitoring visits place a good emphasis on securing learners' feedback on safeguarding arrangements. The board of trustees, managers and subcontractors are well aware of their obligations under the 'Prevent' duty. Tutors have recently conducted relevant training but too many learners are yet to have a good understanding of British values.

Inspection findings

- Senior managers from the partnership work very well to develop the expertise of subcontractors' staff to provide good-quality courses for vulnerable, and often socially isolated, learners. Learners on these courses gain essential social skills and confidence appropriate to their situation. They manage their time better, gain in confidence through meeting other like-minded learners and mix more readily in the community. Discernible outcomes include learners improving their personal financial budgeting skills to prevent the loss of their housing tenancies. A large minority of learners become motivated to take on volunteering roles within charities, establish community newspapers or set up self-help groups after they have completed their courses.
- The very large majority of learners develop their personal, social and work-related skills well. For example, on a 'healthy minds' mental health course, learners explained how previously they had been using their computers late at night and when they were already tired. They became aware of the impact this was having on their ability to sleep well and identified the approaches and techniques needed to improve their sleep patterns and general health.
- Leaders' partnership working is good and, as a result, new community courses

are established that meet local community needs. For example, managers, working with leaders in the Polish community, noted concerns about unemployed Polish parents failing to access training and employment due to poor English language skills. Managers reported that previous courses had suffered from poor retention and outcomes, leaving learners uninspired and poorly motivated. In conjunction with the Polish community, a new course was developed, combining language development and a study of personality type, to enable learners to match their skills and attributes with job types. Learners grasped the relevance of the course and retention has been high, with very few learners dropping out.

- The majority of learners complete their courses to a high standard and progress onto other opportunities. As a result of sensitive tutoring and mutual support from peers, carers following a course on end-of-life-care for dementia patients were keen to act as 'dementia champions' and to move to a more advanced-level course. Learners also identified the need to seek effective dyslexia support and/or enrol on an English course in order to improve their future employment options.
- Tutors are adept at handling sensitive issues within the classroom and structure lessons well to ensure that learners feel settled, safe and ready to learn. As a result, learners contribute well to sessions, engage with topics constructively and gain new knowledge. Tutors use questioning techniques effectively and make good use of specialist and topical workbooks to consolidate learning.
- Managers ensure that subcontractors provide highly effective impartial information, advice and guidance opportunities as a part of each course. Their specialist employability staff provide workshops that enable learners to develop autonomy and plan effectively their next steps into training, further learning, work or a more fulfilled and healthy life. Staff take good account of learners' vastly differing starting points and aspirations to ensure that learners' 'next steps' are realistic and achievable. Learners seeking work take the opportunity to receive further one-to-one support or specialist advice through the National Careers Service.
- Managers and tutors are suitably experienced and work effectively to enable subcontractors' staff to improve their planning, teaching practice and assessment of learners' progress. They utilise effectively subcontractors' specialist expertise in areas such as mental health, housing policy or disability. At the start of their course, tutors enable learners to plan their targets and goals effectively. Target-setting is effective and motivates learners to make good progress. Tutors secure a good level of information on learners' starting points and plan measurable targets that learners understand and that challenge them to excel. In a minority of instances, tutors have insufficient detail about learners' previous attainment to plan learning effectively.
- Managers assess accurately the need to ensure that tutors improve learners' English and numerical skills sufficiently and effectively support non-specialist tutors to promote these subjects in their teaching. The majority of learners make significant progress with their communication skills and build confidence to participate in discussions, respond to questions and work in small teams. However, the teaching of specific English written skills requires improvement.

Tutors do not correct sufficiently learners' mistakes in spelling and grammar to enable them to know what they need to do to improve. They do not seize opportunities as they arise to introduce English creatively into lessons. Managers give insufficient priority to raising the standards of learners' numeracy within lessons, which impedes learners' progress.

- The provider's managers monitor performance effectively. Subcontractors engage well with these processes and, as a result, improve their performance and the outcomes for their learners. However, observations of teaching fail to identify the minority of teachers' weak practice in promoting English and numeracy. As a result, managers are not taking appropriate remedial actions to improve standards. While observations note that not all tutors promote British values in their teaching, actions by managers to improve tutors' planning are insufficient.
- The provider's managers monitor subcontractors' performance well. They identify quickly any potential shortcomings and support subcontractors to rectify and learn from any underperformance. Revised arrangements are in place following the previous inspection to collate and understand learners' destinations. Leaders have improved how they collect and secure the destinations of all learners but more work is required to ensure that this is robust. This inhibits the capacity of leaders to assess fully the impact of the provision.
- An annual celebration event that promotes the high standards of work achieved by the majority of learners is valued highly by learners and subcontractors and, in turn, motivates learners to progress to higher levels of learning or purposeful employment.
- The board of trustees has a clear strategic direction for the organisation and comprises a good mix of experienced members from further and higher education and commerce. Board members challenge managers well. They have strengthened their role in overseeing the quality of courses and are well informed about the performance of subcontractors. As a result, learners achieve very well.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and trustees should ensure that:

- the observation of teaching, learning and assessment and the monitoring of subcontractors' performance identify weaknesses in the teaching of English and trigger actions to ensure that learners improve their English skills effectively
- they train and upskill tutors so that they promote English proficiently in courses
- the development of learners' numeracy skills is given greater priority
- they further improve the recording and analysis of learners' destinations on completion of their course in order to understand fully the impact of their provision and inform the planning of the curriculum
- managers and subcontractors work together to effectively promote British values and the dangers of extremism in order for learners to have a good understanding of these issues.

I am copying this letter to the Education and Skills Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Tony Gallagher
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

One of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two Ofsted Inspectors, assisted by the deputy chief executive as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors met with managers, staff, subcontractors and board members. They observed lessons and reviewed key documents, including those related to management, contract-monitoring quality improvement, learners' achievements and safeguarding.