

Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Sub-committee

Response to submission from Save Southwark Adult Learning Campaign dated 23rd April 2012

Introduction

The submission from Save Southwark Adult Learning Campaign (SSALC) consists primarily of issues that have been addressed a number of times over the last two years, both through correspondence and in four sessions at the Scrutiny Sub-committee over a period of 12 months (14th March 2011, 11th April 2011, 19th October 2011 and 7th March 2012). In addition to this, a number of letters and e-mails on this matter have been received and answered. Officers have also met with representatives of the campaign group and three learner consultation meetings have been held as part of the current review of Adult Learning.

Officers involved in these meetings have included the Head of Culture, Libraries, Learning and Leisure (CLLL), the Adult Learning Service Manager, the Quality and Contracts Manager and the Divisional Accountant for CLLL. The Cabinet Member has also met with the campaigners on more than one occasion.

The current submission raises a number of issues. These are:

1. Southwark's Adult Learning is at risk

This is not the case. The service is funded for the coming academic year at a similar level to the current year. In addition to this, the number of learners is increasing. In 2010/11 there were 548 part time learners pursuing qualifications with a further 3,893 part time learners, learning for personal and social development. This represents a doubling of individual learners over the last three years.

In addition to the external funding secured from the Skills Funding Agency for re-developing the building (£750K), the Council committed a further £250k from its own capital programme to ensure continued support for adult learning at the Thomas Calton Centre.

The most recent OFSTED inspection of the service (May 2012) rated it as "Good" overall, an improvement on the previous rating of "Satisfactory" Specific areas of service are inspected and graded by OFSTED. The March 2012 inspection gave Grade 2 (Good) as their judgement for:

- Overall effectiveness of provision
- Capacity to improve
- Outcomes for learners
- Quality of provision
- Leadership and management (including equality and diversity)
- Learning for qualifications
- Learning for social and personal development

The OFSTED report notes that outcomes for learners have “significantly improved” since the previous inspection. It particularly notes the improved success rates for learners on courses for qualification, improving to 83% from 66%, whilst the overall success rates for the service run at 82%. This is 5% above the national average for the level of our learners.

Rather than being at risk, the service is improving, increasing the number of learners it serves and is being invested in by both the Council and the Skills Funding Agency.

2. The service is under-promoted

The service is promoted in a number of ways. These include:

- A new course brochure each term
- Inclusion on the Hot Courses website
- Inclusion on the Floodlight website
- Presence on the Council’s website
- Brochures distributed to libraries, community organisations, leisure centres and other community locations
- Occasional targeted campaigns including use of adshels on bus stops, newspaper advertising, promotions in shopping centres
- Participation in both National Adult and Family Learning weeks
- Occasional additional weekend provision to enable families and individuals to sample different types of learning

The submission makes specific mention of the service website and that it is difficult to find within the overall Council website. The Council’s policy is for there to be a single website presence for Southwark rather than many disparate websites that are difficult to manage and maintain. Each new term the Adult Learning Service is featured on the front page of the website with a banner leading to more detailed information on courses. However, it is accepted that the website presence could be improved and officers are in discussion with Communications colleagues about how best to do this.

The OFSTED report notes that “learners generally find it easy to get information about courses available”

3. Student’s and learners offer to promote courses has been rejected

This is not the case. Tutors are actively involved in promoting courses and are encouraged to do so by team leaders and more senior management. Evidence of this includes service staff involved in recent promotions at Canada Water Library, Tooley Street and in organising the recent weekend taster courses at the Thomas Calton Centre.

Following discussion at earlier Scrutiny Sub-committee meetings, and a meeting between Management of the service and service users at the Thomas Calton Centre, the Head of Culture, Libraries, Learning and Leisure invited ideas from the campaigners. None have been received. We continue to be happy to welcome ideas for promotion.

4. Borough wide provision of courses

The submission is dismissive of ALS work with other providers to ensure good learning opportunities are provided across the borough, stating “a quick glance at Southwark’s partner providers, though valuable resources in their own right, suggests that this was never an achievable policy”.

The recent OFSTED report notes that “Southwark Adult Learning Service (SALS) and its partners work very well together, jointly improving outcomes for learners. Good partnerships provide learners with a rich variety of learning opportunities. These play a strong part in enabling SALS to reach learners from specific communities and other unrepresented groups”.

The submission raises specific concerns about arts related provision in the borough. The OFSTED report notes that SALS currently funds arts related provision at the Aylesbury Every Woman Centre (SE17), at the Flux Studios (SE5) and at Southwark Muslim Women’s Association (SE15). Please note this organisation is not exclusively used by Muslim women, in fact several courses have significant non-Muslim majorities). SALS also commissions a performing arts programme from the Council’s own arts team.

In addition to this, the service currently funds gardening and horticultural courses at Walworth Garden Farm (SE17) and various family learning courses (which usually focuses on arts related activity) at the Centre for Learning in Primary Education (various venues), Learning Unlimited (various venues), London Wildlife Trust (various venues) and Red Kite Learning (SE1). All of this is in addition to the arts offer at the Thomas Calton Centre.

The OFSTED report also notes that:

“The range of provision is good, meeting the needs and interests of learners well”

“The range of subjects and courses is good, whilst avoiding duplicating provision of other providers”

5. There is no support for learners wishing to progress to other courses or learning

Advice on progression and on other suitable learning is available within the Thomas Calton Centre both from individual tutors and from specifically trained staff who visit individual classes.

The recent OFSTED report notes that “Information officers visit many, but not all, courses to inform learners about the information, advice and guidance services available to them”

Since the inspection, a new approach to providing this information is being implemented with visits to all courses now planned as well as checks being made to

ensure that tutors have comprehensive information available to them when advising learners.

6. Morley College and City Lit (specialist designated institutes)

The submission refers to Morley College and City Lit being able to make courses available at relatively lower rates than SALS. Although this is not the case in all subject areas, it is important to note that both of these providers have “Specialist Designated Institute” (SDI) status which means that they are subject to different funding regulations to non SDI providers such as SALS. This gives them greater flexibility. They also have access to other funding streams not currently available to SALS.

7. Cost of courses

This issue has been discussed at each of the Scrutiny sub-committee meetings referred to above and detailed answers have been given in writing to specific points regarding funding on a number of occasions. Examples of these are attached.

The recent OFSTED report comments specifically on value for money within the service, stating that “SALS provides excellent value for money. It has significantly improved the quality of provision whilst extending the range and reach of services at a time of financial austerity”.

Current review

The Council is currently reviewing its overall approach to Adult Learning, the provision of training opportunities and other support for local people to improve skills and access work. The review also takes into account the wide range of alternative non-Council provision available in Southwark in order to ensure good geographical spread and avoidance of duplication.