

Education and Children’s Services Scrutiny sub-committee report

Southwark Adult Learning Service

- 1. Background information and context**
- 1.1 The Adult Learning Service (ALS) is based in the Thomas Calton Centre in Peckham.
- 1.2 In addition to direct delivery at the Thomas Calton Centre, the service works with a wide range of partners to enable access to learning at a number of other locations across the borough.
- 1.3 The service is entirely funded by an annual grant from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA). The grant comes with strict requirements in terms of quality standards, learner number targets and sound financial management.
- 1.4 For the last two years, and after a number of years, the service met, and exceeded, its SFA learner number targets, building on work undertaken to increase uptake of learning through re-shaping the programme and working more closely with partners.
- 1.5 ALS is just one of a number of adult and family learning providers in Southwark. Other major providers include Morley College and Southwark College. There is also significant provision from private and voluntary sector organisations – some of which receive funding from ALS to deliver learning on the Council’s behalf.
- 1.6 Not all local authorities retain an adult learning service within the Council and there is no statutory obligation on local authorities to be providers of this service.
- 1.7 Overall funding within the sector has declined over the last several years and successive governments have moved the focus of adult learning towards employment-related training and away from the more traditional leisure or arts based courses.
 - 1.7.1 As part of this, there is now significant pressure on providers to secure larger fee contributions from learners. ALS currently generates 4% of its income from learners. The SFA expects provider to work towards generating a larger percentage of income through learner fees. This is extremely challenging in Southwark as many of our learners are eligible for fee remission. In addition to this, our largest curriculum area – adult literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) – is provided free of charge to learners by Government policy, reducing our scope to generate additional income.

2. **Current issues**

OFSTED report and action plan

2.1.1 Adult learning is subject to inspection by OFSTED (the Office for Standards in Education). The last inspection took place in 2009 and the service was deemed to be overall “satisfactory”. Within this rating, several areas were identified as being “good”. These included the thoroughness and accuracy of the Self Assessment Report, good personal support for learners, strong internal and external partnerships to promote social inclusion; strong commitment to improve the quality of provision and good staff development. There were also some areas for improvement, including the quality of some teaching and learning and management information systems.

2.2 Following the inspection, service managers drew up a detailed action plan to address areas for improvement and to build on strengths. This plan was agreed with both OFSTED and the then Learning and Skills Council (LSC) – since re-shaped as the SFA. Much of the plan has been implemented; particularly work to further develop tutors, a completely new approach to management information and a re-shaped relationship with partner organisations including additional assurances about the quality of their work and information management.

Financial pressures

2.3 The Government has been clear that there will be fewer resources available for adult learning and this is a continuing trend with the overall grant to the service having declined from £1,966,385 in 2008/9 to £1,795,739 this year, a decrease of 8.5%.

2.4 The decline in Government funding, the difficulty in generating additional income from fees and the service’s overall dependency on the SFA grant combine to make it extremely difficult to sustain levels of provision and also to respond to issues related to the service infrastructure.

2.5 The Thomas Calton Centre was extensively re-furbished in 2009/10 with an SFA capital grant of £750,000 secured by managers within the service and matched by £250,000 of Council capital monies. Whilst this has made a great difference, there are still many outstanding building issues including problems with the roof, many windows need to be replaced and lift access to the upper floors needs to be improved. Bids have been submitted to the Council’s capital programme over the last few years for these items, but have not yet been successful.

2.6 The service maintains an OFSTED registered nursery to support learners who may otherwise have difficulty in finding childcare and therefore may not be able to access learning. Whilst this is a valuable

service, it also presents financial pressures as we are currently subsidising the nursery with significantly more funding than the SFA allocates to this purpose, directing monies away from direct delivery of learning.

Service charges

- 2.7 In order to address some of these issues, and for the first time in many years, some new charges were introduced to the service last year. The new charges related to learners wishing to repeat or to take additional courses within the same academic year. Concessionary rates are still available where appropriate and all learners are still entitled to one subsidised course within a single academic year. There is no impact on learners eligible for adult literacy, numeracy or ESOL courses which remain free.
- 2.8 A number of complaints were received in response to the new charging regime, almost entirely from learners wishing to repeat courses within the arts or leisure based curriculum areas. These issues were considered by the Scrutiny sub-committee resulting in a request for this further report from officers.

Policy and service direction

- 2.9 It is fair to say that until the last few years, the service has been relatively “forgotten” and has continued to operate in the same way over a very long time. Significant steps have been taken in the last few years to modernise and improve the service and these were acknowledged in the OFSTED report. However, there is currently no agreed strategy for ALS and the Council has not articulated the direction it wishes the service to take.
- 2.10 The national context of decreasing funding and changing focus, together with the Council’s policy of focusing on core activity means it is timely to consider the future direction of the Adult Learning Service and to place it within an overall policy context.

3. What does the Council want from the Adult Learning Service?

- 3.1 The Council has established a set of principles upon which service reviews, budget setting and other change within the Council is to be based – A Fairer Future. It is proposed that a review be carried out, guided by these principles and resulting in a new, clearly articulated direction for the service.
- 3.2 A Fairer Future includes a requirement to promote social and economic quality in the borough; to do all that we can to protect frontline services and support our most vulnerable residents; to ensure value for money; to seek alternative ways of providing services and to be clear about why any service should be cut, reduced or no longer

provided by the Council before proposing such a course of action. These will be key considerations in reviewing ALS.

- 3.3 In coming to a decision on what the Council wants from ALS, consideration should be given to other policy areas relating to employment, regeneration, health and well-being, setting a clear context for the future of the service.

4. Areas for consideration

- 4.1 In order to clearly articulate the future direction of the service, a number of key questions need to be considered. These include:
- Is this a service that the Council should provide?
 - Why does the Council provide such a service and what does the Council add?
 - What do other providers do?
 - Should consideration be given to handing the service over to other providers?
 - If the service is to be retained by the Council, what needs to change and what areas should it focus on whilst still complying with SFA guidelines?
- 4.2 Agreeing the Council's position on these questions will provide clear direction and policy for the service.

5. Stakeholder review and next steps

To take this work forward and to ensure views of key stakeholders are captured, it is suggested the following work be undertaken.

- Officers invite the views of the Scrutiny sub-committee
- A stakeholder and partner consultation event is held
- A desktop review of current provision and national issues and developments is undertaken
- A SWOT analysis is produced setting out the pros and cons of retaining the service within the Council
- A report is drawn up in response to this and presented to Cabinet in February 2012