

Committee: Sustainable Communities Overview & Scrutiny Panel

Date: 4 May 2021

Wards: All

Subject: Merton Adult Learning Annual Report 2019/20 (academic year)

Lead officer: Anthony Hopkins; Head of Library, Heritage & Adult Education Service

Lead member: Councillor Caroline Cooper-Marbiah – Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Skills

Contact officer: Anthony Hopkins; Head of Library, Heritage & Adult Education Service

Recommendations:

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1. That the Scrutiny Panel review and discuss the progress over the last year of the Adult Learning provision in the borough.
 2. That the Scrutiny Panel review the provision of services and amended plans throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.
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1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. Since August 2016 Merton's Adult Learning Service has been operating in a commissioning model. The strategic rationale for moving to a commissioning model was to ensure that education grants received maximised investment in Merton residents, supporting them to develop new skills and improve their life chances. The change also ensured that the service could be managed within the funding allocation received to ensure the sustainability of adult learning in the borough.
- 1.2. A refreshed set of strategic objectives for the service were agreed by Cabinet on 27 January 2020:
- 1.3. *"The London Borough of Merton is committed to providing high quality and sustainable adult learning in order to improve the social, economic, health and wellbeing of our residents. We will deliver this through a strategic investment approach: commissioning provision to the best providers in the field and by developing sophisticated evidence based approaches to what we deliver.*
- 1.4. *We aim to reduce inequalities across the borough by focussing a significant proportion of our investment on those most socially and / or economically disadvantaged whilst providing a broad range of learning opportunities to develop all of our resident's skills."*
- 1.5. In October 2019 Merton Adult Learning Service was subject to a full inspection by Ofsted under the new Education Inspection Framework (EIF) and were the first borough in London to be inspected under the new framework. The inspectors noted the good progress made since the previous inspection and awarded the service 'Good' in all six judgment areas. The Ofsted inspectors noted that, "Leaders and managers ensure

that learners benefit from high quality courses. They pay close attention to planning a curriculum that meets the social, economic and health priorities of the borough.”

- 1.6. This report summarises performance of the last academic year and outlines future projects of the service.

2 DETAILS

2.1. Adult Learning Strategy

- 2.2. In January 2020 Cabinet agreed the refreshed strategic objectives for the Adult Learning Service. The objectives are to:

- Use an evidence based approach to commissioning to ensure the fullest return on investment.
- Embrace technological developments and support residents through the delivery of courses that improve learners’ economic and digital opportunities.
- Deliver courses to improve the health and wellbeing of our residents and reduce social isolation.
- Continue to provide popular courses whilst expanding provision for families to encourage intergenerational learning.
- Increase the quality and number of courses in employability and ensure that a thread of employability and life skills is weaved into all courses.
- Provide targeted courses for adults to improve literacy and / or numeracy skills to enable learners to participate more fully socially and / or economically.
- Further develop the range of courses for learners with learning difficulties and / or disabilities to enable them to live as independently as possible to improve their wellbeing and life chances.
- Tailor the learning journey for all learners from beginning to end so that they progress onto new opportunities.
- Deliver excellent teaching and learning across providers and work collaboratively with them to ensure that best practice is shared and embedded in course provision.

2.3. Providers

- 2.4. Merton Adult Learning Service commissions a range of providers in the borough to deliver services on its behalf. Contracts are currently in place with the following providers:

- South Thames College Group – Main adult learning contract. Accounts for approximately 80% of the grant allocation for Merton.
- GSS (Global Solution Services) – Contract for the provision of community based accredited learning courses.

- RHACC (Richmond and Hillcroft Adult and Community College) – Contract for the provision of courses for learners with learning difficulties and/or learning disabilities (LLDD).
 - A range of smaller providers are also commissioned on an annual basis to deliver community based family learning, digital inclusion and employability programmes. Current providers being used include City Lit, MiComputSolutions, The Assessment and Training Centre (TATC) Merton Home Tutoring (MHT) and Adult Training Network (ATN).
- 2.5. The main services contract, currently delivered by South Thames Group, expires on 31 July 2021. Cabinet agreed the award of the new contract on 8 February 2021. The new contract will ensure that more residents will have access to learning provision in the borough and the contract will focus in particular on upskilling residents in key areas identified in the job market in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 2.6. **Ofsted Inspection**
- 2.7. Merton Adult Learning was inspected by Ofsted under the new Education Inspection Framework between 8 and 11 October 2019. Ofsted noted that good progress has been made across all of the provision. They said:
- 2.8. *“Learners gain a range of benefits from their courses. They enjoy the subjects they study. Those facing social isolation build their self-confidence and form new friendships while they study. Learners are taught valuable skills that help increase their self-esteem and play a more active role in the community. Learners who are not confident with English improve their speaking and comprehension.*
- 2.9. *Tutors create a positive work-ethic among learners. It helps learners to develop the behaviours they need to go on to study at a higher level or increase their prospects of employment.*
- 2.10. *Learners receive a range of advice and guidance that enable them to make the right career and study choices. Specialist careers advisors know what learners who have been out of work for some time need to help them seek employment. Tutors help learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their families find the right next step for them.*
- 2.11. *Learners appreciate the high-quality accommodation at the community venues in which lessons take place. They make productive use of the resources at the various community settings. Learners feel safe and know whom to approach should they have any concerns.*
- 2.12. *Tutors are experienced, knowledgeable and well qualified in their subjects. They have high expectations for their learners.*
- 2.13. *Leaders and managers ensure that learners benefit from high-quality courses. They pay close attention to planning a curriculum that meets the social, economic and health priorities of the borough. For example, learners with LDD benefit from courses such as cookery, information and communication technologies and gardening.*

- 2.14. *Leaders and managers work well with local partners to shape and deliver the curriculum offer. They work with subcontractors who offer courses that meet their curricular ambitions.*
- 2.15. *Effective governance has resulted in leaders working well together to improve the quality of the curriculum.*
- 2.16. *Leaders and managers place a suitable priority on safeguarding. Leaders are thorough in checking the safeguarding arrangements at subcontractors before working with them. Staff are appropriately trained in safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty. When they need to act to safeguard learners and promote their welfare they do so promptly and effectively."*
- 2.17. Since the outbreak of the pandemic there have been limitations on Ofsted inspections and significant focus has been placed on reviewing provider's capacity to deliver courses in different ways such as online and through distance learning methods.
- 2.18. Improvement actions have been incorporated into this year's Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) and formulate part of the continuous improvement of the service. Key areas for further improvement are:
- Continuing to work with providers to improve online platforms and increase resident access amongst disadvantaged groups to ICT to support their learning.
 - Work with providers to ensure that courses delivered in a class room are Covid safe and that learners are comfortable in their learning environment.
 - Further improve attendance levels in courses to above 90%.
 - Increase learner numbers on courses who live in disadvantaged wards.
 - Improve the tracking and reporting of learners' progression and destination once they have finished courses to better inform the service as to what impact the course has had.
 - Further develop the curriculum so addresses the future skills needs of residents.

2.19. **Performance**

2.20. The table below summarises end of academic year performance:

Measure	Total Academic Year 2018/19	Target	Total Academic Year 2019/20	Trend
Number of unique learners funded by the ESFA	1,841	1,112	1,717	▼
Number of enrolments funded by the ESFA	3,697	3,746	3,619	▼
Overall achievement on accredited courses	87%	85%	87%	▶
% of learners from deprived wards	30%	27%	28%	▼

% retention rate per annum	97%	93%	98%	▲
% of end of course evaluations where teaching and learning is rated as good and above	99%	95%	99%	▶
Average cost per learner	£375	£241	£386	▲

- 2.21. Performance in the 2019/20 academic year was affected by the pandemic although figures are still close in the majority of cases to 2018/19 performance. Term 3 performance was greatly impacted due to lockdown and in a normal year the majority of targets would have been exceeded. The reduction in enrolments during the pandemic matches the national picture.
- 2.22. Despite the challenges performance was still strong in retention and achievement with both figures being above national averages. Work to address inequality in the borough will be further developed this year with increased emphasis on supporting those who only have limited access to IT in the household.
- 2.23. **Covid-19 Response**
- 2.24. At the outbreak of the pandemic last March all in person courses were cancelled. The service worked closely with its providers to mobilise new ways of working to ensure that there was minimal disruption to learners throughout the pandemic. This has included moving a significant proportion of courses online and upskilling tutors and learners to work in new ways. The movement to working in new ways was at a far greater pace than the majority of adult learning providers.
- 2.25. Where online provision hasn't been possible regular keeping in touch sessions have been established with learners and hard copies of work posted to learners. In the case of some LDD provision socially distanced visits to learner's homes have also been undertaken.
- 2.26. Some limited in person courses started again in September where the provision is impractical to be delivered in a distance manner. This provision has again been paused since January 2021 due to the latest lockdown.
- 2.27. Recognising the impact the changes to provision have had on learners Merton Adult Learning has been successful in applying for £517,687 of additional funds to the Greater London Authority. These funds have been used to purchase additional IT equipment to enable learners with limited access at home to continue their learning. Equipment has also been purchased to ensure that classrooms are Covid safe and there is an increase of over a third in courses available. The additional course provision focuses in particular on reskilling residents for the changing job market along with additional courses focussing on health and wellbeing.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 3.1. The London Borough of Merton undertook an extensive consultation process before deciding upon its commissioning model. All options of delivery were considered and the new model has achieved financial sustainability and a more developed curriculum to better meet the needs of Merton residents.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 4.1. Feedback and evaluation is gathered from all learners. Learner feedback is very high with 99% of learners rating teaching and learning as good or above.
- 4.2. The service is working to improve the information it records to track learners progression onto new courses or onto new employment opportunities. A new performance measure will be included in next year's reports to measure progress in this area.

5 TIMETABLE

- 5.1. The Adult Learning Service Plan was reviewed at the Sustainable Communities Overview & Scrutiny Panel on 19 January 2021 and details key project and timelines.

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. Merton Adult Learning relies solely on external grants to provide its provision. From the 2019/20 academic year the majority of the grants are now administered by the GLA and their allocation for Merton this year is £1,379,881. A smaller grant for out of London learners is administered by the ESFA of £36,710.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. The main statutory basis for the adult learning service is section 15B of the Education Act 1996. This section empowers local authorities to secure the provision for their area of full-time or part-time education suitable to the requirements of persons who have attained the age of 19, including provision for persons from other areas. It includes power to secure the provision of training, including vocational, social, physical and recreational training, and of organised leisure time occupation which is provided in connection with the provision of education or training. The authority may do anything which appears to them to be necessary or expedient for the purposes of or in connection with the exercise of their functions under this section. In exercising their functions, the authority must in particular have regard to the needs of persons with learning difficulties or disabilities.
- 7.2. The authority does not therefore have a statutory duty to maintain an adult education service but must in considering whether to provide a service and what service to provide take account in particular of the needs of people with learning difficulties or disabilities.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. A significant proportion of Adult Learning's investment is on those most socially and / or economically disadvantaged whilst providing a broad range

of learning opportunities to develop all resident's skills. Focussed programmes are developed that identify priority needs and use a wide range of sources to inform commissioning principles.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1. No implications identified for the purpose of this report.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1. No implications identified for the purpose of this report. Risk registers are maintained and updated by the service.

11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

- None included for the purpose of this report.

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