

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

9th December 2021

**REPORT OF SENIOR
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

CABINET INFORMATION ITEM

Portfolio: Regeneration and Housing – Lead Cabinet Member – Cllr Nigel Cooke

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE GOVERNING BODY FOR THE LEARNING AND SKILLS SERVICE

SUMMARY

This report provides an update on the work of the Learning and Skills Service in supporting residents, employers and community partners with learning opportunities and employment initiatives to meet social and economic priorities during the 20/21 academic year.

REASONS FOR PRODUCING THIS REPORT

To demonstrate the ongoing success of the Learning and Skills Service and its Governing Body as an advisory committee empowered by Cabinet to provide challenge, support and strategic oversight.

This report is for information only. No decisions are required.

DETAIL

Governance and management of the Service

1. The Governing Body was first established in October 2016 and since that time has supported the Service through a period of transition, most recently during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. The Governing Body utilises its skillset, experience and knowledge across different sectors to provide challenge and insight whilst ensuring the Service continues to meet the needs and priorities of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council.
3. The Service is fully funded by external grants allocated by funding bodies including Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). These grant allocations contribute to the overall Council financial position and are regularly reviewed through close governance and performance monitoring.
4. The value of the contribution from the Governing Body along with the management arrangements for the Service have been validated by independent advisors, Ofsted inspectors, and external quality standard assessors.

5. Governors play an active role in quality assurance and improvement. In order to ensure that the Governing Body continues to remain strongly positioned, its membership was recently been reviewed.
6. Membership now incorporates an additional employer representative, specifically within the digital sector to help the Service meet skills demands within this local priority sector.
7. In addition, a new Learner Governor appointment was made during the academic year. Both appointments will provide fresh focus and perspective to support the Service in the coming years.
8. The membership of the Governing Body for the 21/22 academic year is as follows:

Position	Full name	Role
Chair of Governors	Councillor Nigel Cooke	Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Housing (also Link Governor for Equality and Diversity)
Vice Chair of Governors	Frances Hoy	Personnel Manager for NIFCO UK Ltd Employer Representative for Industry and Commerce
Member	Councillor Jim Beall	Deputy Leader of the Council Cabinet Member for Health, Leisure and Culture (also link governor for safeguarding)
Member	Reuben Kench	Director of the Environment, Culture, Leisure and Events for Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council Corporate Management Team Representative
Member	Craig Taylor	Adult Learning and Skills Manager for Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council Staff Representative
Member	Chris Renahan	Assistant Director - Inclusive Growth and Development for Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council Economic Growth and Regeneration Representative
Member	Kevin Cooper	Learner Representative
Member	Karen Grundy	Community Programme Manager for Catalyst Voluntary and Community Sector Representative
Member	Lynsey Robinson	Director, Digital City, Teesside University Employer Representative for Digital Sector
Member	Jacqui Taylor	Education and Employer Representative

Impact and Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

9. For the 20/21 academic year, government guidance confirmed that classroom based delivery could continue, albeit with capacity significantly reduced due to social distancing requirements. This impacted on curriculum planning and delivery whilst increasing financial pressure.
10. The Service invested in additional short term teaching spaces to overcome social distancing restrictions with subsequent additional teaching costs also incurred. This was vital to ensure those in greatest need and with lower levels of skills could continue to be closely supported through face-to-face delivery.
11. For those learners with higher level of skills, the Service continued to deliver flexible blended learning programmes which provided remote access to learning and reduced pressure on accommodation capacities.
12. However, it was apparent through the pandemic that there was a digital divide with those in greatest need unable to access digital services. The Service invested in additional ICT resources to support those without access to a computer and/or network connectivity. This enabled learners to access courses remotely through the Service virtual learning environment and provided greater flexibilities for contingency planning.
13. The turbulence faced for the year was compounded during November when guidance was issued to cease classroom based delivery and revert to remote learning. Similar guidance was again issued in January with the instruction to cease all classroom based delivery until March.
14. Learners and apprentices have shown tremendous resilience and determination throughout the pandemic. They have done their utmost to complete their programmes and achieve their learning objectives. However, for some learners the adverse effect and pressures of the pandemic on family, health and work commitments has impacted on their achievement rates.
15. The forecasted achievement rate for Adult Education Budget programmes is 91.5%, of which, the Adult Skills achievement rate is 84.2%. This was a drop of 2.7% compared to 19/20 and 4.9% below the pre-pandemic national benchmark of 89.1%.
16. Participation numbers have decreased compared to the levels achieved prior to the pandemic. This was not only due to the social distancing restrictions impacting on classroom capacities but due to restrictions in partnership working. Organisations such as Job Centre Plus remained closed resulting in limited recruitment opportunities and reduced referrals. Traditional family learning programmes within schools were unable to be delivered as guidance required school premises and pupil 'bubbles' to be safeguarded from the risk Covid infections.
17. Despite the restrictions impacting participation numbers, the focus and targeted work of the Service to support those in greatest need is recognised in that 64.7% of learners come from our disadvantaged areas. Similarly 22.2% of learners join the Service having no prior attainment/qualifications. This demonstrates the determination of the Service to effectively utilise its funding to address inequalities.
18. The reduction in participation numbers has increased the risk of funding reconciliation from funding bodies including TVCA and ESFA. Similarly, some learning providers in Tees Valley (including 3 other local authority providers) were subject to a pause in funding payments in April due to lower than expected participation numbers.
19. Whilst year-end funding reconciliation details have yet to be confirmed by TVCA, nationally ESFA have confirmed that a reconciliation threshold of 90% will be adopted.

20. Thanks to good governance, curriculum planning and investment, the Service is expected to fulfil 91.4% of its Adult Education Budget contract. If TVCA adopt the national reconciliation threshold, we will remain in a strong position to provide support to our learners and partner organisations.
21. Early positive indications for the new 21/22 academic year also highlight an increase in participation. As of September 2021, enrolments had increased 32% compared to the same period in the previous academic year and were 18% higher than pre-pandemic levels in 19/20.

Routes to Work Programme

22. The Routes to Work programme is led by Tees Valley Combined Authority and delivered by each local authority. It is a joint funded programme with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).
23. The original aim of this pilot programme was to support up to 2500 people into employment, specifically targeting those aged 30 and over and facing the greatest barriers to employment.
24. The Learning and Skills Service is the lead provider within Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council with a target to support 625 residents, with 94 individuals progressing into employment by the initial end of the project in March 2021.
25. As at 31st October 2020, the Service had already fully achieved its targets with 667 clients actively supported and 102 individuals successfully entering employment.
26. Due to the collaborative success across the Tees Valley and to maximise the funding available, in December 2020 the programme was extended by a further year until March 2022 with a new target to support up to 4000 people across the whole project.
27. It was confirmed in August 2021 that the Routes to Work programme would not be extended beyond its current planned end date of March 2022. Instead, it would be replaced by the new DWP 'Restart' scheme as part of the government 'Plan for Jobs'. This scheme will support universal credit claimants who have been out of work between 12 to 18 months with enhanced support to enter employment, similar to the approach taken by the Routes to Work programme.
28. As part of the project exit strategy, the Service will continue to support existing clients to progress them closer to employment whilst working collaboratively with partner organisations to transition individuals to alternative support where appropriate.
29. At the time of writing, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council has supported 852 clients with 159 individuals successfully entering employment, demonstrating the excellent work of the Service in delivering personal, social and economic growth.

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