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Mr N Hopkins
Principal
Peter Symonds College
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Dear Mr Hopkins

Ofsted 2010–11 survey inspection programme: the quality and impact of partnership provision in schools for children in service families

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 29 and 30 September 2010 to look at the college's contribution to the quality of provision and partnerships for young people who are in families of service personnel.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of partnerships, including the quality of the partnerships between schools/colleges and agencies and between schools/colleges and parents, I looked at how effective the partnerships are in improving young people's personal well-being and learning. I also considered the nature of the support given to these young people, including those in the most vulnerable circumstances, or those who have a particular special educational need and/or disability, and the arrangements to ensure the continuity of provision during children's move in and out of your college.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: meetings with you, your senior team and 26 students from the lower and upper sixth. I also met with the head of admissions, the head of boarding, the head of study support, the student services manager and members of staff responsible for information management. I scrutinised a variety of college documentation, including information about student achievement and attendance, and evidence relating to the college's contact with parents.

The college's contribution to the quality of provision and partnerships for young people who are in families of service personnel is outstanding.

Key features

- Your college's ethos of 'counting in ones' means that students are well known as individuals and any additional support they receive is very closely matched to their specific needs. The college's comprehensive academic and pastoral support systems are wide-ranging and flexible; they fully meet the requirements of different groups of students, including those from service family backgrounds.
- Boarders from service backgrounds are confident, articulate and thoughtful. Almost all said that they chose to come to the college as it offered them a wider and more flexible range of courses and was seen as a bridge between school and university. They also said it provided them with a stable and consistent experience during their sixth form education. This was particularly important for those students whose families were relocating or likely to be deployed on active service during this period.
- Outcomes for all of your students are high. Retention and success rates are high at both AS and A level. The achievement of young people from service family backgrounds is consistently in line with their college peers. Outcomes for those boarding students who are in receipt of Ministry of Defence funding also compare very favourably with their peers. Attendance is consistently in line with and often slightly higher than college averages, which are above the national average.
- Students with special educational needs, including those from service family backgrounds, achieve very well. Your rigorous application and enrolment processes incorporate prompt and early assessment of each student's needs. Very effective screening builds on the good information you receive from feeder schools, and is used skilfully to signpost students to those interventions that are best suited to their needs.
- A comprehensive range of student services quickly supports young people who have special educational needs and/or disabilities as well as those who would benefit from attending study skills workshops. Students say these systems are very effective. This contributes significantly to the high retention and success rates for young people with special educational needs.
- Communication and ongoing dialogue between your pastoral and academic staff is very good. For example, the college's 'worry week' and referral systems ensure that there are frequent opportunities for academic staff to identify any concerns they have about underperformance and to pass this information on to tutors and/or student support services. Detailed records are kept of the support students receive and the impact of any interventions. Where information is sensitive, it is managed very carefully. Wisely, you are now considering ways in which this information can be shared more fully with parents in a manner which is appropriate, beneficial and timely.
- The tracking and evaluation of students' achievements and well-being across the college are excellent. Your college's impressive and highly accessible electronic systems enable very good information to be gathered

routinely about different groups of students. This exceptionally high-quality academic and pastoral information helps college leaders to conduct accurate and 'forensic analysis' of the achievement of different groups, including those students who join from Service Children's Education (SCE) schools and/or have special educational needs.

- Your admissions procedures are well-organised and flexible. Transition arrangements are expertly managed, with around 1700 students joining the college each September. Priority for boarding places is given to young people from service families and this is identified clearly in your college's admissions policy. All pre-application information and subsequent documentation, such as the 'boarders handbook', are of a high quality. Open days and interviews are organised to coincide, to make it easier for families who are abroad to attend. Special arrangements are made when parents cannot make the published dates. For day students, around 10 places are held in contingency each year for families moving into the local area. While this is not exclusively designed for service families, it can benefit them greatly.
- Boarding students, including those who join from SCE schools, settle quickly into college life because they are supported very well by their friends and college staff. House parents play a central role in providing high quality and ongoing support for young people. The students say there is always someone they can go to who they trust and who will act quickly for them.
- Safeguarding arrangements are thorough and staff are very well trained. There are excellent links with the police, children's services and other schools. Systems are highly responsive and identify concerns very quickly so that focused interventions can be put in place to those who may be vulnerable. Recent examples have demonstrated clearly the benefit of your strong relationships with feeder schools and effective liaison with army welfare services. Astutely, you recognise the value of developing even closer contact with the overseas schools, particularly when sharing information about students with special educational needs or when updating SCE or Children's Education Advisory Service (CEAS) on changes to your admissions procedures and deadlines.
- Your college welcomes regular communication with parents and this has been enhanced by the recent development of the parents' portal. This provides parents with up-to-date information about progress and attendance and facilitates quick electronic communication with the college. Rightly, you are now considering how the parents' portal can be developed further, particularly as a mechanism for gathering parental views.
- There are very secure systems in place to ensure that parents of young people who are boarding are informed of issues relating to their children's progress and well-being, especially through each student's 'careplan'. Through this system, parents know very quickly if, for example, attendance has slipped or students are unwell. Parents are also able to make use of college staff in *loco parentis* during consultation evenings and college staff provide parents with detailed feedback and follow up any issues that arise as necessary.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop the work with children and young people and their parents who are in families of service personnel.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Wood
Her Majesty's Inspector