

Thornbeck College

Focused monitoring visit report

Unique reference number: 132030

Name of lead inspector: Sue Harrison HMI

Last day of inspection: 16 November 2011

Type of provider: Independent specialist college

Address: Carley Hill
Sunderland
Tyne and Wear
SR5 1SG

Telephone number: 0191 510 2038

Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

Thornbeck College is part of the North East Autism Society (NEAS), which is currently based in Sunderland but plans to relocate to a site on the campus of East Durham College. In addition to Thornbeck College, NEAS offers other services such as day and residential adult provision, domiciliary care and supported living. In 2010/11 the college had 14 full-time learners aged 19 to 25. All learners have autism, associated learning difficulties and/or disabilities and varying levels of challenging behaviour. The college delivers its provision in a range of settings, including a city centre shop, community based workshops and work placements with employers. All learners are funded as day placements by the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA). Its mission is to 'work in partnership to achieve outstanding personalised services for people with autism'.

The college was inspected in 2009 and judged to be outstanding. This report focuses on the themes explored during the monitoring visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress is the college making to develop an effective overview of progress against key performance objectives?	Significant progress
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The college has been successful in developing further its systems to monitor provision since the last inspection. It has simplified its quality assurance procedures to make them more effective and to focus on key performance objectives. As a result, staff feel greater ownership of development plans. There is an impressive culture in the college of staff seeking ways to improve further the quality of provision for learners. All staff contribute to the quality improvement plan, which is monitored regularly to check if it is bringing about the planned improvements. Teaching and learning continue to be monitored rigorously, with good opportunities for staff to share good practice. The college uses feedback from students exceptionally well in developing its provision. It has piloted effective methods to help students with very limited communication to give their views and this has led to changes in learners' programmes where appropriate.

Outcomes for learners

To what extent is the college maintaining strengths in outcomes for learners noted at the last inspection?	Significant progress
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Learners' progress in reaching their long-term goals continues to be a strong feature of the college. All those who finished their programmes in 2010/11 progressed to supported employment and, in one case, to non-supported employment. This is made possible as a result of the work-related and personal skills that learners

acquire during their programmes. Learners make significant progress in their ability to interact with others and to behave in appropriate ways. They develop knowledge and skills to travel successfully on public transport. They also learn skills and gain accreditation in vocational areas, such as retail and business. In addition to work-related skills, learners increase their independence in daily living skills, such as shopping for their lunch and preparing the meal. These skills contribute to the move into supported living made by many of them at the end of their programmes.

Quality of provision

To what extent does the curriculum continue to meet needs, especially through partnership working?	Significant progress
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The curriculum continues to meet needs well. Extensive and very effective partnership work contributes significantly to the curriculum. Learners practise their skills in real community settings and on employers' premises for a substantial proportion of their programme. The college places high priority on work within the parent organisation and with external agencies to develop social enterprises. These provide excellent opportunities for students to develop skills, and avenues of progression when they leave college. Facilities include very good quality workshops that focus on vocational areas such as floristry and woodworking. As a result of partnership working, students produce goods and services that are valued in the local community. Work with local authorities and housing associations is effective in helping learners to move into appropriate accommodation after college. A successful partnership with East Durham College is helping to increase the vocational pathways that are open to learners, and plans are well advanced to re-locate Thornbeck to one of the further education college's sites.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made to develop further staff skills in communication strategies used with learners?	Significant progress
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Extensive work has taken place since the last inspection to ensure that staff employ an effective range of communication strategies with learners. A member of staff identified to lead on this work liaises closely with the speech and language therapists who assess learners' needs and identify strategies. For new learners, strategies are then 'piloted' to determine their effectiveness before being disseminated to all staff. Better coordination of the work ensures consistency among staff in working with an individual learner. Staff have also had useful training on 'best practice' in using cues with learners in ways that encourage independence, for example by not over-prompting them when they are being asked to respond to a question or instruction. In addition, staff are trained in the use of 'Makaton' and are skilful at ensuring its use is planned carefully around the needs and interests of individual learners, and changes to the curriculum. As a result of these initiatives, learners' confidence to express themselves is greatly enhanced.

To what extent does the college ensure safeguarding training, including e-safety, is kept up to date?

Reasonable progress

Staff have regular refresher training on safeguarding policies and procedures and learners are encouraged to make known any concerns they have. Since the last inspection, the college has developed an e-safety policy and staff have had initial training on its implementation. Further training is planned to increase their knowledge and understanding of this aspect of safeguarding. The college also plans to hold a workshop on the topic for parents and carers. Appropriate work takes place with individual learners to help them understand the potential safety issues as their information technology skills increase, including the risks associated with social networking sites. Training for students is delivered using methods to help them understand the issues, including the use of simulated examples.

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