

Dilston College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Independent specialist college

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Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

Dilston College is an independent specialist college situated in rural Northumberland. The college is one of three further education colleges that form the Mencap National College. It provides up to 80 placements for full-time residential and day education for learners aged 16 to 25 who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college is located in a nine-acre site of park, woodland and gardens. Dilston College contracts with the Young People's Learning Agency to provide programmes in Foundation Learning.

The college was inspected in February 2007 and judged to be good. Areas for improvement were the consistency of target setting and recording of progress, the development of RARPA (recognising and recording progress and achievement), and the promotion of equality and diversity. A monitoring visit in February 2008 found significant progress in the first of these and reasonable progress in the others. Further visits in December 2008 and March 2010 found that the college was continuing to make reasonable progress in these areas. This report focuses on the themes explored during the monitoring visit.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

What progress has been made in improving the arrangements for self-assessment and quality improvement since the last inspection? In particular, what progress has been made towards ensuring that strategic planning has a focus on improvement?

Significant progress

Since the previous monitoring visit the college has completed its reorganisation and new ways of working are now well established. Lines of responsibility are now clear and are effectively supporting more cohesive communication through well-minuted weekly team meetings. The college's self-assessment report is clear and incisive, providing a good insight into the college's strengths and areas for improvement. The new meetings structure is providing an excellent forum for monitoring and reviewing progress against all aspects of the self-assessment report and quality improvement plan. The use of data to support judgements is more secure because managers understand data better. All staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities in achieving the targets in the quality improvement plan. Targets are now more specific, less onerous and more meaningful to staff. As a result of this, all staff are clearer about their role in achieving targets and talk knowledgeably about the progress being made towards their achievement. Importantly, learning supporters are significantly more central to the meetings structure and, as such, have a much better understanding of their roles and responsibilities. The views of learners are now much more clearly articulated in the report. The inspector met a group of

learners who were able to talk about the changes that had happened as a result of their feedback.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in ensuring the continued improvement in outcomes for learners?	Significant progress
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The college has very effectively introduced the new Foundation Learning programme which is successfully enabling more learners to achieve qualifications and progress into supported and unsupported employment, and independent and semi-independent living. The monitoring of the progress of all learners continues to be rigorous through the use of clear and specific target setting and detailed recording of progress. Individual action plans clearly identify what a learner needs to do to achieve, any potential barriers to learning and strategies to overcome these barriers. Learners who are on placements decide on their own targets in conjunction with their personal tutor and employer. Increasing numbers of learners are achieving their full qualification or learning goal and all are partially achieving their qualification. Where appropriate, learners’ achievement is accredited through external awards. In 2010, 100% of learners achieved awards in adult literacy and numeracy at entry level and educational skills for life and working life. Almost all learners achieved qualifications in writing and communication, and information and communication technology at level 1. Just under 60% achieved their qualification in numeracy: measuring shape. Increasing numbers of learners are taking responsibility for their own medication through the use of detailed health plans and a range of supporting tools developed by the college.

Quality of provision

What progress has been made in improving the effectiveness of transition planning?	Significant progress
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Learners, and their parents, report that they receive impressive support and guidance to assist with their transition into and out of the college. The transition team, personal tutors, learning supporters, speech and language and art therapists work closely together to ensure a thorough and coordinated service for learners. The transition programme is now well established and an increasing number of learners are moving into work, including voluntary work and further learning. The transition coordinator ensures that communication with learners’ parents and/or carers and home authority very successfully support transition arrangements. An effective planning and risk assessment tool is helping learners to make ambitious but realistic choices about their future life. An individual locality mapping tool carefully identifies leisure and recreational interests in each learner’s home authority. For learners moving to the college, attendance by the transition coordinator at their final school review combined with frequent meetings and college visits are ensuring a much smoother move to college life. The excellent support from the art and speech and language therapists, and the strong focus on total communication, are reducing learners’ anxieties and frustrations at transition. The college reports that in 2011 learners settled more quickly into college life.

Leadership and management

What progress has been made in strengthening collaborative and partnership working to benefit learners and ensure the college offers good value for money? **Significant progress**

Senior managers have grounded future developments in careful budgetary analysis and a clear understanding of local and national needs and opportunities. Frequent and honest communication is keeping staff fully informed and involved in changes. Excellent partnerships are ensuring the curriculum is increasingly responsive and flexible in meeting the needs of learners and the local community. Close working relationships with the local partnership board and other partners are broadening learners' opportunities for real work and learning experiences. Recent initiatives include the opening of 'The Kiosk' at the local railway station to provide refreshments for travellers, staffed by learners from the college, and the use of the specialist area-wide media centre. National employers are particularly enthusiastic about the college's collaborative working, reporting that it is impacting positively on the training and development of their staff, specifically on their understanding of disability. This engagement with national employers is ensuring that learners can access work placements while at the college that can also be maintained and developed when learners return to their home authority. The college Principal is working closely with local general further education providers to develop even more individual diverse pathways that will maximise learning opportunities while ensuring value for money.

How much progress has the college made in actively promoting equality and diversity in the curriculum? **Reasonable progress**

Data analysis, evaluation and target setting in this area of the college are well established. The college continues to monitor carefully the progress made by different groups of learners, taking action where appropriate. Teaching and support staff are developing learners' understanding of diversity through reflection on daily living and learning. Visits to religious buildings and the celebration of cultural and religious festivals now take place in the context of specific curricular and enrichment activities. Currently learners are fund-raising for children in a small rural African village to provide beds and bedding for the children and their parents. Strong support from the art and speech and language therapists is enabling learners to discuss issues and concerns. This significant focus is supporting learners to be more independent thinkers and more confident in dealing with challenges in the outside world. In its efforts to widen the curriculum offer, the college is working locally and nationally to broaden opportunities for learners. It is working with a local kayaking group to develop safe ways for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to participate in the sport. Importantly it is planning training across the country to broaden the offer of this sport to those outside of the college's reach and remit.

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