

Palmer's College

Sixth form college

Inspection dates

1–4 December 2015

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Requires improvement
Outcomes for learners	Requires improvement
16 to 19 study programmes	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings

This is a provider that requires improvement

- Although leaders and managers have arrested the decline in the college's performance noted at the previous inspection, and brought about some improvements, the quality of provision remains of too low a standard in too many subjects.
- A significant proportion of lessons fail to inspire, challenge and motivate learners to achieve high standards, and not enough teachers have the highest expectations of what all learners can achieve.
- On A-level courses, learners in most subjects do not make sufficiently rapid progress in comparison with their starting points, and too few achieve high grades.
- Standards are too low on level 2 vocational courses, and too many learners fail to complete their programmes successfully.
- Both the volume and the quality of learners' independent work are too inconsistent between subjects.
- Learners' attendance at a significant minority of lessons is low.
- Learners on most vocational courses do not benefit from external work experience in commercial environments.

The provider has the following strengths

- The proportion of learners who complete their qualifications successfully has risen and is high.
- Provision in science has improved significantly since the previous inspection, and teaching is now good.
- Gaps in achievement between male and female learners, and between those who need extra help with their studies and those who do not, have been closed successfully.
- Learners who need additional help to complete their studies are supported well.
- Personal progress tutors provide good support, both academic and pastoral.
- Learners' awareness of, and understanding of how to keep themselves safe from, a broad range of potential risks to their well-being is good.

Full report

Information about the provider

- Palmer's College is a medium-sized sixth form college located in Grays, Thurrock. Around 1,700 full-time learners, nearly all of them aged 16 to 18, attend the college and are on study programmes. The vast majority of learners are on courses at level 3, with around half taking predominantly academic programmes and half vocational programmes. A small number of high-needs funded learners attend mainstream courses at the college.
- Thurrock is an area with significant pockets of deprivation, characterised by few families experiencing higher education and a particularly high proportion of the adult population with no qualifications. School performance has been broadly in line with the national rates, although provisional data for 2014/15 show a fall in the proportion of school leavers who attain five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Governors, leaders and managers need to accelerate the rate of improvement by acting swiftly to raise teachers' and learners' ambitions for what learners can achieve, and ensure that all teachers and middle managers are held directly accountable for raising standards.
- Ensure that middle managers with curriculum responsibilities are not distracted by everyday operational matters, and that they focus on identifying and intervening where standards of teaching are not high enough, and where learners' progress and attendance are not good.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment at all levels by:
 - ensuring that all teachers have the highest expectations of what each learner can achieve, and that this is reflected in the pace and level of learning in lessons, including through the tasks that teachers set and through their questioning and other assessment techniques
 - providing guidance and training to those teachers who struggle to make lessons interesting, or struggle with classroom management, so that they develop greater confidence in managing learner behaviour and promoting positive attitudes to learning
 - tightening the monitoring of learners' progress towards achieving ambitious targets by ensuring that teachers and tutors evaluate carefully and frequently learners' progress, focusing on the extent to which learners are improving their subject knowledge and understanding, and on what they need to do to improve further
 - ensuring that all learners do frequent independent work for all their courses, that this work is demanding and of high quality, and that they receive helpful feedback on it.
- Improve the quality of provision in English and mathematics by training all teachers to identify ways in which they can help learners to improve their skills. In discrete functional skills and GCSE classes, ensure that teachers identify which aspects of the subject each learner is struggling with, and plan learning activities on this basis.
- Improve rapidly arrangements for learners to undertake external work experience, especially those on vocational courses at levels 2 and 3.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management requires improvement

- During the last year senior leaders and governors have set about tackling the college's underperformance, and challenging mediocrity, through strengthening management capacity and increasing accountability. They have had some, but not enough, success. A higher proportion of learners are now successful in achieving their qualifications, more are making better progress compared with their starting points, and some significant achievement gaps between groups of learners have closed. However, too many learners still do not make sufficient progress, the standard of teaching is still not good, and there is too much variation in the quality of provision between subjects.
- A concerted effort to establish a high-achieving, aspirational culture through good communications and effective performance management is beginning to have a positive impact, but there is still much to do. A recent sensible management restructure has devolved clear responsibility for learners' outcomes and the quality of teaching to a much smaller number of curriculum managers. Early indications are that this is working well, although it is too early to assess the full impact. The new curriculum managers, some of whom would benefit from further training and development, recognise the need to focus their attention on driving up standards, and not be diverted by day-to-day operational matters.
- Leaders' and managers' evaluation of the quality of teaching is rigorous and accurate, and focuses well on the extent to which learners learn and make progress. The findings from managers' lesson observations broadly match those of inspectors; managers recognise that too much teaching is uninspiring and insufficiently demanding. Many teachers have received effective targeted support to help them to improve, and managers have used formal capability procedures appropriately in some instances. However, too many teachers do still not have high enough expectations of what learners can achieve. Action plans for individual teachers following observations are not always sufficiently detailed or precise.
- Leaders and managers have improved self-assessment at all levels. Evaluations of the quality of provision are realistic, and key priorities for improvement are articulated well. Managers use data on learners' progress increasingly effectively to evaluate performance objectively. Managers at curriculum level are less adept at identifying the precise aspects of teaching, learning and assessment that require improvement, and as a result do not always specify exactly what needs to be done to raise standards.
- Managers have not yet implemented all of the requirements of study programmes effectively. Provision in English and mathematics has been given a high profile and is beginning to improve. Many learners follow a curriculum that is tailored carefully to their future aspirations. However, the provision of external work experience requires significant improvement.
- Leaders and managers work well with local employers in the Thames Gateway area, and with other regional further education providers, to develop a sixth form college curriculum that is fit for purpose. Links with law firms for learners on the legal secretaries' course are particularly strong. Managers are revising the information technology curriculum to tailor it to the digital skills needs of the local economy. Leaders are preparing well for the forthcoming area-based review.
- The culture of the college is inclusive, and equality of opportunity has been strengthened by the closing of some important achievement gaps between different groups of learners. Small numbers of minority ethnic learners achieve less well than others. Leaders have only very recently begun to analyse data to check that specific groups are not more prone to be subject to disciplinary action. Displays around the college promote both respect for diversity and British values well, although these features are less evident in taught lessons.
- **The governance of the provider**
 - Governors are much better informed about the college's performance than at the previous inspection. Revised arrangements for governance, combined with some changes in personnel, have strengthened governors' oversight and understanding of key performance indicators on educational performance. Governors' oversight of college finances continues to be good.
 - Governors are challenging senior leaders increasingly effectively to tackle areas of weaker provision and improve the quality of teaching, and receive detailed reports to help them do so.
 - Governors are self-critical, and evaluate their own performance effectively. They recognise that they have not had sufficient influence in bringing about improvements in recent years.
- **The arrangements for safeguarding are effective**
 - All staff, including governors, have had appropriate training about their safeguarding responsibilities, and checks on their suitability to work with young people have been carried out. Good links with external agencies are used well to investigate concerns and support learners.

- Learners' awareness of safeguarding issues, and how to raise any concerns, is covered well in tutorials and through displays around the college. Learners show good awareness and understanding of issues such as e-safety, cyber bullying and safe relationships, including issues around consent.
- Managers have responded well to the 'Prevent' duty. A good strategy and action plan to respond to the issues is in place, and all staff have been trained. Learners confirmed that issues around radicalisation and extremism had been raised during induction and through tutorials.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement

- The vast majority of learners achieve their main qualification, but not enough make as much progress as they should because teaching, learning and assessment are not consistently good. The slow progress made by a significant minority of learners in lessons is compounded by insufficient emphasis on learners being set, and completing, serious independent study in many subjects. As a consequence, not all learners are as well prepared for further training or higher education as they should be.
- In a significant number of lessons learners, although compliant, are largely passive recipients of learning materials, teachers' explanations and questioning that do not demand enough of them. In many lessons, it is too easy for learners to be bystanders in their own learning because teachers do not do enough to make them think hard, explain ideas in depth or work at a rapid pace.
- Teachers do not always insist on high professional standards in their lessons. For example, in a minority of lessons some learners arrive late, wear their coats and are not equipped with organised note files. In a very small minority of lessons, some learners disrupt the learning of others. For example, in one lesson a small number of recalcitrant learners captured all of the teacher's attention, with the consequence that the rest of the group made very little progress.
- Learners make much more rapid progress when teachers have high expectations and demonstrate these by providing interesting and challenging work both in and out of lessons. Teachers encourage learners to explore ideas in depth, assess each learner's progress carefully, and expect them to answer questions in detail. Good practice in these respects was seen in sports, applied science, graphic design and law. In many subjects, extra workshops are helpful in giving learners the opportunity to consolidate their understanding.
- Teachers are provided with information about learners' abilities captured through initial assessment. Staff support learners who need extra help with their studies well. However, most teachers do not make sufficient use of the information they have to provide work that extends the learning of those who are more able. When assessing learners' progress and setting them targets to improve, too many teachers focus on their behaviour or attitudes, rather than on the development of subject-specific skills and knowledge. An electronic system for monitoring learners' progress is not yet being used to its full potential, and too many learners are not sufficiently aware of their progress in meeting their target grades.
- A strong focus on helping learners to improve their English and mathematics in lessons is supported by dedicated small whiteboards displayed in each classroom designed for teachers to record relevant learning points. However, these are not used frequently. Many, but not all, classrooms have stimulating displays designed to encourage learners to reflect on a range of subject-related and topical issues. A minority of teachers are adept at weaving topics on diversity and British values into their lessons, but most learners rely on tutorials for coverage of these issues.
- The amount of independent study carried out by learners varies significantly across subjects, and a consistent approach to expectations in this regard is not implemented. For example, while learners in law, accounting and health and social care are expected to do a lot of homework, in many other subjects, learners' files are sparse. Similar variations are evident in the quality and frequency of feedback on learners' work.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare requires improvement

- Learners enjoy being at the college, although not all learners enjoy all of their lessons. Most learners on most courses attend well, arrive on time, are ready to learn and are keen to succeed. However, in a significant minority of instances, where lessons are dull and classroom management is weak, learners' attendance, punctuality and attitudes towards learning are notably less impressive. Attendance at lessons is inconsistent, and arrangements for ensuring that teachers' records of attendance are accurate need improving.

- Arrangements for work experience are very good on courses for legal secretaries and sports learners. However, most learners do not benefit from external work experience in a commercial environment. The relatively small number of learners on level 2 vocational programmes do not have work experience as an integral part of their studies. Despite the strong emphasis on the development of work-related skills, and some opportunities for learners to engage in volunteering and entrepreneurial activities, the work-experience expectations of study programmes are not met fully.
- The behaviour of learners in and around the college is generally good, but not universally so. In public areas, high spirits on occasion lapse into inappropriate boisterousness, and a small number of learners disrupt lessons through minor misdemeanours that a few teachers struggle to quell. Nevertheless, the college community as a whole is vibrant, harmonious and respectful of difference. The small number of learners with high needs are integrated well into the college and enjoy their studies.
- A revised tutorial system is working well in supporting learners' progress and helping learners to make informed decisions about their futures. Careers advice, including for those intending to go to university, is good, and learners are well informed about their future options. However, analysis of learners' destinations is neither sufficiently full nor detailed enough to enable managers to evaluate how effective the provision is in preparing learners for their futures.
- Group tutorials provide learners with information on, and opportunities to discuss, a wide range of topics relating to their welfare, safety and health. For example, learners have benefited from sessions covering the current risks posed by those who seek to promote extremist views. Learners feel safe and secure in the college, especially since the introduction of a visible identification system and dedicated staff who patrol the college. However, not all learners wear their identification lanyards without prompting, and a small number of teachers are not good role models in this regard.
- The range of enrichment activities and opportunities to take additional qualifications is narrow; as a consequence, learners do not have enough opportunity to broaden their educational experience. This is particularly noticeable at lunchtimes, which are quite long and are characterised by many learners either playing cards or perusing their mobile telephones in the absence of more stimulating activities in which to participate.

Outcomes for learners

require improvement

- The proportion of learners who complete and achieve their qualifications improved in 2014/15 after three years in which this figure was static, and is now in line with the high rate for sixth form colleges nationally. However, this overall figure disguises significant variations in learners' achievement and progress between and within subject areas. Although there is a trend of improvement in learners' outcomes, it is not sufficiently consistent. Current learners are not making sufficiently rapid progress in many subjects, particularly on vocational courses.
- The vast majority of learners on A-level courses achieve their qualification, but in too many subjects they do not make as much progress as they should from their starting points, and the proportion achieving high grades is low. Provision in AS levels is improving, with more learners succeeding and making good or better progress. Achievements on level 3 vocational courses have improved significantly and were good in 2014/15. However, the much smaller number of learners on level 2 vocational courses neither achieve well nor make good progress.
- Provision in science subjects has improved notably since the previous inspection, and learners now achieve well; improvements are also evident in mathematics. Learners also make good progress in a minority of other subject areas, for example, sports, law, accounting and courses for legal secretaries. However, learners' achievements, or their progress, are poor in several subjects including A/AS-level English courses, history, business studies and computing.
- The proportion of learners who improved their GCSE grade from a D to a C or above in English and mathematics rose significantly in 2014/15, but is still not high enough. The extent to which learners improve their English and mathematics through study in their main courses is uneven, despite a good focus on this by college managers.
- Managers and teachers have been successful in removing some significant achievement gaps between different groups of learners over the last three years. For example, male learners now achieve in line with their female peers, and learners who need extra help with their studies achieve as well as those who do not. Small numbers of learners from specific minority ethnic groups do not achieve as well as others. The small number of learners who attract specific high-needs funding achieve well.
- Most learners are prepared well for their next steps, and progression to higher education or further training is high for those whose destinations are known. However, managers do not know the actual destination of a significant minority of learners, and analysis of destination data is insufficiently detailed.

- The standard of work observed during the inspection ranged from excellent to poor, and reflects learners' variable progress. Too often, learners are not put under sufficient pressure by their teachers to produce practical, oral and written work of a sufficiently high calibre.

Provider details

Type of provider	Sixth form college
Age range of learners	16–18
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	1,946
Principal/CEO	Mark Vinall
Website address	www.palmers.ac.uk

Provider information at the time of the inspection

Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 and above	
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
	11	0	137	0	1,569	0	0	0
Number of apprentices by Apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	–	–	–	–	–	–		
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
	–		–		–			
Number of learners aged 14–16	–							
Funding received from	Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency							
At the time of inspection the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	None							

Information about this inspection

Inspection team

Alan Hinchliffe, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Janet Mercer	Her Majesty's Inspector
Jill Arnold	Ofsted Inspector
Matthew Atkinson	Ofsted Inspector

The above team was assisted by the Assistant Principal (Teaching, Learning and Quality Improvement) as nominee, and carried out the inspection at short notice. Inspectors took account of the college's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the college.

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