

Stafford College

Re-inspection monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

This is the first re-inspection monitoring visit to Stafford College following publication of the inspection report on 17 March 2016. At that time the overall effectiveness of the college was inadequate. The effectiveness of leadership and management of the college was judged to be inadequate and the college required improvement in the remaining three key judgements: the quality of teaching, learning and assessment; personal development, behaviour and welfare; and outcomes for learners. Apprenticeships and provision for learners with high needs were judged to be inadequate; 16 to 19 study programmes and adult learning programmes required improvement.

Governors and the interim senior leadership team are currently pursuing a merger with another college with a view to handing over control from September 2016.

Themes

The fitness for purpose of the post-inspection action plan, reporting arrangements and the rigour of senior leaders' and governors' scrutiny

Senior managers have developed an extremely detailed post-inspection action plan. The plan lists actions for the large majority of areas for improvement identified at the inspection together with a number of themes that have emerged subsequently. Managers have initiated 11 specific improvement projects. These projects help managers to focus on specific post-inspection themes. The senior leadership team has formally reviewed the post-inspection action plan and the progress of actions three times since the inspection.

Although the vast majority of actions in these plans and projects align with the weaknesses identified at inspection, there are a few cases where weaknesses do not have corresponding actions or the planned actions are not clear enough. The expected outcomes of each action are not always sufficiently specific or measurable; progress updates make assertions and assumptions about the impact of actions that are not supported by data or other quantifiable sources of evidence.

Priorities for improvement

- Review the post-inspection plan to ensure that actions for all the key findings of the inspection report are clearly addressed.
- Review individual actions in the post-inspection action plan to ensure that all actions have clear and measurable outcomes, defined in terms of their impact on the experience of learners.

- Identify the data and other sources of evidence that provide the necessary information to measure the impact of actions and use these to inform progress updates.

Actions to strengthen governance, including the recruitment of new governors with appropriate skills, the training of existing governors, and the reporting to governors of learner progress and attainment

Inspectors judged that governance was inadequate at the previous inspection. Governors did not provide sufficiently rigorous challenge to senior leaders. In particular, governors did not receive enough information to enable them to monitor the college's progress against key academic targets; members of the board lacked sufficient knowledge of the curriculum to enable them to ask probing questions. As a result, governors did not hold senior managers to account for this aspect of the college's performance and outcomes for learners had declined sharply.

Leaders and governors fully accept the findings of the recent inspection. They have responded positively and taken a number of steps to improve governors' ability to evaluate critically learners' progress and attainment. These actions include prioritising discussions about curriculum and quality, improving the standard of reports supplied to the board, and providing training and support for the governors themselves and the clerk. Governors have also begun to take a more active role in college life through a programme of visits to specific curriculum areas and they have established 'task and finish' groups to consider specific themes. As a consequence, the level of challenge and support that they provide to senior managers has begun to improve, although they acknowledge that they need to further develop their expertise for their support and challenge to become fully effective. Governors now actively seek further training to support their development.

Priorities for improvement

- Provide further training and support for governors to help them develop and consolidate their knowledge of learners' progress and attainment, so that they are able to provide an increasing level of support and challenge to senior leaders.
- Ensure that governors have access to appropriate advice and support to help them contribute effectively to the plans for merger.
- Provide further training and support for the clerk to enable him to provide suitable support to governors.
- Ensure the changes already made to improve governance are consistently and rigorously applied and become embedded within normal practice.
- Ensure that governors continue to develop and focus upon an appropriate range of performance indicators with which they challenge and support managers and leaders.

The use of data to identify areas for improvement and actions planned to address any areas of weakness; the analysis of attainment gaps for different groups of learners and actions to close these

At inspection, inspectors found that managers did not make good use of key information such as learners' attendance and progress when evaluating the quality of provision. Consequently, teachers and managers believed the quality and impact of teaching, learning and assessment were better than they actually were. Actions to improve standards were not well enough informed by data, sufficiently focused or effective. Inspectors acknowledged that managers had noted and analysed attainment gaps between different groups of learners; nevertheless, subsequent actions had failed to close these gaps.

The range of data now available to governors, the executive and senior leadership teams and teachers is significantly broader and more detailed than at inspection. Curriculum managers and teachers are now able to analyse data that details learners' attendance, retention and progress to identify individuals who are underperforming or at risk of doing so. Interventions by specialist support staff and teachers to help learners overcome any barriers to success are now much more targeted and timely.

However, the quality of data requires improvement. It does not currently provide a sufficient range and depth of accurate information for senior leaders and governors. For example, for the developing curriculum review process, the data gathered so far about learners' predicted achievement does not provide a sufficiently complete or reliable picture. Managers do not produce data showing the performance of all learner groups including those from different ethnic backgrounds, those with a disability or by age.

Priorities for improvement

- Develop further the range and depth of data, to provide governors, senior leaders, managers and teaching staff with accurate and reliable information on individuals' and groups of learners' progress towards completion and achievement of their course(s).
- Ensure that reports provided to governors provide a precise and reliable picture of progress towards college targets, so that they may hold senior leaders more fully to account.

Teaching, learning, progress and attainment in English and mathematics

Inspectors noted at the previous inspection that in English and mathematics lessons for learners of mixed ability, teachers failed to identify individual learners' needs. Consequently they did not provide help that was matched to those needs. As a result, classroom-based learners were making only slow progress. Attendance at English and mathematics lessons for both classroom-based and work-based learners was too low. The extent to which teachers of other subjects supported learners to improve their English and mathematics skills was too variable.

Managers have made a number of changes to English and mathematics provision to help support learners' achievement. They have introduced a monitoring system that requires staff to identify those learners who are struggling and provide them with additional help. Early indications suggest that this support is leading to improved rates of progress for these learners. Staff now use a number of approaches to improve attendance: managers challenge teachers if attendance in their classes is particularly low, staff award certificates and prizes to learners with high attendance and they provide activities that impress upon learners the importance of English and mathematics in the workplace.

Immediately prior to the inspection managers introduced an English and mathematics hub to provide 'drop-in' support for learners. This has now begun to have an impact on learners' progress. They have recently appointed a specialist learning mentor and are in the process of appointing a specialist additional learning support worker to help learners develop their English and mathematics skills. Managers have established links between English and mathematics staff and those in the vocational subject areas to facilitate information sharing and to help coordinate lesson planning. There are plans for English and mathematics teachers to join vocational teams.

Priorities for improvement

- Ensure that English and mathematics teachers have access to initial and diagnostic assessment results as soon as learners start their courses.
- Ensure that learners are allocated to appropriate qualifications/groups at the start of their courses.
- Ensure that English and mathematics have a high profile during enrolment so that all learners are clear about the importance of these subjects.
- Improve teachers' use of group profiles, particularly in mathematics, to help ensure that they may use these as a basis from which to plan learning to ensure learners are able to make progress and achieve according to their potential. Support staff to develop further their skills in planning for and providing learning opportunities to reflect learners' different starting points and potential to achieve.
- Retain the good focus on monitoring learners' progress and supporting those who need it, so that this becomes routine practice.

The management of apprenticeship programmes with a specific focus on subcontractor management, the use of initial and ongoing assessment results to tailor programmes, the development of apprentices' English and mathematics skills, and plans to improve progress reviews

At the most recent inspection, inspectors judged that the management of subcontracted provision for warehousing apprentices was weak; these apprentices accounted for one in four of the total number. Staff did not make sufficient use of the results of initial assessments to identify each apprentice's areas for improvement.

Inspectors noted that, although improvements had been made to the teaching of English and mathematics, attendance at functional skills lessons remained too low and a minority of apprentices continued to make only slow progress. Inspectors judged that reviews of apprentices' progress were ineffective, did not involve employers sufficiently or focus well enough on the skills apprentices needed to develop in the workplace.

Managers have identified fully the various shortcomings of apprenticeship programmes and initiated a wide range of appropriate improvement actions. The quality improvement plan for this aspect is particularly detailed, specific, time-bound and measurable. Actions provide a strong focus on improving assessors' monitoring and recording of learners' progress. Assessors are able to make timely interventions to support those making slow progress. Actions also provide a framework for improving teaching and learning in English and mathematics. College data indicates that these actions are having a positive impact. Apprentices' achievement of functional skills so far this year stands at 76%, which is 10% higher than last year's total. Apprentices' overall success rate so far this year is just over 77% compared to 71% in 2014/15. College tracking documents indicate that the majority of current learners are well on track to achieve their qualification.

Managers have reviewed and improved arrangements for managing subcontractors. Subcontractors have been offered the same training as college staff in order to improve their practice. Problems persist with one major subcontractor, which leaders and managers have not yet resolved.

Priorities for improvement

- Resolve outstanding issues with the poorly performing subcontractor.
- Ensure that the actions already taken to improve the quality of apprenticeship programmes become fully integrated into everyday practice.

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