

Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

On 1 November 2016, Stafford College merged with Newcastle-under-Lyme College to form the Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group.

Stafford College was inadequate at its previous full inspection in February 2016 for overall effectiveness, and leadership and management. It was inadequate in two of the four provision types inspected: apprenticeships and provision for learners with high needs. This monitoring visit follows the re-inspection monitoring visit, which took place in April 2016. The progress judgements from this current visit will inform Ofsted's risk assessment as to the timing of the next full inspection of the merged college.

Themes

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

Significant progress

Inspectors reported at the previous full inspection in February 2016 that former senior leaders and managers had not acted quickly or effectively enough since the 2014 inspection to tackle the college's weaknesses. Leaders and managers presented an overly optimistic assessment of the impact of quality-improvement actions.

At the first re-inspection monitoring visit in April 2016, inspectors found that senior leaders had developed a clear and detailed post-inspection action plan. However, managers had not clearly addressed all of the key findings from the inspection report. Leaders had not defined measurable outcomes in terms of their impact on the experience of learners.

Leaders and managers of the merged college successfully demonstrated to inspectors at this second monitoring visit, their capacity to tackle previous issues from the February 2016 inspection. Since the merger, managers have increased the use of data, based on robust evidence, to support the measurement of impact of improvement actions. The merged college post-inspection action plan and the previous post-inspection action plan from Stafford College have been assimilated into a streamlined version. This plan identifies clearly both the actions and the measurable indicators of improvement. Managers have added additional actions identified from the previous inspection and these now form a robust plan, supported by data to identify progress.

The overall progress towards improvement is indicated through references to reliable, verified data, across the college. Managers across the college have

confidence in this single source of data, and staff use this information to address areas for improvement systematically. The use of this range of measures enables managers and staff to take action based on reliable starting points.

The effectiveness of leaders, managers and governors in eradicating the attainment gaps between groups of students, particularly those with high needs, learning difficulties and/or disabilities and how they make progress compared to their peers.

Reasonable progress

Inspectors reported from the previous full inspection in February 2016 that leaders had not been successful in reducing the gaps in achievement between different groups of students in 2014/15. These gaps had widened from the previous year.

Inspectors judged the provision for learners with high needs to be inadequate. Teachers and managers did not make secure links between learners' education, health and care (EHC) plans, learning disability assessments, the results of initial assessments to determine learners' starting points, support arrangements and personal and curriculum targets. As a result, these learners were not achieving according to their potential.

The data out-turn for 2015/16 was more positive than that for the previous year. The overall achievement rate for learners aged 16 to 18 was some 11 percentage points higher than in 2014/15 and broadly in line with the national rate for 2014/15. Adult achievement was broadly in line with the previous year but some seven points below the national rate for 2014/15. The proportion of learners remaining on programme is currently high; leaders and managers have made a cautious forecast for achievement rates for 2016/17, which are expected to improve further on those for 2015/16.

The previously poor management of subcontractors has heavily affected the achievement rates of apprentices. The underlying data, without those learners involved in the subcontracting arrangement, shows too much variation in the performance of learners by age, level of apprenticeship and by subject area.

Following the merger, leaders and managers have carried out a detailed analysis of the performance of groups of learners and investigated the underlying reasons for apparent differences in achievement rates. Where there are differences, such as between males and females aged 16 to 18 at level 2, these are more to do with the varying performance of different courses on which learners are enrolled than with the differences between learners.

In 2015/16, learners aged 16 to 18 with learning difficulties and/or disabilities performed to the same level as, or better than, their peers with no learning difficulties and/or disabilities. For adult learners, the performance of those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was broadly in line with those without

identified difficulties and/or disabilities, with the exception of learners at level 1. Leaders and managers have traced this underperformance to quality issues with the provision on which these learners were enrolled.

Leaders and managers have refocused the provision for learners with high needs. In 2015/16, each learner in the cohort was successful. In the current year, at the time of this monitoring visit, each learner in a much larger cohort remains on programme. The tracking and monitoring of learners' progress are now much more rigorous. The links between learners' EHC plans, learning disability assessments, and the results of initial assessments, support arrangements and personal and curriculum targets are far more secure. Leaders and managers have implemented systems which support the sharing of information and the performance of high-needs learners between the support team, student mentors and the curriculum team. Learners take part in regular reviews of EHC plans and targets. Scrutiny of individual learning plans for these learners shows regular monitoring of clear and purposeful targets that enable learners to make appropriate progress towards their next stage in employment or further study.

The corporation of the merged college, following a rigorous selection process, includes two governors of the former Stafford College. Governors are successfully exporting a tried-and-trusted process and culture of support and challenge from the corporation of Newcastle-under-Lyme College to the function of governance in the merged college. They show appropriate ambition for learners of the merged college. They are very mindful of the risks attached to the merger and monitor the position closely.

The effectiveness of leaders' actions in making improvements to teaching, learning and assessment, including English and mathematics, to ensure that the support for teachers helps them to make rapid improvement. **Reasonable progress**

At the previous full inspection in February 2016, inspectors reported that the vast majority of teachers had teaching qualifications and good industry experience to support learners to develop good practical skills. However, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment was too inconsistent. Feedback provided to learners was not consistently good and the quality of teachers' planning for learning was too variable. The development of learners' English and mathematics skills required improvement because teachers failed to identify accurately learners' individual needs. Attendance was too low, and subject teachers did not consistently support learners to improve their English and mathematics.

At the previous monitoring visit in April 2016, inspectors identified that the interim managers had introduced a monitoring system that required staff to identify learners struggling with their English and mathematics and provide them with additional support; early indicators suggested that this was having an impact on rates of progress. Managers had provided an effective English and mathematics 'hub' so that

learners could 'drop in'. This was showing signs of improving rates of progress. Inspectors identified that, as a priority, teachers should have early access to initial information on learners' diagnostic test results as soon as learners start their courses, and that English and mathematics should have a higher profile during enrolment. Inspectors reported that teachers should give learners' profiles a high priority so that teachers could use these to inform the planning of learning.

Although the merger did not officially take place until November 2016, managers were able to influence curriculum planning sufficiently in order to plan improvements to English and mathematics from the summer term of 2016. These improvements included ensuring that teachers had early access to the initial assessment outcomes for new learners; this has enabled teachers to secure more focused individual learning plans for learners, based on their starting points. Apprentices' needs and abilities are considered fully and they are now supported to improve with precise, short-term targets. Senior managers have successfully raised the profile of English and mathematics across the college. Learners know and understand the significance of these skills as part of their study programme or apprenticeship. Through the effective use of electronic tracking systems, managers and staff are now able to make informed decisions about individual learners' support needs and plan learning which more accurately reflects learners' starting points.

Tracking and monitoring of learners' progress in English and mathematics, and their attendance at these lessons, are now a key part of performance monitoring. Very regular use of information about aspects such as attendance and progress effectively determines risks associated with learners not completing their course or meeting the requirements of the 16 to 19 study programme. Effective teaching includes good reference to the development of specific, subject-focused skills development in technical English. Teachers set ambitious expectations of their learners, such as the spelling of key terms and the context of language in their chosen subjects.

Quality improvement and monitoring of teaching, learning and assessment now include a much wider range of reliable data to support college evaluations. The feedback from observations of teaching and learning is supported by frequent analysis and review of wider information about learners' progress from their starting points, their attendance, and feedback on marked work. Managers base their evaluations on reliable data to inform improvement strategies and performance management. However, managers have identified that there is much work to do to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment overall. Leaders have instigated a range of initiatives to support improvements in teaching, learning and assessment. These include targeted support for underperforming teachers, the use of teaching and learning coaches and a programme of ongoing staff development sessions. Managers acknowledge that teachers would benefit from more support in this area and that it is too early to judge the impact of improvements to date.

The quality of too much teaching, learning and assessment is inconsistent and still requires improvement. Effective teaching is taking place in some lessons, and

learners are making modest progress. However, too many sessions lack pace and variety or clear learning objectives to ensure that all learners make consistent, measurable progress. For example, teachers rely too much on questioning techniques to elicit evidence of learning. Teachers do not take sufficient account of the needs and starting points of individual learners. Teachers place insufficient emphasis on the development of learners' mathematical skills.

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

From the previous full inspection in February 2016, inspectors reported managers' poor use of key information such as learners' attendance and progress to assist with the evaluation of the quality of provision. As a result, leaders and managers overestimated the quality and impact of teaching, learning and assessment. Their actions to improve standards were not well enough informed by the available data.

At the first re-inspection monitoring visit in April 2016, inspectors found that the range of data available to governors, leaders and managers had improved in breadth and detail. However, they reported that there was still much work to do to ensure that information was sufficiently accurate and reliable on individual learners' and groups of learners' progress towards course completion and achievement. They agreed a second priority for improvement around ensuring that reports to governors should provide a precise and reliable picture of progress towards college targets, so that they might hold leaders more fully to account for the outcomes learners achieve.

Following the merger, leaders and managers have worked hard and to good effect to tackle the requirement from the visit in April 2016 to ensure that information on individual learners' and groups of learners' progress towards course completion and achievement was appropriately accurate and reliable. Regular and accurate reporting is the cornerstone of the review and evaluation of learners' in-year progress. Leaders and managers now have the information to enable them to tackle quality-improvement tasks in-year. For example, weekly retention and attendance reports enable managers to follow up areas of concern and take appropriate action. The education and standards committee of the corporation receives reports on a termly basis for the whole college and by curriculum area; reports denote action to be taken to improve attendance in-year. Similarly, a weekly performance report enables the tracking of learners' progress, highlighting areas of concern such as the numbers of referrals, and the volume of merit or pass grades.

Governors are well informed of the quality of learners' experience and outcomes, benchmarking the performance of learners at the Stafford campus against that of learners at the Newcastle-under-Lyme campus, and against sector rates.

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 **Reasonable progress**

At the previous full inspection in February 2016, inspectors identified that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment provided to apprentices was generally effective, although reviews of progress did not involve employers sufficiently to monitor effectively the impact of learning at work. College managers were not managing the performance of all subcontractors effectively. Teachers did not use the results from initial assessments to help apprentices develop the skills they needed to improve, including their skills in English and mathematics.

At the first re-inspection monitoring visit in April 2016, managers had identified the shortcomings in the apprenticeship programme and initiated improvement actions. Assessors were making more timely interventions to improve the support for those apprentices making slow progress. Actions to improve the teaching of English and mathematics were having a positive impact and apprentices' overall success rates were showing a modest improvement. Inspectors agreed that, as a priority, the issues with the poorly performing subcontractor required resolution and that the actions taken to improve quality should become part of everyday practice.

Following the merger, leaders identified many areas where inaccuracies in data provided a more positive picture of apprenticeship performance than was actually the case; they now use this information to inform strategic decision-making. These inherited performance issues will continue to have an impact on performance for apprentices' framework achievement over the next two years. College leaders have now thoroughly rectified inaccuracies in the apprenticeship data to remove a significant number of learners who had breaks in their learning or who were not recorded as leavers. Leaders now have a very clear view of the scale of the challenges they face to improve performance. Assessors understand fully what standards managers expect of them. They also understand how they will be held to account for areas of underperformance.

Leaders have taken swift action to resolve the issues with the poor performance of one subcontractor and quickly ceased working with a further three organisations. Managers' introduction of electronic tracking and monitoring systems has made a significant, positive impact on their ability to identify programmes where performance is not good enough, apprentices who are at risk of leaving early, and those making slow progress. Contract managers now have access to a much wider range of data and information which they use to monitor contract performance and take action where needed.

Improvements in the arrangements for the development of apprentices' English and mathematics functional skills are now similar to the revised arrangements for learners on the 16 to 19 study programme, and continue to improve. Early assessment of learners' starting points and previous learning now reliably inform apprentices' individual learning plans.

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