

South Staffordshire College

Report following a monitoring visit to a 'requires improvement' provider

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

South Staffordshire College was inspected in May 2018. At that time, inspectors judged the overall effectiveness of the provision to require improvement; all key judgement areas and all the provision types inspected were also judged to require improvement.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to evaluate the progress that leaders and managers have made in addressing the main areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. The themes for this monitoring visit were selected from the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection report.

The college has four main campuses, located in the south of Staffordshire. A number of outreach centres provide community learning and skills courses. The curriculum includes courses in all sector subject areas apart from humanities, ranging from foundation level to higher education level. At the time of the visit, the college had 3,963 learners. The majority of learners were aged 16 to 18, with the remaining being adult learners. In addition, the college has 842 apprentices on programme, of whom a very small minority are working towards standards-based apprenticeships.

The proportion of pupils in Staffordshire achieving five GCSEs including English and mathematics at grade 4 or above is similar to that reported nationally. The proportion of residents within South Staffordshire with qualifications at level 3 and above is broadly in line with that reported for the West Midlands, but well below the national average.

Themes

What progress have governors made in holding senior managers fully to account for making improvements recommended in previous inspection report and ensuring that all learners and apprentices receive a high-quality education and training experience?

Reasonable progress

Governors are clear about the role they play in ensuring that leaders and managers are challenged to make secure and sustained improvement and set high standards for learners and apprentices. Governors have the necessary range of skills, experience and expertise to challenge and support senior leaders effectively.

Since the previous inspection, governors have increased their level of scrutiny and challenge of the actions being taken by leaders to support college-wide improvement. Governors have organised themselves appropriately through two task-and-finish groups and an apprenticeship steering committee. As a result, they have a clear understanding of key issues and areas of underperformance across the college.

Senior managers now provide the governors with increasingly detailed and pertinent information about learners' and apprentices' performance and the standards they achieve. Governors use the information presented to them very effectively to support and challenge managers to tackle performance issues. Board minutes show governors closely scrutinise the information presented to them.

With the active support of the board, the senior management team has implemented a suitably challenging quality improvement plan. The plan focuses well on improving the quality of learners' and apprentices' performance throughout the college. Leaders and managers continuously monitor progress against actions in the quality improvement plan. They report formally to governors through the quality review group and full board meetings. Quality improvement now has a much stronger focus on the quality of learners' and apprentices' experiences. For example, leaders and managers have revised the initial assessment and guidance provided to learners and apprentices. This helps ensure that they are recruited on to programmes that best meet their needs and interests. As a result, the numbers of learners who transfer to another course are much reduced.

Minutes of governors' meetings show an increased level of challenging and probing questions about key college performance indicators, with supporting papers demonstrating a much greater openness and clarity. Where pertinent, governors request additional information and briefings. This ensures that they have a full understanding of the quality of provision at the college and the impact of actions being taken by leaders and managers to secure improvement.

A few of the actions taken by governors have been too slow; for example, the first meeting of the governors' quality recovery group occurred only in late September 2018, some four months after the inspection. Governors on this key committee have only recently met with learners and apprentices to inform their understanding of the impact of college improvement initiatives. This is despite this being an action agreed by governors at the inaugural meeting of the quality recovery group.

What progress have leaders and managers made in strengthening the process for monitoring the progress of learners and apprentices, to ensure that they make the progress of which they are capable, given their qualifications on entry? Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers now have a well-developed understanding of the quality and standards across the different learning programmes that they are responsible for. They have strengthened their analysis and use of data to monitor and track closely the progress and performance of learners and apprentices. For example, leaders and managers now use detailed management information 'dashboards' to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of all aspects of provision. Analysis of in-year data indicates that the proportion of learners continuing on their course and the attendance of learners have improved. An increasing proportion of learners and apprentices are now making more assured progress towards the achievement of their qualifications than in the previous year. Leaders provide comprehensive and

thorough support and challenge to managers and their curriculum teams where learners' and apprentices' performance is not in line with the board's high expectations.

Internal communications are now much improved, through a series of whole-college management, teaching and other focused meetings. Staff are well informed. Leaders and managers are working collaboratively to solve common problems and challenges. Leaders and managers now monitor and question performance information more closely. They ensure that the quality of the learners' experience is at the centre of all teaching, learning and assessment activities.

Leaders have recently amended the college's lesson observation process to encourage observers to focus on the evaluation of learners' progress and performance. This process is providing better assurance and oversight of the quality of teaching and assessment. Observers have benefited from recent training to extend their confidence and skill in making sharply focused and increasingly accurate judgements. As a result, their records of observations make clear what teachers and assessors need to do to develop their practice. Teachers now have a better understanding of those aspects of their practices that are effective and those that require development. They respond well by participating in a range of directed staff development activities. They value the individual coaching provided by newly appointed quality-improvement leads and raising-standards leaders.

Staff training activities have a clear and purposeful focus on improving teachers' and assessors' skills, to help learners and apprentices make more assured progress than was formerly the case. Targeted support and development have led to an increasing proportion of staff now making more effective use of assessments and progress-tracking information. As a result, they plan purposeful and challenging learning for their learners and apprentices. Staff are positive about the recent changes initiated by leaders. Morale has improved greatly, with most teaching staff committed to becoming more reflective and skilled practitioners.

While leaders have improved their use of data, some aspects of the college's information systems are not sufficiently comprehensive. For example, the college's data dashboard provides leaders with live information, such as the number of study programme learners who have completed planned work experience. However, it does not currently record or report on the quality of such placements, or the extent to which these have benefited learners. In addition, apprenticeship data is recorded on a variety of different information reporting systems; this leads to a lack of systematic and regular oversight of the performance of a small number of apprentices.

What progress have leaders and managers achieved in improving learners' attendance

Reasonable progress

across the college and promoting improvement in the teaching of English and mathematics across all curriculum areas and levels of study?

Managers have acted to improve attendance, particularly in English and mathematics. Curriculum managers are now accountable for their learners' attendance at these classes. They receive regular reports of attendance by curriculum area and by specific classes. Leaders and managers have set ongoing targets for improvement. These actions are resulting in a steady improvement in the overall attendance of learners in English and mathematics classes. Despite these improvements, attendance is still too low and needs to improve further.

Most learners and apprentices are aware at the start of their course of the English and mathematics requirements. All learners and apprentices identified as requiring English and/or mathematics for their qualification complete a diagnostic test. Since September 2018, these tests have given teachers much greater detail about the specific areas for development learners and apprentices need to address. This information allows tutors to tailor English and mathematics classes to meet learners' and apprentices' individual needs.

Teachers build the confidence of learners and apprentices well through a strong focus on the application of English and mathematical skills in their vocational and academic learning. They also skilfully promote the importance of these essential skills in their wider personal lives. For example, in a travel and tourism lesson, a teacher inspired learners to improve their understanding and use of written and spoken language when writing a travel report. As a result, the learners developed their critical analysis skills effectively, and applied depth and creativity to their written work. In engineering, a teacher emphasised the importance of using the correct units of measurement when referring to important aspects such as force, momentum and acceleration.

Most learners are positive about the impact of teachers' marking on their work in helping them to develop their English and mathematics skills. For example, their marked work routinely identifies errors, with corrections to help them improve their skills. Most learners and apprentices can describe clearly how they have extended their use of sector-specific terminology during their course.

Since the previous inspection, managers and teachers have introduced an improved system for tracking learners' progress in English and mathematics. This allows them to monitor more closely the progress learners are making towards achieving their qualifications in these essential skills. As a result, managers and teachers can identify learners and apprentices at risk of falling behind or not achieving. They take appropriate actions to support learners' and apprentices' successful completion of their qualifications. However, it is too early to judge the full impact of this work on improving learners' achievement of their target grades.

All teachers have a group profile which identifies the needs of individual learners. The profiles often identify whether learners have the required qualifications or are undertaking English and mathematics courses. However, most profiles do not identify the specific English and mathematics skills that the individual needs to develop,

regardless of previous qualifications. This is the case even in departments which carry out their own additional diagnostic testing, for example in mathematics for engineering.

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