

Birtenshaw

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

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Name of lead inspector:	Suzanne Wainwright, His Majesty's Inspector
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Type of provider:	Independent specialist college
Address:	Crompton Way Bolton Greater Manchester BL2 2PE

Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

Birtenshaw was inspected in December 2021. At that time, inspectors judged the overall effectiveness of the provision to require improvement.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to evaluate the progress that leaders and managers have made in resolving the main areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

Birtenshaw is an independent specialist college. It is part of the Birtenshaw Group, a registered charity and company limited by guarantee that was established in the 1950s to support children with disabilities. The college was set up in 2014 and achieved independent status in 2016. It provides specialist further education for young people aged between 16 and 25. Learners have a variety of learning difficulties and/or disabilities and complex health needs. Learners are grouped into three learning pathways: communication and choice, learning for life, and employability, and they follow individualised programmes. At the time of the monitoring visit, 59 learners attended the college. There were three learners on the communication and choice pathway, 41 learners on the independence pathway, 13 learners on the employment pathway, and two studied a combination of pathways.

Themes

What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that the curriculum is sufficiently ambitious, well sequenced and provides continuity in learning across subjects to enable learners to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need for their next steps? Insufficient progress

Since the previous inspection, leaders have introduced personalised learning programmes for each learner. These have not led to a well-designed and well-sequenced curriculum that helps learners to develop and master sufficiently the knowledge and skills that they need for their next steps. All learners are taught individually with a member of staff. This is beneficial for those with more complex needs. However, this approach is not sufficiently ambitious for the most able learners. They do not benefit from the development of their wider skills, such as learning to work with and tolerate others or how to discuss and debate topics respectfully.

The new recording and monitoring process is cumbersome and focuses too much on the completion of documentation. The 'learn, practise, practise, practise, assess'

formula stifles creativity and effective learning. Not all learners learn at this prescribed pace. Where learners do not achieve their intended learning outcome in a 'practise' lesson, they do not repeat the learning to ensure that the required knowledge and skills are secure in their long-term memory.

Most learners are taught how to manage and self-regulate their behaviours through attending the college. This supports a few learners to gain opportunities for paid employment, which they often continue when they leave. Others benefit from meaningful work experience placements that meet their interests and aspirations. However, on a few occasions, staff do not enforce routinely industry-standard requirements, such as the wearing of appropriate personal protective equipment or the need to understand data protection law when dealing with personal information.

Learners benefit from therapeutic input and regular physical exercise as part of their curriculum. Consequently, most learners' health-related outcomes from their education, health and care plans are embedded effectively into their individual learning programmes.

Very few members of staff have formal qualifications in teaching and/or supporting learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The majority of staff receive appropriate developmental training on how to successfully teach and support learners with SEND.

What progress have leaders and managers made Insufficient progress to ensure that target-setting is sufficiently precise, enabling all learners to make swift progress from their starting points and to achieve ambitious learning goals?

The baseline assessments that teachers complete during the first six weeks of learners' programmes are not rigorous enough. Teachers do not use a broad range of meaningful activities to help them establish learners' starting points accurately. Assessment activities do not identify what learners already know and can do across a range of settings or circumstances to ascertain their levels of mastery in each knowledge and skills area. Too many baseline assessment documents are incomplete and do not contain pertinent information, such as the date that the assessment took place or whether teachers assess the skill more than once. Very few assessments identify crucial information about whether learners complete each of the tasks independently or with varying levels of support. Consequently, too many targets do not reflect learners' knowledge, skills and abilities at the start of their programmes and are often insufficiently challenging.

The setting and monitoring of learners' targets are disjointed and inconsistent between teaching staff. They are mostly tokenistic and rely on 'ticks' and date stamps rather than evaluative evidence to demonstrate what learners learn and achieve towards ambitious learning goals.

Learners are not always engaged in appropriate or meaningful tasks that help them to make the progress of which they are capable. Learners who cannot read or write struggle to complete written tasks, such as evaluating a gym session. They are limited to answering closed questions and completing activities such as gluing photographs to evaluation sheets. A few learners are left without an activity to complete while support staff use lesson time to write up the evaluation of their progress. Consequently, learners with more complex needs are often heavily dependent on staff. They miss out on opportunities to develop and practise the knowledge and skills that they need for greater independence and for their next steps.

What progress have leaders and managers made to improve the governance arrangements so that governors provide appropriate scrutiny and challenge to leaders and hold them to account for the quality of learners' education? Insufficient progress

Governance is not effective. College governors do not have a sufficient oversight of the quality of education at the college. Through relevant training, governors understand that the responsibility and accountability for the quality of learners' education lies with them. However, they do not do enough to support college leaders to help them raise standards and to improve the quality of the provision. Too few governors visit the college regularly to gain a first-hand understanding of what learners experience, to help them in their roles as governors.

Governors do not identify relevant quality improvement actions for either themselves or college leaders to hasten improvements to the curriculum. They do not discuss the impact that curricular activities have on learners' progress and aspirations. For example, governors do not ask whether work experience helps learners to achieve aspirational goals such as paid employment.

Leaders and governors have identified the staffing issues within the college as a risk. In a few instances, the situation currently prohibits new learners from accessing the full provision to which they are entitled.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
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M1 2WD

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