

Linkage College

Inspection report

Provider reference	131913
Published date	February 2008

Contents

Background information	3
Summary of grades awarded	5
Overall judgement	6
Key strengths and areas for improvement	7
Main findings	9

Background information

Inspection judgements

Grading

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

The descriptors for the four grades are:

- *grade 1 – outstanding*
- *grade 2 – good*
- *grade 3 – satisfactory*
- *grade 4 – inadequate*

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body; and where appropriate the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk); reports from the inspectorate annual assessment visits or quality monitoring inspection; and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the last inspection. This inspection focused on the following aspects:

- overall effectiveness of the organisation and its capacity to improve further
- achievement and standards
- quality of provision
- leadership and management.

Description of the provider

1. Linkage College is part of Linkage Community Trust, a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. The Trust was established in 1976 to meet the needs of young people with learning disabilities who require further education, support and training in order to realise their potential for independence. Linkage College provides residential and day further education for individuals with learning difficulties and/or disabilities; it operates from two campuses located approximately 40 miles apart. The Weelsby campus is in Grimsby, North East Lincolnshire and the Toynton campus is near Spilsby in Lincolnshire. Learners are recruited nationally and may opt to attend either of the campuses. At the time of the inspection there were 232 learners enrolled; 91% residential and 9% day learners. The college does not currently provide for those young adults who have significant personal care and medical needs; nor does it normally provide for learners with profound and multiple learning difficulties. The student population includes those who have conditions such as Down's syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, Tourette syndrome, autistic spectrum disorder, epilepsy, speech and language difficulties as well as less overt emotional and behavioural difficulties.
2. All learners are placed within one of three programme areas which provide progression routes as appropriate. Programme one focuses on the development of independence skills; this forms the majority of the learner's activities along with access to the enrichment and vocational taster sessions. Programme two provides a balance of independence skills and access to the vocational curriculum. Programme three is for learners who have good levels of independence skills with regard to personal care and autonomy. Whilst they will continue to develop their independence skills, the main focus of their programme will usually be accredited vocational areas within Linkage or with other educational providers. Related work experience placements are also a significant feature for programme three learners.
3. The college subscribes fully to the vision of Linkage Community Trust. This is for 'a society in which people with disabilities can realise their full potential and live as independently as their abilities and disabilities allow'. To that end Linkage College has its own mission, which is to 'provide individualised quality further education and care for learners with learning difficulties and other associated disabilities'. The aim is to help every learner develop toward adulthood and to achieve greater independence in preparation for his/her future life.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Outstanding: Grade 1
Capacity to improve	Good: Grade 2
Achievement and standards	Outstanding: Grade 1
Quality of provision	Outstanding: Grade 1
Leadership and management	Good: Grade 2
<i>Equality of opportunity</i>	<i>Good: contributory grade 2</i>

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Outstanding: Grade 1

4. Linkage is an outstanding college. The achievement levels and the quality of learners' work are outstanding. Standards have been maintained over time and are rising. Where appropriate, learners make very good progress in a range of national awards. Gains in independence, social and communication skills are particularly high. Initial assessment is rigorous and comprehensive baseline information is used well to inform individual learning plans. Innovative use of a range of technologies promotes and captures achievement. The RARPA (recognising and recording progress and achievement) initiative is well established.
5. Teaching and learning are outstanding overall. A greater proportion of excellent teaching was seen at the Weelsby campus. Highly relevant activities are successfully used to enhance learners' employability and promote independence. Lesson planning is rigorous. Well qualified and skilled staff provide very effective opportunities for the development of literacy, numeracy and communication across the curriculum. The use of specialist resources and accommodation overall is outstanding. Behaviour management is very effective. Staff have high but realistic expectations for the learners.
6. The college's approach to meeting the needs and interests of learners is outstanding. An innovative and well planned curriculum provides an excellent range of opportunities to gain qualifications on vocational courses and develop work related skills. The extensive work experience programmes enhance these opportunities. Good progression routes for learners enable them to move onto internal vocational courses and appropriate destinations. Very good use is made of practical and relevant learning environments. Social and educational inclusion is good.
7. Guidance and support for learners are outstanding. Excellent therapeutic and specialist support is provided which is accurately identified on learners' entry to the college and reviewed throughout so that individual needs are consistently met. Transition arrangements on entry to and on exit from the college are comprehensive and highly effective. Induction is thorough and enables individuals to settle quickly into college life. Specialist multi-disciplinary teams make a significant contribution to learners' ability to access the curriculum and make progress.
8. Leadership and management are good. Senior managers provide clear vision and strong strategic direction. Quality assurance processes are effective but insufficiently coherent. Self-assessment is robust and the report is largely accurate. Staff development and training programmes are excellent. Curriculum management is good. Management information systems are well developed but the analysis of a range of data is insufficiently rigorous. The college is aware of the need to fully comply with recent equalities legislation. Governance is good.

Trustees are well informed and rigorously monitor the college's performance. Linkage College provides very good value for money.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

9. The college demonstrates a good capacity to improve further. The senior management team has been recently strengthened by a restructure. Quality assurance is comprehensive but the analysis of a range of data to set targets for improvement is insufficiently rigorous. Regular lesson and peer observations, along with high quality staff development opportunities, have been very successful in improving the quality of teaching and learning. The self-assessment processes are comprehensive and robust; the report is largely accurate but cumbersome to use. Effective actions have been taken to improve issues raised at the last annual assessment visit. A major building project has just been completed successfully. The curriculum is effectively modified in response to learners' needs. Staff and managers at all levels demonstrate a strong commitment to continuous improvement.

The effectiveness of the steps taken by the college to promote improvement since the last inspection

10. The college has made good progress to address the key areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. Short term core objectives are now set in lessons. Learners' achievement is more effectively tracked and recorded on the management information systems. The recording of incidental learning, although much improved, is still not consistent across all sites and departments. Access to a range of careers resources and other reference materials is good and these are being used successfully. Procedures for initial and baseline assessments are comprehensive and effective. They are more rigorous and the outcomes now successfully inform individual learning plans. The college now has a robust and purposeful meeting schedule, peer observations, supportive and informative mentoring schemes and advanced practitioners to help share expertise and best practice.

Key strengths

- outstanding learner achievement
- highly innovative and successful approaches to teaching and learning
- excellent use of specialist resources and high quality accommodation
- outstanding practical contexts for learning with a stimulating curriculum
- very effective arrangements for work experience and transition
- outstanding multi-disciplinary specialist support for learners
- excellent staff development and training programme
- clear vision and strong strategic direction by senior managers.

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- the use of a range of data to better inform targets for improvement
- the matching of the quality of teaching across the Weelsby and Toynton campuses
- full compliance with recent equalities legislation.

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Outstanding: Grade 1

11. The achievement levels and the quality of learners' work are outstanding. Standards continue to rise. Rigorous initial assessment and comprehensive baseline information is used very well to inform individual education plans; these are reviewed and updated regularly. Progress in relation to the challenging but realistic learning goals identified in these plans is excellent. The college has recently introduced a successful pilot using MP3 players to enable learners to record and to take more ownership of their own targets and progression routes. Very good progress is made in a range of national awards and learners significantly improve their independence and social skills. They gain a wide range of appropriate qualifications from pre-entry level to level 2. Many learners also gain additional awards such as those in sports leadership, stable management and the Duke of Edinburgh Award. They make great gains in work related skills such as good communication, punctuality, team working, problem solving, time management and literacy and numeracy.
12. Learners develop the skills and confidence they need to participate fully in society including, where appropriate, open or sheltered employment. Destination data indicate that in 2005/06 56% of leavers entered into vocational training or employment; in 2006/07 this figure increased to 59%. One learner, who on entry to the college was unable to attend social events or make eye contact with others, has now learned to travel independently on public transport and has developed sufficient skills to enable him to return to work part-time. Two other learners left Linkage having achieved a level 2 award in administration and are now studying a level 3 administration award at a general further education college (GFE).
13. The RARPA staged framework is applied well and used effectively so that the college can have confidence in the processes and outcomes for softer skills achievement. The appointment of an advanced practitioner to lead in this area has benefited learners and improved staff understanding of RARPA. Every opportunity is taken to encourage learners and to celebrate their successes. Innovative use of a range of technology promotes and captures achievement; for example, each learner is helped to build up a web-based record of their progress over time. This is known as digi-profiling. Learners enjoy their work and are very proud of their achievement. There are many high quality displays of learners' work throughout the college and residences. The practical nature of much of the curriculum increases learners' motivation, enjoyment and understanding of a healthy and safe lifestyle. They are closely involved with their immediate and local community and are helped to make a positive contribution. Retention, punctuality and attendance are good, well monitored and any issues are dealt with swiftly as they arise.

Quality of provision

Outstanding: Grade 1

14. Teaching and learning are outstanding. Effective lessons thoroughly engage and motivate learners. Activities are well planned, varied and interesting; tutors use questions skilfully to establish understanding. Increased levels of independence are promoted through challenging targets and high expectations. Levels of support in lessons are high and dedicated learning support staff ensure work is displayed and celebrated to best effect. A greater proportion of excellent teaching was seen at the Weelsby campus, although teaching at the Toynton campus was good with some excellent features.
15. Behaviour management is very good. Effective interventions by staff help to re-engage students. Learning support staff are well prepared, skilled and know what is expected of them. Specialist staff work effectively across the college resulting in a rigorous multi-disciplinary approach to promoting learning. As a consequence individual long and medium term targets are appropriate and challenging and are used consistently and effectively in lessons. Tutors differentiate clearly between individual support needs and the degree of challenge required by each learner. The recording of incidental learning, although much improved, is not consistent across all sites and departments.
16. The strategy to develop learners' literacy, numeracy and communication skills is highly effective and integrated well across the curriculum. Learners' work is particularly well evidenced in portfolios. Skills for Life staff work successfully across the college and this results in learners extending their skills in an appropriate context. Excellent use of specialist resources and accommodation provides a broad range of working environments to develop learners' skills to a high level. The estates are used to teach horticulture, with catering and hospitality skills developed in industry standard restaurants and kitchens on the Weelsby and Toynton campuses. Excellent quality IT resources in both the Karten CTEC Centres support well the development of work related skills. An innovative internet protocol television project is being developed to enable parents and carers to view learners' work online.
17. Learners have been involved in a variety of art projects within the community, including designing and making cards for East Lindsey Council, The Beach Hut Festival at Mablethorpe and an art exhibition of figurative sculptures made from recycled materials. An innovative project on 'My Space' promotes learners' art work which is currently being inspired by Kandinsky and other painters. This good practice was not shared across sites. Learners overall progress is regularly assessed through team meetings and reviews. Marked work often shows good use of positive messages; however, feedback does not always provide learners with information on how to improve.
18. The curriculum is outstanding with an excellent variety of courses that enable learners to progress; individuals have very good opportunities to gain vocational skills and qualifications which include catering, horticulture, information and communication technology (ICT), office and basic skills. Where appropriate, learners mostly follow level 1 courses in their chosen field but a few progress further and gain level 2 qualifications either within Linkage or as a result of

them attending a local general FE college. There are very good progression routes from programme one to three and individualised programmes are well matched to individual needs. Learners benefit from the practical activities on offer which are then practised in realistic and extremely well resourced learning environments. Independence skills are delivered very effectively within residences and learners are able to progress onto more independent living arrangements. Learners enjoy and participate well in the extended curriculum, enrichment and the sporting and leisure activities on offer. Inspectors agree with the college's self-assessment that very good use is made of residential and community settings.

19. Work experience arrangements are comprehensive and linked appropriately to learners' vocational courses. There are good links with local FE providers and employers to ensure learners progress onto meaningful destinations. Many innovative projects are organised to enable individuals to become actively involved in the wider community. Learners contribute well in decision making through the learner councils and forums and special arrangements such as interviewing potential staff applicants and shadowing managers whilst performing their roles. Communication between staff within residential and college provision is good and programme managers ensure learners' programmes are reviewed and revised regularly. However, opportunities are missed to integrate the development of core skills across all programme areas. The college's response to educational and social inclusion is good. Equality and diversity are promoted effectively within curriculum activities. Most college buildings are accessible to people with mobility problems.
20. Support and guidance are outstanding. Managers and staff are successful in providing high levels of support and clear guidance; they know their learners very well. The self-assessment report accurately judges that there is strong pastoral and educational support for all learners. Programme co-ordinators act as personal tutors and are highly effective as advocates. They deal well with issues and concerns learners may have in relation to their personal needs and well-being. Personal tutors liaise effectively with staff across the provision and identify where actions need to be taken and monitor effectively their implementation. Care plans are comprehensive and cover all aspects of individual support requirements, although a minority of risk assessments are not sufficiently individualised. There is an excellent range of specialist support services which all contribute to the initial assessment process. Procedures to address health and safety issues are comprehensive.
21. Specialist support requirements are identified at an early stage and result in very effective arrangements to ensure learners settle quickly into the college. Detailed support plans are implemented successfully. Where appropriate, these include detailed behaviour plans which provide valuable information to staff about strategies to use to ensure effective behaviour management. Learners benefit from the range of therapies made available to them, including speech and language therapy. They develop an increased awareness of their feelings and emotions through the therapeutic support provided within a dedicated area referred to as 'A Quiet Place'. They are helped to learn techniques to improve their behaviour and responses to difficult situations. Transition arrangements

are highly effective, both on entry and on exit from the college, and include very good careers guidance and information. Induction processes enable learners to settle quickly. Those with particular problems in accessing curriculum activities attend 'a safe place' where they can obtain high levels of support. Parents and carers are fully involved in learners' programmes and play an active role in their progress.

Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Contributory grades:

Equality of opportunity

Good: grade 2

22. Leadership and management are good. Since the last inspection, the Principal, Trustees, managers and staff have worked tirelessly to improve the performance of the college. A culture aimed at raising standards and setting high expectations for learners is evident across all areas. Strategic planning and development are rigorous and comprehensive. Planning documents and the self-assessment report all have clearly linked, detailed action plans which are reviewed regularly and are closely monitored by the Board of Trustees.
23. Quality improvement procedures are comprehensive and high levels of accountability exist throughout the college. Performance is well monitored but quality improvement processes are not sufficiently coherent across all areas. Self-assessment is well established, thorough and largely accurate but the report is cumbersome and does not sufficiently focus on the common inspection framework. Management information is accurate, timely, readily available and widely used by managers to track progress. The setting of clear and challenging targets has significantly improved. However, insufficient use is made of summary data to inform planning and set targets for increasing achievement; the college is aware of this issue and has plans for improvement. Communications are good. There is a wide range of meetings which involve all the staff and which enable them to contribute their ideas for improving the learners' experience but there is insufficient contact in some departmental areas across sites, for example in art.
24. Procedures for staff induction, performance management and lesson observation are robust. Tutors are observed three times a year; issues for further development are clearly identified and staff report that comments are helpful in order to improve their practice. There were very high levels of correlation between the outcomes of joint observations undertaken with inspectors and college staff. Accommodation is excellent with realistic contexts for learning used well. Curriculum areas are successfully managed. Staff development opportunities are extensive, accessible and effectively planned and focus particularly on teaching and learning. Staff are well qualified.
25. Feedback from parents and carers and a range of stakeholders is formally collected and acted upon as necessary. The college takes an active part in local and regional forums and staff contribute well to national agendas. Links with a wide range of other providers are good. Excellent professional links have been

established with external stakeholders and the local community. Linkage meets its responsibilities with regard to safeguarding and has comprehensive policies and procedures for the protection of children and vulnerable adults. Equality and diversity is effectively promoted and discrimination is tackled well. The college's response to the requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2002 (SENDA) are satisfactory overall but the college has yet to fully analyse data on learners' achievement in relation to disability, race and gender and complete impact assessments of the Disability Equality Scheme. The equality policies have action plans attached but they are not sufficiently evaluated.

26. The Trustees are well informed; they assess their own performance regularly and monitor the college's performance rigorously. Financial management is effective and income is well deployed to support educational priorities with a high level of investment in physical and human resources. Linkage provides very good value for money.