

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Dilston College  
Date of visit: 28 February 2008

### Context

Dilston College is an independent specialist provider situated in rural Northumberland. It is one of three specialist colleges that together form the Mencap National College (MNC). Dilston offers full-time residential and day education for learners aged 16-25 with learning disabilities. Currently there are 77 learners attending the college, of whom 64 are residential and 13 attend daily. Of these, 3 learners are of ethnic minority heritage. Dilston's mission is 'preparing students for the next stage in their lives'. The college offers an educational programme with accredited and non-accredited routes across three main areas: social and life skills; practical and vocational programmes; and Skills for Life (communication, literacy and numeracy). In partnership with Tynedale Virtual College, the college offers a national vocational qualification (NVQ) level 1 in catering and hospitality.

The college is supported and monitored by the MNC board of governors which has representation from learners across the three colleges as well as trustees from the Mencap board. Dilston has an acting principal and acting deputy principal and the college has recently reorganised middle management. The purpose of reorganization has been to increase the capacity of the college in order to the demands and expectations on the specialist sector.

The college was last inspected in January 2007 and was judged to be good in all areas. Strengths included good development of learners' practical, work-related and independence skills, excellent resources for vocational programmes, good integration of communication, literacy and numeracy opportunities, effective learner involvement in the community, effective lesson observation process and good management of change. The areas noted for improvement were the consistency of target setting and recording of progress at all levels across the college, the development of recording and assessment of progress and achievement (RARPA) and the explicit promotion of equality and diversity through the curriculum.

## Achievement and standards

What improvements have been made to better ensure the consistency of target setting and recording of progress at all levels across the college?	Significant progress
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There is improved consistency in ensuring learning targets are tackled effectively. This has been achieved through joint working across teaching and learning support staff and a highly focused staff training programme. There has been a much greater emphasis on enabling staff to identify what the learners' need to learn as opposed to completing activities. The targets set for learners are now much more realistic and specific. They are contextualized and more related to the world of work and independent living. Weekly tutor group and curriculum area team meetings provide an effective forum for the reviewing of targets and for ensuring that all targets are meaningful and challenging for learners.

What progress has been made with the development of recording and assessment of progress and achievement (RARPA)?	Reasonable progress
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The implementation of RARPA is satisfactory and continues to develop at a reasonable pace. There is increasing clarity about the five stages of the RARPA framework, especially with regard to the aims for each individual programme. Managers have an increased focus on enabling staff to identify clear and specific objectives for all lessons and so lesson planning is improving. Initial assessment profiles are comprehensive and outcomes are used effectively to establish a comprehensive baseline summary for each learner. There is a clearer process of assessment throughout learners' programmes. Individual care and support plans, subject area assessment sheets and individual learning plans are reviewed and amended each term to ensure that progress is being made.

The new management information system is central to the development of RARPA and improved reporting. Targets are now being scrutinized by managers and recording and tracking of progress is improving. This has led to better recognition of small steps of learning. As a consequence of improved target setting, learners are now more able to discuss what they have learned. Lesson evaluations are more student focused and progress is evaluated against these targets. The college has recognized the need to enable key workers and learning support assistants to develop their abilities to contribute to individual learning plans on informal learning.

## Quality of provision

What progress has been made in increasing the proportion of good or better teaching?	Reasonable progress
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The college has established a teaching and learning steering group along with a comprehensive quality improvement plan in order to raise standards in teaching and learning. The results of the lesson observation system are now more robust. Staff have formal observations twice a year and more regular themed informal observations take place throughout the year. Managers have a detailed and improving understanding of teaching and learning in the college. Lesson observation outcomes are monitored by the National Mencap College moderation group and plans are in place to benchmark outcomes in the future. As yet, group and individual tutorials are not observed. The results of teaching and learning observations are used effectively to target both individual training and cross-college themes such as embedding literacy and numeracy and improving target setting. Well-received training for all staff has been crucial in promoting good teaching practice. Teaching resources have improved significantly over the past year. The college now employs a full-time member of staff to develop specialist resources in consultation with tutors. These are being put to good effect in lessons.

Data from the past year indicate a slight decrease in the proportion of good or better teaching. This is a result of more rigorous moderation. Plans are in place to improve the analysis and use of strengths and areas for development identified during the teaching and learning observations. The college has continued to develop excellent vocational resources. Approximately 92% of tutors hold a Certificate in Education and 100% will have completed the award by July 2008.

## Leadership and management

How well has the college addressed the formal promotion of equality and diversity issues within schemes of work and lesson plans?	Reasonable progress
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The formal promotion of equality and diversity within schemes of work and lesson plans has been given greater prominence since the last inspection. The active promotion of equality is now part of the assessment criteria in the lesson observation cycle. The National Mencap College has recently produced an equality and diversity audit tool. This will be used to identify issues and inform action plans but it is too early to judge the effectiveness of this development. Equality and diversity are promoted well through the curriculum and displays around the college.

Activities include cultural events such as the display of pottery in the college entrance which illustrates different patterns from a variety of cultures and the forthcoming fashion show where learners are being encouraged to explore personal styles and cultural approaches to fashion. However, the college does acknowledge that these approaches would benefit from being further developed.

How effective are management information systems in gathering and using data to monitor achievement?	Reasonable progress
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Evidence of the extent of progress across all areas in the college is being now captured on an accessible data base. Individual learning plans effectively record learners' progress. Since September 2007 data is now more secure and centrally accessible. Since September 2007 all targets set for learners have been held on a central data base that is accessible to all staff. Summaries of learners' progress are recorded at the end of lessons, through paper based records. This information is then transferred onto the new reporting system at the end of each term and the college now has more accurate statistics to monitor progress. Learners have improved opportunities to take nationally recognized awards in a range of subjects. For example 31 second and third year learners are currently enrolled on a Skills for Working Life award and 35 are doing Entry Level Adult Literacy and or Numeracy awards. Learners' progress towards achieving these qualifications is documented on the MIS and in portfolios.

What has been done to improve the learning environment such as the variability in the standard of classrooms and temporary accommodation noted at the last inspection?	Reasonable progress
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The teaching environment is improving and specialist learning resources are very good. The accommodation for basic skills, although improved, remains cramped but the college is making the best use of these facilities until the new building is ready. Plans are well under way to create a new education block and to extend the present café and potting shed provision. The pottery and other arts facilities will also be relocated into a purpose built arts facility. Building work is planned to commence in 2009 for completion in 2010. The college is also continuing to develop and improve facilities through partnership with other local providers.