

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Derwen College

Date of visit: 10 June 2008

Context

Derwen College is an independent **specialist** residential college situated near Oswestry. Learners are enrolled from all parts of England and Wales. Currently 247 residential learners are funded through the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in England and the Welsh Assembly Government. The college caters for learners with a wide range of disabilities and learning difficulties. Of these, 10% are from a minority ethnic background and 59% are male. Approximately 181 learners are aged 19 or over. The college was outstanding at the previous inspection in May 2006 and considered excellent by the Commission for Social Care Inspectorate. Derwen was awarded Beacon Status in June 2007.

Achievements and standards

What progress has been made to increase the range of opportunities for learners to gain workplace skills, especially in vocational studies?	Significant progress
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The curriculum in vocational areas is now much more focused on enhancing learner's employability skills, and to this end, employer engagement has been greatly increased over the past two years. Since September 2007, over 77% of learners have been involved in some form of work experience. Overall, 547 work placements are available either on- or off-site. Currently 31 learners attend external work placements without college support and a further 40 attend supported work placements (job coaching). These figures represent a significant increase in the range of opportunities for learners to gain workplace skills since the previous inspection. All vocational departments now seek to identify and extend opportunities for real work situations. Communications between the vocational departments has improved. Improved cross-team working between work placements and learners chosen vocational area has significantly enhanced learners' employability skills. A bid has been submitted to the LSC to enable the college to offer eight apprenticeships in retail for people with disabilities aged 19 to 24 years. Plans are at an advanced stage for a smoothie bar and production garden that will compliment the new retail department farm shop. These initiatives should further enhance learners' confidence in the work place.

What improvements have been made to strengthen and embed skills for life throughout the curriculum?	Reasonable progress
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The college has improved its approach so that skills for life are more effectively embedded throughout the curriculum. Appropriate individual objectives for learners are included in session planning and the recording. The use of peripatetic basic skills staff to work alongside teachers has raised awareness of the importance of this area and led to the development of more effective resources for learning. Plans are being developed for staff to take an increased responsibility for the delivery of literacy, numeracy and communication within their own curriculum areas. A significant amount of staff training is taking place. Further improvements have taken place in the recording of learners progress with significant improvements in numeracy skills. Increased collaboration between basic skills staff and speech and language therapists has led to combined reporting and improvements in target setting for learners. Derwen College has had its Makaton Centre excellence award renewed this year. Good progress has been made in developing age appropriate books and resources, which are available in a variety of formats, to enhance careers information and guidance.

Quality of provision

Do accommodation plans effectively resolve the weakness in accommodation for retail and performing arts?	Significant progress
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The quality of accommodation and resources is high. An extensive capital development programme has taken place; the building of new teaching facilities for the retail department commenced in July 2007 and is near completion. It will provide a high quality learning environment for learners when it opens in September 2008. The farm shop, which will be staffed by learners, will sell local produce and a range of Derwen grown crops. The teaching facilities within the horticulture department have been greatly improved with the addition of the new large 'commercial production' greenhouse and will further enhance work placement opportunities for learners. The proposal to open a smoothie bar catering outlet in this garden area will provide alternative work experience opportunities in the future. The previous retail department accommodation is being re-developed in late 2008 to provide office space, a base for work based training, and additional classrooms for use by the personal development and independent living skills departments. Facilities for performing arts will be improved as they gain an extra music studio as the result of further space becoming available late 2008.

Leadership and management

What changes have been made to further increase the thoroughness of health and safety procedures across the college?	Significant progress
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The promotion of health and safety measures and the management of risk is firmly embedded in the quality policy and procedures. Policies are regularly reviewed and heads of department have full responsibility for operational risk assessments for employees, learners and the public. The health and safety advisor, in conjunction with the head of care, takes responsibility for ensuring that risk assessments at department and individual learner level are reviewed and maintained to meet statutory requirements and individual needs. An annual audit, carried out by an external consultant, is an integral aspect of the maintenance and development of the risk assessments. The college continues to maintain comprehensive safeguarding procedures. Derwen College has increased the level of health and safety qualifications gained by staff that carry out risk assessments. During 2006/07, 50% of the nominated staff (heads of residences and departments) have achieved the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health qualification, managing safety. This qualification ensures a high level of health and safety risk management awareness and the 2008 target, to increase the proportion to 70%, is well on the way to being achieved and now also includes a member of the governing body.

What progress has been made in developing teaching and learning and sharing best practice?	Significant progress
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The college continues to strengthen its session observation system. Greater involvement by heads of department takes place in session observations as a means of monitoring and managing teaching and learning more effectively. For the past two years joint observations have been conducted with general and specialist colleges. External consultants have been employed to train staff, examine the effectiveness of the session observation process and moderate grades. Managers and staff speak positively about the outcomes of this initiative and a culture of improvement is firmly embedded. Good practice continues to be shared well between departments and is integral to staff professional development. This year the college teaching observation programme has been extended to include learning support staff and peer observations and has judged teaching to be good or better in nearly 78% of sessions graded. Only 1% of sessions were graded as inadequate and a thorough support programme is in place for staff graded at three or below. These outcomes represent a significant improvement from last year. The well structured professional development programme has had a positive impact on the culture of change and peer observations have led to genuine sharing of good practice. Peer referencing has also helped to improve staff skills as they work with a range of staff from other specialist and general further education providers.

How well are learners and stakeholders views gathered and used to bring about improvements?	Significant progress
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The college is committed to involving learners in its strategic decision-making and operational management processes and this direct involvement is increasing learner satisfaction and success. The production of a learner involvement strategy in autumn 2007 ensures that the needs of the learners are central to decision-making within the college. The Bradbury Learning Resource Centre has been very successful in drawing learners and staff into the decision making processes. The power of the learner voice has brought about weekend opening, the development of the library reference section and the development and management of the college website. Learners are represented on many of the college working groups and they are involved in the appointment of new staff. The learners' perception of college results and analysis compare very favourably with national benchmarks of further education learners. Individual departments also conduct learner perception surveys as part of their quality assurance, and the results are effectively analysed and acted upon as part of their self-assessment reports.

How well does the college cater for the 20% of learners who come from Wales, including learners with English as an additional language and those for whom Welsh is the first language?	Significant progress
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The college caters very well for learners with English as an additional language. Welsh speaking staff help to overcome language barriers for those learners for whom Welsh is their first language; such learners are allocated a Welsh speaking personal tutor wherever possible. Welsh speaking staff and learners clearly identify themselves in college by the wearing of an internationally recognised lapel badge sponsored by the Welsh Assembly Government. This badge is worn with pride to demonstrate that these staff and learners are happy and willing to speak the Welsh language and assist where needed. A Welsh speakers club exists where all learners who wish can practice the Welsh language and learn more about their country and its traditions. Welsh speaking staff are involved with assessments and basic skills and these staff also work on a peripatetic basis across all departments to support staff and learners and help to develop appropriate resources. The main reception area has an electronic screen which welcomes visitors in both English and Welsh. Signs are displayed in both Welsh and English in the retail shop and plans are in place for bi-lingual signage in the new retail centre.