MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Stafford College

Date of visit: 24 February 2009

Context

Stafford College is a large general Further Education College based in the town of Stafford. The College has one main site and one smaller site both in the town centre and it operates two high street information technology centres. The College serves the town and a large part of mid and south Staffordshire. The College's mission is to 'meet learner needs and aspirations through excellence in performance and successful partnerships'.

The College offers vocational and general education programmes ranging from foundation level to higher education in 14 out of 15 sector subject areas funded by Learning and Skills Council. In 2007/08 the college enrolled just under 3000 full-time learners, mainly 16-18 year olds and around 3500 part-time learners, mainly adults. There were around 325 work-based learners and around 270 learners aged 14-16. The college delivers an extensive range of leisure and adult education programmes on behalf of the local education authority (LEA). The college is a member of 3 Train to Gain consortia. There are 6 high schools in Stafford all with sixth forms. In addition, the Chetwynd Centre, a school consortium post 16 centre funded by Staffordshire LEA, operates close to the College main site. The College is a member of the Stafford Borough 14-19 Collegiate which is a partnership between the schools, college and work based learning providers. The College has a CoVE in Early Years Care and Education.

Achievement and standards

What progress has the college made in improving overall success rates?	Significant progress

The college overall and long course success rates in 2007/08 show a continuing upward trend and are now above national averages. Success rates on long level 1 and 2 courses are well above national averages for learners of all ages. Success rates on long level 3 courses remain around the national average for learners of all ages; both the retention and achievement rates of learners aged 16-18 are around the national average, whereas adult learners have low retention rates and high achievement rates.

Evidence on achievement by learners aged 16 to 18 compared to their prior attainment indicates that learners on level 3 vocational programmes generally achieve above expectation, whereas learners on level 3 academic programmes generally achieve below expectations. There is significant variation in these learners progress between subjects on all types of programmes.

Although key skill success rates show a long term improvement to above low national averages, they fell marginally in 2007/08, but this is not acknowledged in the college summary self-assessment report (SAR). The faculty self-assessment report acknowledges issues in information communication technology at level 2 and in communications at level 3.

What progress has the college made in improving success rates in work based learning ?	Insufficient progress

Since the last monitoring visit the apprenticeship framework rate has improved at a slower rate than the sector; in 2007/08 both the overall framework success rate and the timely success rate for both apprentices and advanced apprentices were below the national average. The college summary self-assessment report does not recognise the deterioration in the rate of timely completions which is now very significantly below the national average.

Quality of provision

How is the college assuring the consistency of tutorial arrangements, including target setting?	Reasonable progress

Tutorials are now delivered much more consistently across faculties. Robust monitoring processes ensure all full time learners have regular individual tutorials to discuss their progress and that group tutorials cover the same range of topics addressing the themes of Every Child Matters (ECM). The quality of group tutorials is also monitored as part of the college's lesson observation process. Students are very positive about the quality of tutorial support they receive and the relevance of the topics covered in group tutorials such as issues relating to equality and diversity, substance and alcohol misuse and healthy living. Students' planners are given to all students and are used to inform progress reviews held with tutors every six weeks. This encourages students to be pro active in identifying their learning targets and the actions they need to take to ensure their achievement. Tutors complete tutorial reviews for each student which provide a summary of issues discussed during the meeting with students and the agreed targets and actions. However, target setting and recording of progress lack rigor. Staff have received training in relation to the implementation and use of student planners but this as yet to impact on the quality and consistency of target setting. Opportunities to identify targets in relation to key skills through tutorial processes are missed; for example, students on vocational courses who have been assessed as having significant difficulties with numeracy. Other than on AS and A level courses, information on entry qualifications is used insufficiently to set challenging longer term targets, improve progress and evaluate the extent students achieve beyond or below expectations.

To what extent is information on individual needs used to inform support and teaching and learning?	Reasonable progress

Pre-entry and initial assessment procedures are comprehensive and are very effective in identifying individual learner needs in relation to basic and key skills. Support needs in relation to a specific learning difficulty or disability are clearly identified. Over 21% of students with additional support needs are identified prior to them commencing at the college. Resources and equipment are provided and lecturers are effectively prepared to ensure planning for learning takes into account the students' particular support requirements. Staff development and training has raised staff awareness of how particular disabilities and learning difficulties impact on learning. Specialist support is provided within faculties to help lecturers to plan for students' needs within lessons. Each faculty has a Skills for Life specialist to provide a focus on English and Maths. They evaluate resources and course assignments to ensure appropriate adaptations are made and student work is planned in line with students' assessed levels of ability. The quality of support within lessons is observed to enable faculties to address any issues impacting on individual student learning. These actions are starting to impact on overall success rates, and key skills on most courses have improved. Students assessed to have additional support needs achieve at least as well or better than other students.

Leadership and management

To what extent are quality assurance arrangements driving forward improvements in success rates?	Reasonable progress

Since the last inspection there has been significant improvement in the success rates of many categories of learners. 'This way up' is the college's overarching approach to quality improvement and it is well established. The college has an effective system for identifying and monitoring courses which are underperforming, a 'red' category. Recently this system has been extended to include closer monitoring of courses where there are some negative indicators, an 'amber' category. An extensive range of improvement measures have been implemented across the college supported by innovative practices to improve teaching and learning, such as peer coaching.

Each year quality priorities and strategies are reviewed by the senior team and implemented within faculties however these are not drawn together into a definitive plan with milestones against which progress can be measured. There is a strong focus on action at faculty level but the overarching strategy is less explicit. While the Quality Improvement Plan within the college self-assessment report identifies some major areas for improvement some issues identified by inspectors are omitted. Actions to achieve improvement within the self-assessment report are not cross referenced to detailed action plans, where these exist.

How effectively is work-based learning managed?	Reasonable progress

Although the outcomes of learners on WBL programmes has declined in the last 12 months relative to the sector, and timeliness has declined significantly, this is largely accounted for by specific historic issues in two sector subject areas. A detailed action plan addresses these issues although they are not addressed sufficiently in the college summary self-assessment report. Action taken is seen to be having an impact. Contracts which were discontinued by the Learning and Skills Council have been re-instated. There has been substantial training of staff in the importance of detailed and timely recording; an improved administrative system has been installed; and assessor workloads have been reduced. Progress in the area is subject to regular scrutiny by the work-based learning strategy team.

What is the impact of the college's equality and diversity committee	Reasonable progress

The equality and diversity committee has a more central role in the leadership and management of the college. The committee is inclusive, with staff, student and governor representation. The single equality and diversity action plan includes a comprehensive set of performance indicators for monitoring equality and diversity. Staff are aware of their responsibilities on equality and diversity and this is reinforced through the lesson observation process. In 2007/08 equality and diversity training was a key element of staff development. Also this year the proportion of staff of minority ethnic heritage improved to 6.6%. Three members with minority ethnic backgrounds have been appointed to the governing body.

Impact assessments are conducted for all separate groups of learners including those in receipt of additional learning support. Students assessed to have additional support needs achieve at least as well or better than other students. The success rate for males and females is virtually identical at 81% for males and 82% for females. Excluding unknowns, the percentage of minority ethnic learners in 2007/08 was 5.2% compared to a local minority ethnic population of 2.6%. Success rates for most minority ethnic groups were at or above college average in 2007/08. The success rate of students from disadvantaged wards was identical to the college average.