

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Walford and North Shropshire College

Date of visit: 8 & 9 June 2009

Context

Walford and North Shropshire College (the college) is a medium-sized general further education college. Its main campus is in Oswestry and it has a second site at Walford, some 15 miles from Oswestry, which specialises in land-based education and training. The college also has a site at Shipley, on the south east Shropshire border specialising in horticulture, child care and information and communication technology (ICT); and a centre near Ludlow, which specialises in engineering, motor vehicle and ICT courses. The majority of the college's students come from Shropshire with a small proportion from neighbouring counties and Wales. The college offers courses in all sector subject areas. The college works with nine local schools and is the lead partner in a consortium to deliver six New Diplomas. The college has recently gained validation for foundation degrees in animal and equine sciences working in partnership with a local specialist land-based higher education institution.

In 2007/08, the college enrolled 6,323 learning and skills council (LSC) funded students of whom approximately 15% were full-time. The majority of full-time students were aged 16 to 18. The majority of part-time students were adults. Approximately 120 apprentices were on work-based learning courses.

The college was last inspected in May 2007. At this inspection, the college's overall effectiveness and capacity to improve were graded as satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

How much progress has been made in improving success rates in all aspects of the college's work?	Reasonable progress
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Almost all headline success rates increased in 2007/08, in several cases significantly, reversing the sharp decline in long course success rates evident in 2006/7. The long course success rate increased markedly to just below the average for similar colleges. The college has successfully improved the performance of the significant proportion of underperforming courses evident in 2006/07 as a result of concerted action by managers and teachers. Long course success rates for students aged 16 to 18 increased at levels 2 and 3 to be above average, largely because of an improvement in the achievement rate, especially at level 2. The success rate at level 1 for this age group was similar to the previous year and remains well below the

average. Long course success rates for adults increased at all levels, but remain below average at levels 1 and 3, but similar to the average at level 2. The success rate for key skills qualifications increased in 2007/08, especially at level 2, to be broadly in line with the low average in similar colleges.

Analysis of success rates by gender shows broadly similar performance by male and female students aged 16 to 18 over a three year period from 2005/06 to 2007/08. For adult students, the gap between male and female performance has widened over a similar period with males underperforming compared with females. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities do not achieve as well as their peers. This is especially so for adults. The college's analysis of the performance of these groups is limited. The numbers of students from minority ethnic groups are too low to allow a meaningful analysis of their success rates. However, the college recognises the need to monitor the progress of these groups carefully at course level.

Students often make good progress compared with their prior attainment on GCE AS and A level courses, as shown by measures of added value. Attendance has increased considerably and is satisfactory overall and good in a number of curriculum areas. College data show that retention rates of students due to complete their courses in the current year along with measures of 'in-year' retention compare favourably with a similar position in the previous year.

Success rates for advanced apprentices and apprentices are improving steadily and are satisfactory; however, not enough emphasis has been placed on ensuring that apprentices complete their courses in the time allocated. The college recognises that it underestimated the time required to complete a newly introduced framework in agricultural engineering and has adjusted accordingly for the present cohort. Train to Gain success rates were poor in 2006/07 but show a significant improvement to be satisfactory in 2007/08. The college is using appropriate methods to recognise and record progress and achievement on non-accredited courses based on attendance and successful completion of individual targets. Success rates on these courses are high.

Quality of provision

To what extent have improvements in teaching and learning, including in the use of information and learning technology, been implemented successfully?	Reasonable progress
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Improving teaching and learning is a key focus of the college's actions for improvement. The lesson observation scheme has been strengthened considerably to ensure that its findings are accurate. A much greater number of lesson observations has been undertaken compared with the previous year. The profile appears realistic and correlates appropriately to the pattern of success rates across curriculum areas. The profile of grades from lesson observations for 2007/08 shows an increase in the

proportion of outstanding teaching with around two thirds of lessons graded as good or better. A considerable amount of staff development has taken place to ensure that lesson planning is robust and a comprehensive series of prompts on lesson plans encourages consideration of *Every Child Matters* and equality and diversity themes. Plans are in hand to increase the level of dialogue and sharing of good practice further through weekly meetings focused on teaching and learning. Resources to support the effective use of information and learning technology have improved and training is underway to support staff in gaining confidence in their use. A virtual learning environment is at an early stage of development.

How effectively are the Every Child Matters themes promoted throughout the college, including through the tutorial programme?	Reasonable progress
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Every Child Matters themes are promoted college-wide through initiatives such as an anti-smoking campaign. The themes are also an integral part of the tutorial scheme of work. Tutors develop the overall themes flexibly to increase their relevance and integration into each curriculum area. Rescheduling of all tutorials to a common timetable slot has enabled the college to use visiting speakers more efficiently and cost effectively. *Every Child Matters* themes are among the 14 aspects which tutors consider, record and cross reference against the various activities in the college's new style lesson plans. Students' awareness of the themes is good.

How much progress has been made in gathering and using students' views in influencing the work and life of the college?	Reasonable progress
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Students' views are being given an increasingly high profile within the college. Students' surveys are used widely and evidence from these features as part of the self-assessment process. Students' focus groups are a key part of the new quality assurance arrangements. Good representation from across most subject areas was evident during the internal inspections undertaken in the current year. The college has a comprehensive learners' involvement strategy, implemented in March 2009. The first planned action to be successfully completed was the attendance of an invited cross section of students to the annual governors' strategy day. Governors made good use of feedback and discussion with students during this event.

The college has 2 student governors. Involvement from students in other forums across the college is limited, although there is student representation on the farm advisory committee. The learners' involvement strategy seeks to involve student representatives further in the running of the college but it is too early to judge the impact of the strategy.

To what extent has the college's Skills for Life Strategy been implemented across the college and provision improved?	Insufficient progress
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The college's Skills for Life strategy is being appropriately revised to strengthen it and take account of the introduction of functional skills in September 2009. The policies in place for both key skills and functional skills are detailed and soundly based. Management of data across the provision has improved considerably although there is insufficient central collection of data to aid some key actions such as applying for proxies for the examination element of key skills qualifications. Progress in tackling areas for improvement has been too slow, despite senior management's intervention. Both the college's self-assessment and its internal inspection process have judged basic and key skills provision in 2007/08 as unsatisfactory. Most success rates are below or well below average, despite improvement in 2007/08. Strategies to integrate key skills learning into vocational areas exist but not enough progress has been made in implementing actions. Managers are taking emergency action to help students to achieve key skills qualifications in the current year but at this late stage in the academic year too few portfolios have been completed and there are too few passes in external tests. Retention is much improved on basic skills courses in the current year.

Leadership and management

To what extent have improvements in the use of data at all levels of management across the college been successful in supporting raising of standards?	Reasonable progress
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Managers use data well and have a clear understanding of the importance of accurate, easily accessed, centrally held data at all levels. A range of reports are produced regularly and the reports are being used increasingly effectively to identify areas for improvement. The marked improvement in attendance is largely attributable to prompt collection and analysis of data. National averages are used appropriately for comparison.

How well are quality assurance procedures embedded and proving to be effective across the college's work?	Reasonable progress
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A major revision of the college's quality assurance arrangements has been implemented successfully. A programme of internal inspections of all curriculum areas has been well resourced and completed thoroughly with robust moderation arrangements built into the programme. The process includes quality assurance of all aspects of the college's work and the findings are sharply focused on identifying areas for improvement and making realistic evaluations of the quality of provision. A review of the process is planned to evaluate it fully and to refine its scope. There is some unnecessary duplication between self-assessment activities and the internal

inspection process. The college recognises that there is insufficient emphasis on quality assurance of tutorial practice and has plans to increase the focus on this aspect in the coming academic year. Self-assessment has improved considerably and appears realistic, based on the evidence available during the visit.

What improvements have been made to the promotion of equality and diversity within all aspects of the college's work?	Reasonable progress
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The lesson planning process requires teachers rightly to indicate where and how equality and diversity themes are promoted. The lesson observation process includes an evaluation of the extent of this promotion, which is not yet strong. Equality and diversity themes are also included in the tutorial scheme of work and in particular college events to celebrate diversity. There have been successful exchange visits with other colleges, such as an inner city college, where there is a greater diversity among students and staff. An equality and diversity group keeps curriculum area leaders and others up to date with equality and diversity issues, which are then shared effectively with curriculum teams. Equality and diversity themes are included in staff training sessions.

Policies and procedures are reviewed appropriately to assess their impact on equality and diversity and adjusted as needed to remove or minimise any negative impact. Priority has initially been given to policies and procedures within the human resources area of the college but impact assessments of other policies are underway or are planned. The college monitors enrolment and success rate data routinely to identify under represented groups and the relative achievement of different groups of students. Staff are aware of particular issues such as a number of students whose first language is Welsh.

What progress has been made in leading and managing changes in the culture, structure and strategic direction of the college and in improving the college's financial position?	Significant progress
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The college has undergone a period of significant change since the previous inspection. Senior managers have made a number of changes to the structure and level of staffing efficiently and smoothly. They have communicated these changes and the rationale that underpins them well across the college. They have tackled a number of long standing areas of difficulty such as data management and course costing firmly with highly beneficial impact across the college. A few actions by managers are relatively new and, although largely soundly based, their impact is not yet fully evident. Staff demonstrate a strong desire to improve their practice. Financial management has improved with appropriate controls in place. The college has successfully recruited an increased number of students aged 16 to 18 in the current academic year.

