

## MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Linkage College

Date of visit: 17 June 2009

### Context

Linkage college (the college)'s learner population comprises of young people who have a moderate to severe learning difficulty, many of whom also have conditions such as Down's syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, Tourette's syndrome, autistic spectrum disorders, epilepsy, speech and language difficulties, cerebral palsy and some less overt emotional and behavioural difficulties. At the time of the monitoring visit there were 222 students enrolled; 87% residential and 13% as day learners.

Since the last monitoring visit, the college has established a 'Bistro' facility at the East Lindsey District Council headquarters in Manby. The facility allows learners to access teaching and learning opportunities in catering and food service at national vocational qualification (NVQ) levels 1 and 2. Additionally, the college is one of a number of partner organisations that accesses the newly built Wolds College in Louth, providing new vocational subject offers in: hairdressing and beauty therapy; construction; and painting and decorating. In September 2008, Linkage introduced a one-year transition to further education and employment programme aimed at supporting learners not in education, employment or training.

### Achievement and standards

What does college data indicate about learners' achievement of nationally accredited awards and learners' destinations?	Reasonable progress
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In 2007/08 the proportion of learners achieving full vocational awards through the college's vocational curriculum, which constitutes over a quarter of its provision, increased by 22%. On Skills for Life programmes, all learners who registered for entry level numeracy qualifications, which stood at around 50% of the cohort, achieved the full award. However for literacy, the proportion of learners who passed the full award declined to 55%, with 62% of the total cohort registering for the qualification. The more recently introduced level 1 literacy and numeracy qualifications generally performed well, with the majority of learners successfully passing the full awards.

The college is successfully embedding its use of data to analyse and report on learners' performance. Trend data is now reflected through the college's self-assessment report. However, not all data in the self-assessment report are presented clearly or placed in sufficient context to gauge the full extent of any progress made. Due to the three year rolling programme that most learners follow, full achievement data for 2006/07 and 2007/08 are not yet complete. The college is planning to introduce data reports that summarise the in-year progress of learners to provide a more like-for-like and timely comparison of achievement over time.

Learners' retention rates are generally high, as expected in independent specialist colleges, and show an improving trend. The development of learners' confidence and of the skills they need to participate fully in society remains very good. Learners' destinations are carefully tracked at an individual learner level. The college's destination data indicate that a significant proportion of learners continues to progress into further education, vocational training and supported employment.

#### Quality of provision

What progress has been made in ensuring the increasing number of learners with profound learning disabilities receive high quality support?	Significant progress
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The college is working closely with a local special school to broaden access and learning opportunities for learners with more profound physical disabilities and complex learning needs. Evidence indicates that these learners receive high quality support to ensure they integrate well into the college environment. Transition arrangements are carefully considered and are comprehensive. Resources and accommodation at the college have been adapted to provide a more appropriate living and learning environment for some very specific disabilities. The curriculum is continuously adapted and personalised with the needs of individual learners in mind. For example, support staff identified that one learner with profound learning disabilities was not learning as effectively in the afternoon and adjusted the timetable to include increased respite at midday. The learner is now responding well to the afternoon sessions.

Since the last monitoring visit, the college has also appointed a full-time physiotherapist who has helped provide bespoke training to college staff on how best to meet individual learners' complex support needs. Additional support staff have been appointed to aid the development and support of these learners, with one such learner contributing to the interview panel. As part of the college's inclusive agenda, it aims to increase access further to learners with more profound learning disabilities where this is feasible.

To what extent has the college made progress in promoting the learners' voice?	Significant progress
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The college has extended the range of opportunities learners have to air their opinions and ideas. An independence learning forum has been introduced this year to meet different groups of learners across the college to gauge their feedback and, more notably their ideas about how to improve provision. This includes discussions around whether learners would prefer workshops or taught sessions in certain subjects. Six learners from the college attended the East Midlands Specialist College learners' conference to contribute their views. Two student council members meet throughout the year with a senior manager at East Lindsey District Council to contribute the student body's views on key themes in the community, such as improving road safety and anti-social behaviour. On an individual feedback and involvement basis, the college has introduced person-centred plans to engage learners in discussions and ideas about their future and how best to plan for it. These are optional for learners, although already around 100 learners have taken up the opportunity. Learners spoken to at the monitoring visit expressed how highly they valued the activity.

The student council feel listened to and take their roles seriously. Several learners' suggestions are acted upon, such as 'Linkage Radio', a college radio station which is now mostly run by learners. The newly developed online learners' questionnaire, with questions based on the national learner survey, indicates positive feedback overall. However, despite some improvements to the range and quality of food available, this is still an area many learners feel could be improved further.

The college recognises there is still further improvement to be made. The mechanisms for feeding back to learners are underdeveloped. Some methods of communication are too informal or are not appropriately accessible to ensure all learners understand what action has been taken or what has been improved as a result.

The college is planning to accredit aspects of learners' contributions through a self advocacy qualification. From September 2009, the college is appointing a previous learner from the college to act as a learners' representative and to work within the learners' services team.

## Leadership and management

How effectively is the college ensuring the quality of provision is coherent across its newest centre at Louth?	Significant progress
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Since the last monitoring visit in June 2009, the college's Louth Centre has become much more established, with around 20 to 40 learners from the Toynton and Weelsby site attending vocational courses. The curriculum offer at Louth now includes:

childcare; health and social care; business administration; financial and health literacy; and customer services.

The college applies its observation of teaching and learning proportionately across all sites, including Louth. It has improved its use of data for the observation of teaching and learning to aid the monitoring of teaching and learning and to highlight any requirements for further staff training and development. The provision at Louth is monitored well through the college's quality assurance processes. College data indicate that the quality of teaching and learning is as high as at the two main college sites.

What progress has been made by the college in response to meeting equalities legislation?	Significant progress
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The college has made a positive response to equalities legislation. Its approach to undertaking equality impact assessments is thorough, well managed and has involved learners' feedback in the process. Gender, race and disability schemes are in place, published and reviewed as appropriate. The schemes are monitored frequently by the college's equality and diversity committee and progress against each action is presented to the committee through a portfolio of evidence. However, several targets stated in the schemes are too broad and not sufficiently specific to be measurable to determine exactly the extent of progress being made.

A learners' diversity group forum, which includes a student council representative, meets three times a year to discuss equality related issues that are taken to the college's equality and diversity committee. The committee also has learners' representation. Equality of opportunity continues to be promoted and monitored through the curriculum through activities such as 'diversity days' and through the college's observation of teaching and learning process. Learners' survey results are now analysed by different groups of learners and indicate no significant differences. Overall, learners display a good understanding of their rights and responsibilities.

The college continues to use its data more effectively to monitor equality. However, although an analysis of the staff profile has been undertaken, as yet there has been no analysis of staff by job position to evaluate if there are any significant patterns emerging by gender or ethnicity, for example, at management, teacher or support staff level.