10 July 2009

Mrs M Barton
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Barton

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Information and communication technology (ICT)

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 1-2 July 2009 to look at work in ICT.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the quality of assessment.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, observation of five part lessons and visits to other lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ICT was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards in ICT

Achievement is satisfactory. Standards are broadly average.

- Attainment on entry is just below average. At the end of Year 11 the proportion of students attaining a pass or better in an ICT vocational qualification is average. However, the proportion attaining a merit or distinction is below average and therefore overall standards remain just below average. This indicates that students have made the nationally expected progress and that achievement is satisfactory.
- The progress made by students in using ICT to communicate and present their ideas, to handle data, to control machinery and in collecting data from sensors is satisfactory. However, a significant

proportion of older students make insufficient progress in their use of programming.

- Achievement in the sixth form is satisfactory and standards are in line with the national average.
- Students have a satisfactory awareness of how to keep themselves safe when online. Some students understand the possible dangers posed by identity theft or the theft of their financial details during online transactions.

Quality of teaching and learning of ICT

Teaching and learning are good.

- Teachers have mostly good subject knowledge and good technical skills in the software applications the school uses. However there are some gaps in expertise in specific aspects like programming.
- Teaching and learning in ICT lessons are good. The ICT team has invested considerable effort in recording a large number of video tutorials for their courses. These demonstrate and explain to students a particular skill which they then try out for themselves in a follow up activity. This approach is highly effective in ensuring students have work of appropriate challenge to them personally and in freeing up the teacher to spend more time on giving individual students feedback and guidance on how to improve. Students say using the video tutorials makes the work easy for them to understand.
- Some good uses of ICT in improving teaching and learning in other subjects were observed. For example in a Year 9 history lesson powerful video clips of the '9/11' attack engrossed the class and set the scene well for what they were about to learn. The main facts from the lesson were covered and rehearsed using wireless voting pads which enabled the students to compete against each other in getting the right answers. This really motivated students as well as helping them memorise a summary of the events. In another lesson sixth formers used a 'wiki' to facilitate collaborative team work. Individual team members were able to evaluate and comment on each other's input.
- However, in general, there are insufficient opportunities for students to use ICT to improve their work in other subjects. This is mainly due to the high level of demand for ICT resources which outstrips what the school is able to make available.

Quality of the curriculum for ICT

The curriculum is inadequate.

- All students begin a vocational qualification in ICT in Year 9 which, depending on how much work they cover by the end of Year 11, is equivalent to up to two GCSEs. This provides students with opportunities to develop their skills in animation, computer graphics and web design.

- Students studying the IT diploma at Key Stage 4 and sixth formers taking a BTEC course get good opportunities to learn about computer hardware and operating systems as well as in using a range of software. For example, in a Year 12 lesson students assembled the main components of a desk top computer. This gave them a good understanding of what the various components looked like and the opportunity to learn the practical skills of fitting them to the logic board or chassis. As one girl said: 'I now feel able to fit RAM memory myself if I needed to although I'm not sure my mum would let me'! The computers the students built actually worked and the students' next step is to install and configure an operating system.
- However, the demand for computers across the school means students are unable to use ICT when working in other subjects as much as they would like to. Consequently opportunities for students to try out the ICT skills they have learnt elsewhere are restricted and this holds them back.
- Provision for students to learn to use spreadsheets and databases is limited and around a third of older students do not receive their statutory entitlement to develop their understanding of programming. Consequently, there are significant gaps in students' experiences. These deficiencies mean that the curriculum is inadequate.

Leadership and management of ICT

Leadership and management are good.

- Good monitoring and self-evaluation procedures ensure the school has a good grasp of its strengths and weaknesses. These inform the school's vision of what it intends ICT to be like in the near future and the strategic plan that sets out how the school intends to get there. The vision prioritises the further development of the use of online multimedia tutorials and individual feedback all being available from students' homes as well as when they are in school.
- The school realises that it needs to make more ICT resources available to other subject areas as well as expanding students' access to their user areas from home. It has embarked on a cost effective strategy which enables it to reuse old computers as 'thin clients' and still run modern software applications on them. This strategy is beginning to increase the total number of computers available and to make the school's applications available to staff and students at home. In this way students can continue to benefit from the school's investment in expensive software even after the school has closed for the day.
- The impact of good leadership and management is seen in the strong improvements in examination results over the last few years. The school has a good capacity to continue to improve.
- The principles of best value are applied well by the school in getting the most out of its investment in ICT. The school challenged itself over its previous strategy of procuring new desktops for computer rooms. It is now able to deploy repurposed computer terminals at around half the cost. Students and parents are consulted and their views taken into

account when planning ICT improvements. For example parents were asked to rank the most important items they would like to see on the school's web site.

Use of Assessment

The use of assessment is good.

- Attainment on entry is established from detailed assessments made against National Curriculum levels by middle school teachers at the time of transfer. The local authority organises moderation across the town to ensure assessments are standardised.
- All students are set ICT targets derived from their prior attainment. There is a detailed tracking system which shows at a glance which tasks students have completed, the standard to which they were completed and whether they were completed within the time allocated. Intervention strategies are in place to help those falling behind or those underachieving to catch up.
- Students are provided with detailed assessment criteria to accompany each unit of work they complete. These enable students to evaluate the quality of their work and to make further refinements to improve its standard.
- Teachers make innovative use of audio technology to mark students' work on screen verbally and then follow this up by recording detailed guidance to on how they might improve it. Audio files are stored along with students' computer files on the network so that students can play them back at any time. Teachers also record discussions they have with students in lessons so that students have a record of them too.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring statutory requirements for students to develop their programming skills are met
- providing more opportunities for students to use spreadsheets and databases in a variety of contexts
- making more ICT resources available so that students can use ICT to improve their learning more frequently in other subjects.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop ICT in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

David Anstead
Her Majesty's Inspector