

Thornbeck College, NEAS

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 132030

Name of lead inspector: Susan Preece HMI

Last day of inspection: 24 September 2009

Type of provider: Independent specialist college

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Information about the provider

1. Thornbeck College is part of the registered charity, North East Autism Society (NEAS) which is based in Sunderland. In addition to Thornbeck College the charity offers other services such as day and residential adult provision, domiciliary care, domiciliary outreach and supported living. Thornbeck College recruits learners from all backgrounds and cultures. In 2008/09 there was a total of 13 learners, three of whom were female; none was of ethnic minority heritage. All learners have autism spectrum condition associated learning difficulties and varying levels of challenging behaviour. Some have mental health difficulties. In recent years the college has experienced a growth in referrals from learners with more complex needs and challenging behaviour. In November 2007 the college moved into temporary accommodation until a new building is completed. The college has a shop in Sunderland city centre, a community-based gardening project and access to a range of external work placements.
2. All learners are funded as day placements by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). In 2008/09 one of the 13 learners was resident in an NEAS home within the local community; this year that number has increased to six. These residential placements are funded through social services and/or health authorities. The aim of the provider is 'to be a centre of excellence in education, social and vocational training and care for people with autism and Aspergers syndrome'. They aim to achieve this by providing inclusive programmes that promote 'Skills for Life'.

| Type of provision | Number of enrolled learners in 2008/09 |
|--|--|
| Provision for adult learners: Further education (19+) | 13 full-time learners |

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

| | |
|------------------------------------|---------|
| Overall effectiveness of provision | Grade 1 |
| Capacity to improve | Grade 1 |
| | Grade |
| Outcomes for learners | 1 |
| Quality of provision | 1 |
| Leadership and management | 1 |
| Safeguarding | 1 |
| Equality and diversity | 2 |

Overall effectiveness

3. The college has outstanding success in supporting learners to gain sheltered employment. Assessment procedures are detailed and comprehensive. Targets are well set and successfully informed by the outcomes of detailed multidisciplinary assessments. High quality person centred learning plans (PCLPs) inspire learners to achieve the targets they have set themselves. Learners are responsible for updating their PCLPs with personal progress and achievement. Lots of opportunities are created to reduce barriers to learning and for learners to use their disability to their advantage. Staff are well trained in helping learners to process and understand a wide range of sensory information. However, it would help learners even more if staff used signing more regularly. Partnership working is excellent and a range of innovative social enterprise is used to increase employer engagement and to extend opportunities for learners to develop their skills in real work situations. The college has plans to extend these opportunities even further. Arrangements for care, guidance and support are of very high quality. The management of learners' severe and challenging behaviour is extremely good. Senior managers inspire staff and learners to exceed challenging targets. The college has outstanding safeguarding practices. The promotion of equality and diversity is good and could be improved even more by including a wider range of cultural issues in the curriculum. The self-assessment process is highly effective and involves all staff and learners. However, the college is aware that the quality process is overly complex and lacks a clear and simple overview of progress against key performance indicators. Thornbeck College provides outstanding value for money.

Main findings

- Progression routes are excellent. The college has outstanding success in supporting learners to gain employment. Over the past two years, through excellent local partnerships, 100% of leavers have gained sheltered employment averaging about 25 hours per week. The use of robust destination data demonstrates that the employment is sustained over time.
- Outcomes for learners are outstanding and are strongly focused on individual need. In 2008/09 10 out of the 13 learners followed an externally accredited programme and all achieved a qualification at entry level. In the previous year 7 out of 11 learners entered and achieved external accreditation at entry level.
- Target setting is rigorous and well informed by the outcomes of thorough multidisciplinary assessments. High quality PCLPs are detailed and comprehensive; they empower learners and inspire them to achieve the targets they have set themselves. Each learner is responsible for updating their PCLP with personal progress and achievement.
- The college's approach to meeting the needs and interests of learners is outstanding. A comprehensive and detailed curriculum framework minimises the impact of autism spectrum condition (ASC). Staff reduce barriers to learning and enable learners to use their disability to their advantage. For example, obsessive attention to detail is turned into a key strength in retail and production activities.
- Partnership working is outstanding and a major strength of the college. Links with a wide range of employers, schools, further education (FE) colleges, community groups and local authorities provide excellent work placements. Outstanding social enterprise is used to increase employer engagement and to identify and extend opportunities for developing skills in real work situations.
- Arrangements for care, guidance and support are excellent. The management of learners' severe and challenging behaviour is extremely good. Individual behaviour support plans are outstanding and encourage learners to identify and address their own difficulties.
- National and local priorities provide the firm basis of highly effective strategic planning. Leadership and management are outstanding. Senior managers inspire staff and learners to exceed challenging targets.
- The college has outstanding safeguarding and safety practices for all environments experienced by learners. Good relationships with the local safeguarding board contribute to the highly effective support and training for staff.
- Promotion of equality and diversity is good with a clear emphasis on meeting the individual needs of all learners. Data are well used to identify trends in achievement. Training for learners, staff and partners who engage with learners is very effective but does not sufficiently include all aspects of equality and

diversity. The college only has one learner from the local ethnic minority population.

- The college uses an effective and wide range of methods to gather and use learner views to improve the quality of provision. An active student council, well supported by communication workers, effectively involves learners in decision making and has representatives on the college decision making groups such as equality and diversity.
- The self-assessment process is highly effective and involves all staff and learners. The detailed development plan has rigorous targets and clearly identifies the impact of actions on the learners. However, the college is aware that the quality process is overly complex and lacks a clear and simple overview of progress against key performance indicators.
- The wide range of training and support is outstanding. It is effective at improving the skills, knowledge and confidence of staff to identify and help learners to address their barriers to progression.

What does Thornbeck College need to do to improve further?

- Increase the use of staff signing to improve learners' understanding and use of expressive language.
- Continue to expand the variety and choice of employment opportunities.
- Develop a simple and effective overview of progress against key performance indicators from the detailed quality reports.
- Evaluate the recruitment and initial assessment processes to match the needs of all potential learners.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- Using Computers
- Activities at college which help to increase independence
- Learning new skills
- Talking mats
- Interesting activities
- Staff who help us to understand what to do in sessions
- Staff who listen to us

What learners would like to see improved:

- Texture of some of the resources used in textiles
- Using mobile phones
- Bike riding

■ Price of refreshments

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 1

4. Thornbeck College's capacity to improve is outstanding. The chief executive and trustees effectively oversee sustained improvements in all aspects of provision. National and local priorities provide the firm basis of highly effective strategic planning. Senior managers inspire staff and learners to exceed challenging targets. Excellent local partnerships successfully contribute to the outstanding achievement of all learners gaining sustained sheltered employment and independent living.
5. The college has implemented significant improvements in all aspects of the provision since the last full inspection. All strengths have been maintained and all areas for improvement effectively addressed so that many are now significant strengths. The process of self-assessment is comprehensive, rigorous, fully inclusive and used successfully to secure improvements. A clear and detailed development plan, and termly quality reports, support the strong culture of continuous improvement. Management structures are clear and well defined with highly effective mentoring and supervision process. Outstanding training opportunities ensure that staff develop the skills, knowledge and confidence to recognise and interpret the complex needs of learners with autism spectrum condition (ASC).

Outcomes for learners

Grade 1

6. Outcomes for learners are outstanding and are strongly focussed on individual need. A good range of national awards from pre-entry to entry level 1 enables learners' progress to be acknowledged and well celebrated. The college rigorously collates and uses achievement data to bring about improvements. All learners achieve high levels of success and enjoyment in their work. The attainment of national accredited qualifications has continued to improve. In 2008/09, 10 out of the 13 learners followed an externally accredited programme and all achieved a qualification at entry level; in the previous year 7 out of 11 learners entered and all achieved external accreditation at entry level.
7. The target setting process is rigorous and well informed by the outcomes of thorough multidisciplinary assessments. High quality PCLPs are detailed and comprehensive. To make the plans fully accessible to learners they are kept on personal electronic storage devices and this helps to develop learners' information and communication technology (ICT) skills. The plans inspire learners to achieve the targets they have set themselves, use visual information matched to their preferred learning style and enable them to actively participate in their review meetings. Learners are responsible for updating their PCLPs with personal progress and achievement and keeping the information safe. The staged process of recognising and recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning (RARPA) is well established and effectively applied so that the college has confidence in the processes and outcomes for softer skills

achievement. In 2008/09 learners achieved 77% of their overall targets; outcomes for the previous year were 71%.

8. All learners participate in work experience activities. High priority is given to travel training. Prior to starting at Thornbeck College very few learners regularly travelled by public transport. In 2008/09 over 92% regularly accessed public transport with support or independently. Learners make great gains in work-related skills such as good communication, punctuality, team working, problem solving, time management and functional skills. They learn to take much greater responsibility for themselves.
9. Progression routes are excellent; in 2008/09 all leavers were successful in gaining employment near their home community, most living in independent supported tenancies. Over the past two years, through excellent local partnerships, all leavers have gained employment averaging about 25 hours per week. The use of robust follow-up destination data demonstrates that these sheltered employment placements are sustained over time.
10. The practical nature of much of the curriculum increases learners' motivation, enjoyment and understanding of a healthy and safe lifestyle. The promotion of learner safety has a very high priority and is reinforced through induction, curriculum activities and the student council. Individual and generic risk assessments are rigorous and wherever possible include contributions from individual learners. Robust plans and procedures are in place to swiftly address any issues related to bullying. Staff and parents/carers indicate that the learners clearly demonstrate that they feel safe in college.
11. Learners have access to an extensive social and leisure programme to promote healthy lifestyles such as the opportunities for weekly cycling, rock climbing, dance studio sessions and swimming. Some learners are currently running six miles cross country on a weekly basis. In 2008/09, 10 out of 13 learners achieved the bronze Duke of Edinburgh Award. Social enterprise activities, such as the shop and market stall which sell high quality bespoke wedding and party stationery, enable learners to interact with the public who in turn enhance their knowledge of ASC. Retention, punctuality and attendance are well monitored and any issues are swiftly addressed through multidisciplinary team approaches.

The quality of provision

Grade 1

12. Teaching, training and assessment practices are excellent. Procedures are thorough and comprehensive and outcomes of assessment are successfully used to inform baseline assessment summaries and PCLPs. Staff are skilled in meeting the individual needs of learners with ASC; they use their expertise well and regularly share best practice. Support assistants are effectively informed about their role. Outcomes from regular lesson observations, validated by external specialist providers, demonstrate that teaching and learning have consistently improved over time. Differentiated activities are well planned, varied, interesting and designed so that they help learners to develop

transferable skills in realistic contexts. For example, working in the shop involves learners using public transport, planning and shopping for resources, lunch preparation, general shop duties and dealing with the public.

13. Staff minimise barriers to learning and enable learners to use their disability to their advantage. Obsessive attention to detail is used as an advantage in production activities. This was clearly demonstrated in the production of objects of excellent quality for sale in the shop. The use of a range of ICT is very good. Resources such as light writers, talking mats, interactive white boards and specialist equipment are routinely incorporated into activities as appropriate. Whilst staff do use a good range of strategies to develop learners' communication skills, there is limited use of signing to develop understanding and the use of expressive language. Staff and learner interactions are characterised by high levels of mutual respect and an adult focus.
14. A comprehensive curriculum framework provides clear routes for progression. The impact of the triad of impairment associated with ASC, communication, social interaction and imagination and flexibility, is minimised. The college is aware of the need to further develop and embed equality and diversity throughout the curriculum. A good range of enrichment activities contributes to learners' enjoyment. Induction and transition planning are highly effective and resources are produced in a variety of accessible formats.
15. Self-assessment has accurately identified partnership working as outstanding. Links with a wide range of employers, schools, FE colleges, community groups and local authorities provide excellent opportunities for work placements and for practising and extending learners' skills in realistic contexts. Increased use of innovative social enterprise is improving the availability of employment opportunities. The college has identified a need to expand on the variety and choice of these opportunities and plans are at an advanced stage to purchase a local farm in partnership with a local housing association and the local authority.
16. Arrangements for care, guidance and support are of very high quality. The management of learners' severe and challenging behaviour is extremely good. Individual behaviour support plans are outstanding and encourage the learners to identify and address their own difficulties. The college has plans to increase the integration of an increasing range of therapies. Dedicated speech and language therapists are providing excellent support for learners and staff in developing all aspects of communication.

Leadership and management

Grade 1

17. The principal, chief executive officer (CEO) and senior managers provide outstanding strategic leadership and direction. The college has a clear ambition to improve opportunities and outcomes for learners through highly effective partnership work with local communities. Plans to develop the provision include new facilities in Durham that will widen the catchment area for prospective

learners. The CEO and board of trustees have a clear oversight of the NEAS and provide highly effective challenge to the management of the college.

18. The promotion of safeguarding is outstanding. The college has created a highly effective learning environment underpinned by outstanding safeguarding practices. Very good generic and individual risk assessments and the resulting action plans ensure that these vulnerable learners can participate in community-based activities. Good relationships with the local safeguarding board contribute to the highly effective support and training for staff. Lines of responsibility are clear and staff with responsibility for safeguarding are well trained and qualified. All staff undertake refresher safeguarding training every six months and are highly competent in recognising, reporting and addressing indicators of possible safeguarding issues. Safeguarding training for learners is well planned to meet individual needs; it starts in induction and includes bullying and internet safety. The single central vetting and recruitment record is rigorously monitored. Incidents and complaints are well managed and clearly recorded.
19. The active promotion of equality and diversity is good. Autism awareness training, involving learners whenever possible, and support for community partners are effective in reducing discrimination. Learners benefit from specific weeks each term dedicated to the further promotion of respect and tolerance. However, much of the focus is on disability and does not fully include all aspects of equality and diversity. A learner from the student council is represented on the college equality and diversity group and staff are supported by an equality champion. Equality training for staff is frequent and includes electronic refresher training. Good use is made of local partners for disability specific training.
20. The college fulfils all legal equality and diversity requirements; impact assessments are detailed with close monitoring of resulting action plans. Preparation for a single equality scheme is well advanced. The gender balance of staff in the college has improved in recent months; approximately 40% of staff are male. A good range of learner data is analysed, for example by postcodes and individual learner circumstances, in order to monitor and eliminate possible discrimination.
21. Recruitment to the college and adult services is through referrals from Connexions; the local community is well represented in the overall intake. The proportion of learners from ethnic minority groups who are assessed as suitable for the college is very small. The college has not fully analysed the reasons for this difference in outcomes from the initial assessment process.
22. A clear, detailed strategy sets the scene for effective engagement with learners. The college successfully employs an individualised range of methods to gather and use learner views to bring about improvements. Parents are encouraged to contribute their views on the college through questionnaires and meetings and are well represented on the board of trustees.

23. The self-assessment process is very effective and inclusive. The detailed development plan has clear targets and identifies the impact of actions on learners. Termly reports provide extensive detail including evidence from monthly performance reports from managers. Data are detailed, accurate and well used to improve performance. Senior staff have a clear view of performance through a whole organisation approach involving significant support and supervision systems. However, the college is aware that the quality process is overly complex and would benefit from a simple overview of progress against key performance indicators.
24. The college provides outstanding value for money. All learners make significant progress and achieve their goals. Budgets are clear and specific for each learner, with rigorous challenge by senior management and trustees of the value for money. The wide range of training and support is outstanding in its effectiveness at improving the skills, knowledge and confidence of staff to identify and help learners to address their barriers to progression.

Information about the inspection

25. Two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), assisted by the provider's vice principal as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the college's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding bodies, the previous inspection report, reports from the inspectorate's quality monitoring inspection, and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
26. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails. They looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed on behalf of the college. They also observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

Thornbeck College, NEAS

Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; 16-18 Learner responsive: FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; 19+ responsive: FE full- and part-time courses; Employer responsive: Train to Gain, apprenticeships

| Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate | Overall | 14-16 | 16-18 Learner responsive | 19+ Learner responsive | Employer responsive |
|--|---------|-------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|
| Approximate number of enrolled learners | | | | | |
| Full-time learners | 13 | | | 13 | |
| Part-time learners | | | | | |
| Overall effectiveness | 1 | | | 1 | |
| Capacity to improve | 1 | | | | |
| Outcomes for learners | 1 | | | 1 | |
| How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning? | 1 | | | | |
| How well do learners attain their learning goals? | 1 | | | | |
| How well do learners progress? | 1 | | | | |
| How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development? | 1 | | | | |
| How safe do learners feel? | 1 | | | | |
| <i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i> | 1 | | | | |
| <i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i> | 1 | | | | |
| Quality of provision | 1 | | | 1 | |
| How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development? | 1 | | | | |
| How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users? | 1 | | | | |
| How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners? | 1 | | | | |
| How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve? | 1 | | | | |
| Leadership and management | 1 | | | 1 | |
| How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation? | 1 | | | | |
| <i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i> | 1 | | | | |
| How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners? | 1 | | | | |
| How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap? | 2 | | | | |
| How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement? | 1 | | | | |
| How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners? | 1 | | | | |
| How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money? | 1 | | | | |

*where applicable to the type of provision

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