

Dilston College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: Independent specialist college

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FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Context and focus of visit

Dilston College is situated in rural Northumberland and is one of three specialist colleges that together form the Mencap National College (MNC). It provides full-time residential and day education for learners aged 16 to 25 with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college offers accredited and non-accredited routes across three main areas: social and life skills; practical and vocational programmes; and Skills for Life (communication, literacy and numeracy).

The college was inspected in February 2007 and judged to be good. Areas for improvement were the consistency of target setting and recording of progress, the development of RARPA (recording and recognising achievement in non-accredited provision), and the promotion of equality and diversity. A monitoring visit in February 2008 found significant progress in the first of these and reasonable progress in the others. A further visit in December 2008 found that the college was continuing to make reasonable progress in these areas. This report focuses on the themes outlined below.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

<p>What progress has been made in developing self-assessment processes that help to improve the learners' experience?</p>	<p>Reasonable progress</p>
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The college is undergoing a period of change. A reduction in learner numbers in 2009 due to funding changes led to the loss of some staff. However, the learners' experience remained the key focus of the college and the quality of provision was not affected. The college's self-assessment report gives a clear indication of the strengths and areas for improvement. The use of data to monitor the quality of provision has improved significantly since the last inspection. Lesson observations take place regularly and focus well on the extent to which learning is taking place. College records show continuing improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. The self-assessment report identifies that the monitoring of informal learning opportunities is an area for further improvement. The college is part way through reorganising its management and staffing structure, in line with Mencap plans for each of its colleges. The new structure provides a much closer link between formal and informal learning, particularly for residential students. The college is reviewing its curriculum to ensure that it meets changing national priorities.

Outcomes for learners

To what extent have the positive outcomes for learners noted at the last inspection been maintained or improved further? Reasonable progress

The college has maintained the positive outcomes for learners identified at the last inspection. This is aided by improvements in target setting and recording of progress noted at a previous monitoring visit, including the recording of non-accredited outcomes within the formal curriculum. Learners fully achieve the majority of their targets and in most other cases there is partial achievement. They continue to gain confidence and learn how to manage their behaviour, while developing skills for independence. Where appropriate, learners' achievement is accredited via external awards. In 2009, of the 25 learners entered for English Speaking Board accreditation, 92% achieved the award. A similar number gained qualifications in literacy and numeracy. A small number of learners take catering qualifications. Both learners aiming for NVQ level 1 in catering achieved the qualification in 2009 and four learners gained level 2 in food hygiene.

Quality of provision

What further progress has been made with the pilot project noted at the 2008 monitoring visit to help prepare learners for their transition out of college? Reasonable progress

Arrangements to help learners make the transition out of college continue to improve. The project has helped this process in terms of developing links with external agencies and helping learners to be more involved in the process. In particular, the college has undertaken successful work to produce resources that enable learners with communication difficulties to participate better in meetings about their future after leaving college. Many learners achieve their goal of progressing to independent living, sometimes with support. Fewer learners attain their goal of supported or open employment. This is a key focus for the college in its new structures and curriculum strategy. For example, it is trying to link work placements more closely to opportunities for learners when they leave college. The new college structure includes a transition manager at a senior level, and a transition co-ordinator.

Leadership and management

To what extent has the college made progress in promoting equality and diversity within teaching and learning and the curriculum since the 2008 visit? Reasonable progress

The college is making good progress in the use of data to promote equality. It monitors carefully the progress made by different groups of learners and takes action where appropriate. This includes investigating aspects of curriculum or teaching, where learners appear to be making better progress in some aspects of the provision

than others. The college is making satisfactory progress in the promotion of diversity. It is introducing a more systematic approach to how staff use schemes of work and lesson plans to identify opportunities for learners to increase their understanding of different groups in society. For example, the teaching and learning committee has devised learning objectives linked to the college's involvement in the Dilston festival and these are now incorporated into lesson plans. The college is beginning to measure the impact of this work for learners.

What progress has the college made in the implementation of its learner involvement strategy since 2008? Reasonable progress

Learners are well represented on college committees, including health and safety and promotion of equality and diversity. They give their views on college provision in tutorials and at meetings in the residences. Student feedback on how well staff listen to their views is positive. In order to improve further the implementation of its learner involvement strategy, the college plans more training for learners to act as advocates for themselves and others. It has prioritised aspects of provision where learners could be more involved and has specific targets in place to achieve this. This includes a greater involvement of learners in the appointment of staff, where they currently have informal opportunities to give their views. The college also has plans to strengthen learners' involvement in risk assessments in order to increase their levels of independence; for example, in the administration of medication where appropriate.

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