

# Birkenhead Sixth Form College

## Focused monitoring visit report

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**Unique reference number:** 130494

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**Type of provider:** Sixth form college

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## FOCUSED MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

### Context and focus of visit

Birkenhead Sixth Form College was established in 1988. Most of the college's work is on a single site close to the centre of Birkenhead. The college offers courses in 14 subject areas, the largest being science and mathematics. The majority of learners are aged 16 to 19 and represent around 90% of the college's funding. In 2009/10 the college enrolled 1,211 full-time learners and 1,675 part-time learners. Around 83% of learners aged 16 to 18 are enrolled on level 3 courses. Around 52% of adult learners are enrolled on entry and level 1 provision.

Wirral is the eighth largest metropolitan council in the country. Between October 2009 and September 2010 the unemployment rate in Wirral was 9.1% which is higher than the rates for the North West and nationally. Almost 12% of Wirral's working population have no qualifications.

At the last inspection inspectors judged the college's overall effectiveness, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management to be satisfactory. The college's capacity to improve was judged to be good as were provision in English and modern foreign languages and in business, administration and law. The provision in science and mathematics and in humanities and social sciences was judged to be satisfactory. This report focuses on the themes explored during the monitoring visit.

### Themes

#### Self-assessment and improvement planning

<p><b>What progress has been made in further improving and embedding quality assurance systems so that managers can identify weaknesses at an early stage and take swift action to tackle them?</b></p>	<p><b>Reasonable progress</b></p>
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At the last inspection, better quality assurance arrangements were beginning to improve the provision. These arrangements have become further embedded and provide a strong focus on improving provision for students. Effective processes to identify and improve underperformance at course and subject level have evolved and are impacting positively on student outcomes. These include early identification of departments and individual courses causing concern. Greater accountability and responsibility are placed on teachers to monitor and account for learner performance.

Target setting is rigorous and targets for success rates, value added and attendance are challenging. At monthly meetings, senior managers provide good scrutiny and monitoring of course performance against targets.

Further interventions use a partner college as a critical friend who, with a team of senior managers, review and evaluate the quality of individual subject areas. Outcomes from the observation of teaching and learning are used effectively to identify staff training and development to support positive change and improvements in provision.

The self-assessment process is rigorous. However, when arriving at the capacity to improve grade the college places too much emphasis on the rate of improvement without acknowledging that success rates are still a few percentage points below national averages.

**Outcomes for learners**

**What progress has been made in ensuring the continued and consistent improvement in success rates?** **Reasonable progress**

At the last inspection, achievement and standards were judged to be satisfactory. Since then, overall achievement on long courses has risen from 77.2% in 2008/09 to 78.6% in 2009/10 but it still lags behind the national rate of 84.0%. The rise in overall achievement on long courses for students aged 16 to 18 represents a higher rate of improvement than that nationally. Overall achievement on long courses for students aged 19+ remains comparable with the national rate. Redundancies in local companies have severely impacted on the success rates for adults on Train to Gain programmes which were very low in 2009/10. The college is withdrawing from this provision. Overall success rates on A-level programmes increased from 78.5% in 2008/09 to 80.6% in 2009/10 but they still lag behind the national rate of 85.0%. The in-year retention for full-time students has improved when compared to the same period in previous years and the number of high grades has increased steadily over the last three years

The college closely monitors success rates and value added, and these are discussed at monthly meetings between managers and heads of subjects. Value added is positive for many courses and the college has action plans in place where necessary. All staff are kept fully informed about the performance of their courses. Student progress is carefully monitored through the development of an online system which can be accessed remotely from the college by students, teachers and managers. This is used particularly effectively to tackle underperformance. Most learners are making good progress towards attaining their anticipated grades.

**Quality of provision**

**What progress has been made in continuing the good focus on improving teaching and learning?** **Reasonable progress**

The college has maintained the good focus on improving teaching and learning. Successful initiatives have been introduced to promote effective and innovative use of information and learning technology to support and illuminate learning. Learning

resources are generally good. Managers continue to use the outcomes of the college's teaching and learning observation scheme effectively to identify and meet staff development needs. Moderation of the teaching and learning observations has led to an increased focus on learning and attainment within observations. The management of assessment is particularly effective. Assignment briefings and marking criteria are clear and learners receive detailed feedback on how they could improve their mark. Teachers return learners' work promptly. The online system is used effectively to record student progress and provide timely feedback.

Teaching and learning practice has been improved through arrangements for effective coaching and mentoring and the introduction of peer observations, resulting in the wider sharing of good practice. Most lessons are structured to include a suitable variety of activities to maintain learners' interest and motivation. However, as at the time of the last inspection, the quality of lesson planning remains variable and some teachers do not use sufficient strategies to ensure all learners remain challenged by the work.

**What progress has been made in developing a culture of raised aspirations for learners?**

**Significant progress**

The college has made significant progress in developing a culture of raised aspirations for learners. Learners' attainment on entry is below average for a sixth form college. Most students achieve at grades higher than their anticipated grades. Value added is good on most courses. The 'flying start' initiative has been introduced to ensure learners experience homework upon enrolment through being given work to complete for each subject in readiness for the first day of attendance. The college has implemented a college-wide homework policy which specifies a minimum of two hours homework each week in each subject. Any work submitted below the anticipated grade is required to be resubmitted. The theme of 'working hard to achieve' is reinforced throughout the year. Review days in November and March have proved highly successful in checking students' progress and setting clear targets for achievement. The 'focus on the finish' initiative successfully reinforces students' attention on succeeding on their courses through the agreement of a precisely focused action plan.

Throughout the year, learners' progress is rigorously monitored against aspirational grades. Comprehensive guidance is provided on careers education and higher education progression opportunities. Although progression to universities has decreased slightly since the last inspection, progression to non-local universities has increased significantly. The number of universities attended by students from the college has increased from 43 in 2008 to 49 in 2010.

**To what extent are tutorials now better co-ordinated and progress monitored, with effective target setting used to drive learner progress?**

**Significant progress**

At the previous inspection some aspects of the tutorial provision required further development, including the development of challenging and precise improvement targets for students. The college has made significant progress in bringing about improvement. Students have regular tutorials which provide particularly effective pastoral and academic support. Two dedicated review days, when classes are closed, allow students to meet with all their tutors to review progress to-date and focus on what they need to do to achieve or improve upon their target grades. This is then reinforced with a college-wide focus to support students in achieving their optimum results towards the end of their programme. Highly effective strategies and interventions identify, monitor and support students who are underperforming.

Target setting for students is robust. An online monitoring system is extensively developed and used particularly effectively to monitor students' performance. Students have good access to the system, which sends them automatic reminders and text messages when target dates are due. Good use is made of target grades to measure performance and there are good examples of students exceeding their minimum grades.

**Leadership and management**

**What progress has been made in embedding the arrangements for safeguarding?**

**Reasonable progress**

Over the last 12 months, the college has continued to improve safeguarding arrangements which are comprehensive and compliant with the relevant legislation. Appropriate policies and procedures are in place and they are understood by staff and reviewed annually. All staff who have direct contact with learners are subject to enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks. All teaching staff have received recent training and staff involved in recruitment have received further training. The college has appropriate recruitment practices with respect to safeguarding. Safeguarding training is planned for support staff. A central list is held that includes the details of CRB checks but does not sufficiently record the levels and dates of safeguarding training. The college has good contact with the local safeguarding board. Learners have a satisfactory understanding of safeguarding and are aware of college arrangements to safeguard them but not all learners recall coverage of safeguarding, particularly internet safety, during induction. The college has good links and arrangements with a local clinic to promote learners' health and well-being.

**What progress has been made in improving the over-crowded teaching space and the lack of social space for learners?**

**Reasonable progress**

The previous inspection identified that social space was insufficient and some teaching space was overcrowded. The college has made reasonable progress in improving some of the teaching areas and facilities for students. Senior management has applied for a government building condition improvement grant and will know the outcome shortly. As a contingency, the college has built up its financial reserves to fund a partial college refurbishment.

Some refurbishment has taken place to improve the learning environment. Through consultation with students, the learning centre has been refurbished and provides more computers, zoned areas for group teaching and a quiet room for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Good investment in information technology allows students to access college computer software systems from home to aid their course work. Tutorial rooms have new furniture and have been redecorated. Break-out rooms for individual meetings have been added.

Social space remains extremely limited. A conference room and a local church hall are used on some occasions to provide extra social space as a short-term measure. Outside, benches have been added to provide additional seating. As part of the planned refurbishment, some rooms will be re-configured to provide more social space for students.

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