

Barnfield College

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

Barnfield College is the largest provider of further education in the Luton area and is situated on two main campuses in the town. The college provides a wide range of full- and part-time vocational courses across all subject areas from entry level and level 1 to higher education. Growth in enrolments is particularly significant on both level 1 and level 2 courses. The college's main areas of provision are in health and social care, construction, information and communications technology (ICT), hairdressing and beauty therapy, visual arts, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and business.

Luton is an extremely diverse town, both ethnically and socially. Almost one third of residents are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Areas with a vibrant business culture sit alongside parts of the town where people face significant personal and financial challenges in their everyday lives. The town's previously strong manufacturing base has declined significantly to be largely replaced by a wide range of technical and service industries.

Ofsted last inspected the college in April 2012. At that inspection, inspectors judged all aspects of the provision to require improvement, with the exception of hairdressing and beauty therapy which were inadequate.

This monitoring visit follows a joint investigation by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and Education Funding Agency (EFA) into allegations of financial irregularities and ineffective governance at the Barnfield Federation, which includes the college, made during autumn 2013. A new interim chief executive officer (CEO) for the federation was appointed following the investigations to work with the college to rectify urgently the weaknesses identified in both the SFA/EFA reports and to consider the options for the future of the federation, including the college. Ofsted carried out this monitoring visit to assess the progress made by the college in improving its governance and leadership and management since the publication of the reports.

Themes

Leadership and Management

What progress has the college made in improving the management of students' assessment and performance information to ensure the accuracy and reliability of reported success rate data?

Reasonable progress

Managers at Barnfield College have made reasonable progress in improving the use of information about students' assessment and achievement to ensure the accuracy and reliability of reported success rate data. Working closely with the head of management information systems (MIS), college managers had already identified

and acknowledged poor practice in the way in which success rates were reported for a number of courses prior to the publication of the SFA's report in which it cited concerns regarding potential manipulation of success rates. Managers have acted to resolve these issues to ensure that they now use, and report, data correctly.

College leaders have also acted swiftly to eradicate other inappropriate practices regarding the funding of qualifications for students and staff. Students attending schools in Luton no longer study short courses at the college for which it was erroneously claiming funding. Staff at the college do not now have to enrol on short courses in, for example, sustainability and healthy living. Full-time students are not enrolled on short 'learning to learn' courses in the two weeks prior to starting their main qualification.

The cumulative effect of these changes in enrolment practice and their consequent impact on college funding claims is to reduce significantly the number of 'starts' in 2013/14 on courses of all durations, but most notably those that are classified as short or very short. Managers acknowledge that these practices have contributed markedly to the much improved success rates over the last two years, most notably on long courses in a number of subject areas, but not all, where they rose by 10 percentage points between 2010/11 and 2011/12 to be high. They remained high in 2012/13.

As a result, college managers recognise that the success rate data for the last two years are inaccurate, particularly for students aged 16 to 18. Following managers' reprofiling of the data, retention rates in many of the subject areas in the 2012/13 academic year are lower than reported and in some cases are below corresponding national rates. Managers predict a success rate for long courses in 2013/14 which will be below that achieved in 2012/13.

Inspectors did not have sufficient time during this monitoring visit to examine in detail the impact of any re-assessment of the data on achievement rates. However, leaders and managers have taken steps to improve the reporting of students' achievements to the relevant awarding bodies and staff and managers interviewed during the inspection spoke appreciatively of the changes in assessment practice. A new MIS will replace the current in-house student records system during the 2014/15 academic year. College managers are confident that success rate data for 2013/14 will be much more reliable and a true reflection of the college's performance.

What progress has the college made in strengthening leadership and management to ensure that roles, responsibilities and accountabilities are clearly defined to promote an open and transparent culture?

Reasonable progress

College leaders have made reasonable progress in strengthening the leadership and management of the college and in ensuring that managers at all levels are clear

about their roles and responsibilities and are able to carry out their duties in an open and transparent way.

Leaders and managers within the college have experienced a turbulent 18 months, during which a significant number of changes have taken place, both internally and as a result of the investigations carried out by the SFA and EFA. The new interim CEO of the federation is clear about her role and in distinguishing her responsibilities from those of the principal as accounting officer and of his team of senior curriculum managers. The principal is now part of the federation's executive team which holds regular meetings, ensuring that he is more involved in both the strategic management and day-to-day running of the college. However, it is too early to assess whether this, and other changes to meetings structures, will ensure the principal will be fully empowered to run the college in a way which is commensurate with the normal expectations of college principalship.

Moving forward, college leaders must be cogniscent of the implications of further interim CEO appointments and the impact these may have on the stability of management styles, roles and responsibilities and continuity of practice; and on the ability of the principal to form appropriate relationships with the governing body and key external stakeholders. It is vital to ensure that the role of the principal as accounting officer in strategic decisions which affect the mission and character of the college is clear and consistently applied.

Managers and teaching staff interviewed during the inspection value the much improved atmosphere around the college with regard to openness and transparency. The principal and other senior managers are all highly visible. The introduction of a number of new student-centred initiatives by the principal have helped to renew the focus on teaching and learning after a difficult period during which staff were kept appropriately informed of the investigations carried out by the SFA and EFA. Managers are now more confident in their ability to be creative and entrepreneurial in their roles. They have identified areas of potential growth, for example in apprenticeship provision. A combination of new permanent and interim senior management appointments is helping to strengthen the day-to-day operation of the college and to inject new ideas and momentum into the curriculum. A number of weekly meetings are helping in the sharing of good practice and enabling teachers to feel that leaders and managers are listening to, and acting upon, their feedback.

The astute appointment of a new executive financial director in July 2013 is assisting greatly in identifying how, and then enacting ways in which, the college can move from a position of significant financial deficit at the end of 2012/13 through a much reduced predicted shortfall in 2013/14 to a situation where the college may be able to break even or register a small surplus in income in 2014/15.

The interim CEO of the federation has used her considerable experience of managing complex further education institutions to good effect in instilling a strong focus on modelling scenarios and projections for future funding and other income generation, as well as on costs, including the implications of clawbacks from the funding bodies

in relation to previously erroneous funding claims. The interim CEO of the federation now approves all major items of expenditure on behalf of the federation. Managers are now more accountable for budget setting and are at the early stages of submitting their budgets for 2014/15. They value this increased openness and the training and support they are receiving to carry out what, for many of them, is a new responsibility. Senior leaders are predicting substantial future savings, most notably through a full restructure of curriculum management to be completed by July 2014. This will remove a number of managerial posts and reduce perceived overstaffing. Senior leaders also anticipate that it will result in greater accountability for, and ownership of, subject areas. Allied to this restructure and the need for further cost reduction is a plan to rationalise and move specialist support roles such as MIS and human resources back into the college from Barnfield Education Services (BES) Ltd so that staff in those areas can work more closely with programme area leaders, lead lecturers and teaching staff.

What progress has the college made in ensuring the governing body now follows appropriate and transparent procedures and policies to oversee operational matters?

Reasonable progress

The progress made by the college to ensure the governing body follows appropriate procedures and policies to oversee operational matters and has the skills to fulfil those responsibilities successfully has been variable but is reasonable overall. Whilst the interim CEO of the federation has made progress in instilling new governance procedures and in training governors to improve the skills they need to deal with the highly complex demands of the role at Barnfield College, initiatives to refresh the governing body with new appointments are less successful and have encountered a number of issues which are proving difficult to overcome.

The interim CEO of the federation has devised a plan with a clear set of actions and timescales to address the breaches of governance identified in the SFA and EFA investigations. A full review of the corporate governance structure in February 2014 led to the decision to close a number of governing body committees, moving instead to monthly board meetings with the aim of giving governors a greater and simpler oversight of the full range of the federation's activities. The academy trusts are now operating within legal requirements as separate trusts and clear lines of accountability exist between the key members of the federation. Terms of reference, declarations of conflicts of interest and decision-making processes in relation to governance have all been reviewed and amended, or are in the process of being finalised. The governing body is involved appropriately in the approval of new senior post holders and in benchmarking salaries for senior staff. A risk management policy and procedures are ready for audit committee approval in June 2014. The training of governors to improve both their knowledge of more general duties and of specific roles and responsibilities has started and more is planned in the near future.

Progress to appoint new governors, including a new permanent chair, is slow and subject to a number of delays. The corporation has taken effective action to remove

those members who have failed to attend meetings and/or contribute adequately. As a result, attendance is improving amongst the smaller cohort of current governors, although it remains low at curriculum, quality and standards committee meetings. Until recently, the approach to recruiting new governors has been too fragmented, resulting in an insufficiently clear strategy to refresh the governing body with new skills. However, clerking support for the corporation has now been strengthened through the appointment of a new interim clerk prior to the recruitment of a permanent clerk in July 2014. Attempts to recruit new governors are also hampered by the reputation of the college as portrayed in the local media following the two investigations and by the complex demands of the role, which requires specialist knowledge of the work and legal status of both colleges and academies. The ethnicity of the current governing body is not representative of either the student cohort at the college or the wider community within Luton.

However, the urgency to appoint new governors is now gathering momentum. Two new governors have been appointed to the corporation board from within the cadre of academy governors and two further external appointments with relevant expertise are ready for approval by the search committee. Ten further applications are under consideration. A new permanent chair of governors is due to be elected, and a new clerk appointed, by the start of the 2014/15 academic year.

What progress has the college made in ensuring the governing body has an effective oversight and understanding of the college's academic performance?

Insufficient progress

Progress in ensuring the governing body has an effective oversight and understanding of the college's academic performance is insufficient. Governors have not had sufficient training and have not received sufficiently detailed information to enable them to carry out their duties effectively. Governors' attention during what has been a difficult year has necessarily focused mainly on the investigations carried out by the SFA and EFA, the consequent need to restructure much of the governance arrangements and on the financial implications for the college. All of this has had a detrimental effect on the morale and confidence of the corporation.

It is within this context that governors are not monitoring the performance of the college's students and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment regularly enough, or in sufficient detail. Although the governing body receive regular reports from the principal and his senior curriculum managers about, for example, attendance and retention, they do not have sufficient understanding of trends in performance and the likely implications for the college's success rates. This lack of clarity is accentuated by the principal's attendance at corporation meetings by invitation only, as he is not a member of the board. Governors were unaware, for example, that attendance rates have declined in 2013/14 to date and are low in a number of subject areas. Whilst they realise that the previously poor practice with regard to entering students and staff inappropriately for qualifications is likely to have a negative impact on success rates both in 2013/14 and retrospectively for the

preceding two years, governors remain confused by the shifts in data sets and are yet to understand the exact implications of this malpractice. Minutes of governing body meetings reveal a lack of challenge to the data presented and imprecise actions to follow up on areas of under-performance. Governors do not receive in-year reports on students' progress and the likely impact on the college's value-added data. Consequently, they have no opportunity to gain a full picture of how each curriculum area is performing in terms of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and their impact on students' progress and outcomes.

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