

Stoke-on-Trent College

Report following a monitoring visit to a 'requires improvement' provider

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

Stoke-on-Trent College was inspected in February 2018. At that time, inspectors judged the overall effectiveness of the provision to require improvement; all key judgement areas and all the provision types inspected were also judged to require improvement.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to evaluate the progress that leaders and managers have made in addressing the main areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. The themes for this monitoring visit were selected from the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection report.

The City of Stoke-on-Trent is one of 12 opportunity areas designated by the Department for Education due to learners' low levels of attainment and progress at all stages of education. The proportion of pupils in Stoke-on-Trent leaving school with five GCSEs at grade 4 or above, including English and mathematics, is below the national rate. The proportion of adults with intermediate level qualifications is significantly lower than the national average. Around 15% of the local population has no recognised qualifications, around twice the national rate.

Themes

What progress are governors making in holding leaders and managers to account for improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment through the use of sharply focused and challenging targets, so that learners and apprentices routinely receive a consistently high-quality education and training experience?

Reasonable progress

The college principal, members of the senior leadership team and the recently refreshed board of governors have a clear grasp of the areas for improvement identified at inspection. They are applying substantial effort to tackle these. With the support of external partners, they have developed well-considered action plans to secure the long-term financial viability of the college, and to raise the quality of teaching standards and learners' performance. The recently published 'New Beginnings' strategic plan sets out an incisive and appropriately detailed overview of how leaders and governors seek to raise the quality of provision and position the college on a strong financial footing.

Since the previous inspection, governance arrangements have been strengthened with the appointment of a new chair of corporation, and a wide-ranging review has been undertaken to strengthen the composition and expertise of the corporation. This has resulted in the appointment of additional governors with a range of appropriate skills including legal, financial, educational, and business to complement

and extend the expertise of the board. Governors have revised their committee structure arrangements. These now include a much strengthened and refreshed transformation, finance and resources sub-committee and a revitalised curriculum, quality and standards committee. They monitor closely leaders' progress against the college's financial recovery plan and the post-inspection action plan. Both groups meet monthly and report to the full corporation at their usual meetings.

Minutes of governors' meetings indicate that the board is increasing its knowledge and oversight, including of the quality and standards of provision at the college. The principal and senior leaders keep governors well informed with regular updates and detailed analysis of institutional performance against a range of key performance indicators.

Reports presented to governors are in a format that makes it easy for them to identify pertinent points and closely scrutinise what needs to improve at the college. Governors ask a wide range of challenging questions as to the pace and effectiveness of senior leaders' and managers' actions. Where necessary, governors ask for additional information to be presented to aid their understanding. Governors are now better informed and equipped to challenge leaders in raising institutional performance and standards. However, they recognise that much more work needs to be undertaken to extend their understanding regarding the progress that learners and apprentices make based on their individual starting points.

Leaders have ensured that the college's quality improvement plan is appropriately detailed, with clear milestones and lines of accountability. Leaders and managers frequently monitor progress against the specific actions contained in the plan. However, a few of the actions focus too much on increasing volumes of activity and do not focus sufficiently on broader quality impact measures. For example, one action is to ensure that just under one third of learners with high needs benefit from meaningful work experience to extend their skills for employment. However, no targets are set indicating the minimum level of entitlement and duration of a suitable placement. No challenging impact measures exist for these learners to progress into employment or the next level of learning as a result of gaining employability skills.

Following the previous inspection, leaders and senior managers swiftly reviewed and strengthened the arrangements for quality assurance. As a result, the process for the observation of teaching and learning is now more coherent. Observers make more consistent use of a broad range of sources of information. These are linked to a newly devised scorecard to assess the effectiveness and impact on learners' progress and performance of teachers' actions. Outcomes of individual observations are linked closely to professional development action plans and performance management reviews to raise standards and quicken the pace of improvement. Teachers whose performance is not at the required standard benefit from an appropriate mix of relevant professional development activities. These include intensive one-to-one coaching sessions and the timely use of targeted developmental lesson observations. Managers continue to use effectively performance management procedures to help underperforming teachers improve their practice.

Where necessary, leaders promptly deploy capability procedures; underperforming staff quickly leave the college's employment.

Leaders and senior managers carefully collate and analyse the outcomes of all observations and use this to inform faculty and college-wide training action plans. Managers monitor these plans closely to improve the quality of teaching and learning. A new back-to-basics programme focusing on teaching and assessment skills is at an early stage in helping to raise teachers' confidence and their expectations of learners' achievement in lessons. For example, the programme helps teachers to develop strategies to improve the pace of their lessons and meet the needs of individual learners. However, governors have yet to evaluate fully the impact of this programme and how successfully it is addressing improvement actions.

Managers are developing their ability to use data well to evaluate the impact of their actions for improvement. Weekly senior leadership meetings, fortnightly faculty team meetings, and monthly governors' meetings focus well on thorough monitoring of the provision. Senior managers ensure that data for a wide range of key performance indicators is produced at least monthly. As a result, all staff can now monitor the performance of individual learners on different courses. Subject area managers value this access to data on the progress and performance of learners in their departments. They are able to respond far more swiftly and effectively where performance in key areas declines, or is not improving rapidly enough.

How successful are leaders' and managers' strategies to ensure that learners and apprentices make good progress and achieve in line with their potential?

Reasonable progress

The actions that leaders and managers quickly implemented following the previous inspection have been successful in securing modest improvements in the performance of the college's classroom-based and apprenticeship provision. As a result, an increasing number of learners and apprentices successfully gained their qualifications in the planned time. However, although achievement rates are improving, they are not yet good. There is too much variation between curriculum areas, age groups and levels of learning for both classroom-based learners and apprentices.

College leaders are aware of these inconsistencies and are relentless in their drive to eradicate underperformance and drive up standards. They have set appropriately challenging targets for improvement in the post-inspection action plan.

Actions taken by leaders to ensure that all learners are supported to achieve in line with their identified potential are not yet fully successful. For example, on classroom-based programmes, the proportion of learners who achieved their qualifications improved in 2017/18, but performance remains below national rates. At foundation level achievement rates are high; however, at intermediate and advanced levels achievement rates remain too low.

College data indicates that learners with high needs and those who were looked after achieved well, but that learners in receipt of free school meals do not achieve as well as their peers. Teachers and managers have ensured that there are no significant

differences in the achievement of qualifications of learners from different ethnic backgrounds.

Value-added data for 2017/18 indicates a mixed and variable level of performance for college learners. On level 3 applied general and technical level qualifications, too many learners do not make the progress expected of them when compared with their prior attainment and individual starting points.

Changes to the management of apprenticeship programmes have brought about improvement in the number of apprentices who successfully complete their course. Achievement rates for apprentices both within the planned timescales and overall are now high and above national rates. The proportion of apprentices aged 25+ who achieve their qualification in the planned time improved rapidly to being significantly above the latest national rate. However, performance for apprentices aged 16 to 18 and 19 to 24 declined, with too many not achieving their qualifications in the allocated timescale. College leaders with responsibility for apprenticeships have analysed the reasons for this decline and appropriate actions are in place to improve performance; however, it is too early to judge their effectiveness.

Leaders and managers have worked very effectively to reduce the number of learners who leave their course early by ensuring that they are on suitable courses that meet their aspirations and abilities. They are providing a wide range of support strategies for learners who might be at risk of leaving. These actions have resulted in a noticeable improvement in the numbers of current learners staying on programme when compared with the previous academic year.

Where data is available, the proportion of learners moving into further learning or employment is high. However, due to the timing of the monitoring visit the information that the college collects on learners' progression and destinations was incomplete.

What progress have leaders and managers made with their strategies for improving attendance and for raising the quality of English and mathematics teaching and learning? Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have introduced a range of strategies such as travel assistance, the provision of free breakfasts, and a financial rewards incentive to motivate and improve learners' attendance and punctuality at lessons. These have resulted in a modest improvement in overall college attendance rates, which have risen to being just below the overall college target. However, despite a range of management interventions, learners' and apprentices' attendance rates at discrete English and mathematics lessons remain too low; this continues to be an area for improvement.

Individual department managers and most tutors monitor learners' attendance closely and, in conjunction with newly re-established personal tutors, they set learners clear and specific targets for improvement where their attendance is too low. In a small minority of instances teachers and assessors do not use the college's

internal tracking systems consistently well to monitor and report on learners' attendance and punctuality. In a range of curriculum areas, teachers use different threshold values to denote if attendance and punctuality are above, in line with, or below the stated college target. As a result of such inconsistencies, leaders' oversight of attendance and lateness tracking and reporting data is hindered.

A significant majority of learners have a secure understanding of the importance of regular and high attendance at lessons and of the consequences and sanctions that may be applied if this drops below minimum course expectations. Leaders ensure that personal tutors write to all parents/carers of learners, providing details of each learner's attendance patterns and requesting their support to improve attendance where it is a concern. However, a small minority of learners spoken to by inspectors during the monitoring visit did not have a secure understanding of the expectations for attendance on their individual courses.

Following the previous inspection, managers and teachers have undertaken considerable work to strengthen and promote improvement in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment for English and mathematics. This work is beginning to show some early signs of positive impact. For example, analysis of the college's functional skills results shows that the proportion of learners who successfully achieved their functional skills qualifications rose significantly in 2017/18, to be above that of other similar institutions.

College data on functional skills results for adult learners shows a high level of in-year improvement, with performance being above comparable national rates. Younger learners' performance, although much improved, is still too low and requires further improvement. Similarly, analysis of the college's latest GCSE results for 2017/18 shows an increase in the proportion of learners aged 16 to 18 who achieved a high-grade pass at 4 to 9 in English. However, the results in GCSE mathematics for learners aged 16 to 18 did not improve and continue to remain low. In contrast, GCSE outcomes in English and mathematics for adult learners improved and are high.

Teachers have benefited from an intensive programme of support facilitated by specialist lead practitioners for English and mathematics to update their skills and confidence in how to plan and provide appropriate learning. As a result, an increasing proportion of teachers are becoming more adept at planning and putting into relevant contexts learning in English and mathematics. They aim to ensure that learners of differing abilities make more progress in these essential skills, but this is not yet resulting in consistently strong practice.

In English, teachers are becoming more confident in challenging learners to improve their skills in areas such as the rules on apostrophes, the formation of paragraphs, and the conventions relating to sentence structures. Teachers use their skills to plan and teach a rich variety of activities to maximise opportunities that support learners' progression and to build their confidence. In addition, teachers use questioning techniques well and give detailed, encouraging verbal feedback to learners. As a result, learners grow in confidence and develop an appropriate range of verbal and written English skills. However, a minority of teachers' feedback is cursory and does not effectively tell learners what they need to do to improve.

In mathematics, staff accurately establish learners' starting points and attainment gaps. However, the effectiveness of target-setting to promote achievement varies too much. This is because teachers focus on learners completing worksheets and assessments rather than on developing and consolidating their learning. Where learning in mathematics is more effective, teachers design activities that engage and motivate learners by ensuring that work is put into real-life situations that readily capture learners' interest. More accomplished teachers provide their learners with varied opportunities to demonstrate their skills and provide instant further challenge through more complex tasks or questioning; for example, encouraging learners to develop the skills of estimation prior to the use of a calculator to work out a mathematical challenge.

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