

# Birtenshaw

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

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**Type of provider:** Independent specialist college

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## Monitoring visit: main findings

### Context and focus of visit

Birtenshaw College was inspected in January 2018, when inspectors judged the overall effectiveness of the provision to require improvement.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to evaluate the progress that leaders and managers have made in rectifying the main areas for improvement, identified at the previous inspection.

Birtenshaw College is part of Birtenshaw, a registered charity and company limited by guarantee, which was established in the 1950s to support children who have disabilities. The college was established in 2014 and achieved independent status in 2016. It provides specialist education and support for young people aged between 16 and 25 who have a variety of learning difficulties and/or disabilities and complex health needs. At the time of the monitoring visit, 41 learners attend the college.

### Themes

**What progress have leaders, managers and teachers made in identifying accurately learners' starting points and ensuring that, as a result, learners achieve their full potential?**

**Reasonable progress**

Leaders, managers and teachers assess learners' starting points accurately. They have revised their approach to how they identify learners' starting points substantially. Teachers now assess a range of learners' skills, in addition to English and mathematics. These include an assessment of their levels of independence and communication skills, and behaviour. Assessment begins at the time of each learner's referral to the college and involves parents/carers and staff from the learner's current setting. Managers and teachers use all the information they collect effectively to determine the correct programme for each learner when they arrive at the college.

Managers' and teachers' approach to target-setting and monitoring is much better than it was at the previous inspection. They use learners' starting points to set targets and to monitor learners' progress in detail. Learners have individual learning plans that include targets that link to the achievement of qualifications. They also have targets that link to the development of their personal and social skills. All learners make at least the progress expected of them, and a few exceed expectations. However, targets are not always personalised or challenging enough, or linked directly to learners' individual ambitions. As a result, teachers do not always plan or structure activities in lessons that challenge learners sufficiently or prepare them specifically for their next steps.

Leaders, managers, governors and teachers use the recording and monitoring system, which was new at the previous inspection, very effectively to monitor learners' progress. They use this information to produce detailed and accurate reports for parents and governors on the progress that learners make.

Teachers support the development of learners' personal and social skills successfully through effective behaviour management strategies. They identify the causes of recognised behaviours in learners and implement activities that reduce the incidences of these behaviours. As a result, the impact of learners' challenging behaviour on their progress is reduced.

**What progress have leaders, managers and governors made in strengthening the quality improvement arrangements to ensure that the quality of the provision improves rapidly?**

**Reasonable progress**

Leaders, managers and governors have improved their approach to self-assessment significantly since the previous inspection. They understand fully the strengths and weaknesses of the college. The self-assessment report identifies clearly and in detail the actions that leaders, managers and governors take to improve the quality of the provision. It focuses accurately on the weaknesses identified in the inspection report, although too much of the self-assessment report is descriptive. Leaders explain the impact of the actions that they take clearly and articulately. However, they do not record this impact sufficiently in the quality improvement plan (QIP), or in other documents. The QIP does not show the impact that these actions have on raising standards, or how rapidly leaders and managers improve the quality of the provision over time. Minutes of meetings show that leaders focus their management discussions fully on the areas that require improvement. However, records do not demonstrate that leaders evaluate the impact of the actions they take sufficiently.

Leaders and governors have strengthened governance arrangements significantly. Governors have a breadth of skills that they use effectively to support leaders and managers. For example, they have experience of working with learners who have special educational needs and disabilities, and of working in the further education and skills sector. They take far greater responsibility for quality assurance arrangements than they did at the previous inspection. Governors hold leaders and managers frequently to account for the progress they make against the identified quality improvement actions. They meet with leaders often outside formal governors' meetings, to monitor the quality of the provision and learners' progress. Governors have improved their understanding of the organisation's post-19 provision significantly. The chair of governors sets appraisal targets for leaders and managers that link to the strategic vision.

Quality processes, such as performance management and the observation of teaching, learning and assessment, require development to ensure that they bring about improvement more rapidly. While processes have improved since the previous

inspection and they link explicitly to the corporate objectives, leaders and managers do not implement them rigorously enough. For example, staff appraisal targets are still not sufficiently personalised. All teachers receive the same targets, regardless of the different groups of learners that they teach, or the outcomes of their individual lesson observations. Lesson observations do not take account sufficiently of the impact that learning support assistants (LSAs) have on the progress that learners make. They do not take into account whether the LSAs work effectively with the teacher to support learners. On a few occasions during the monitoring visit, joint observers focused too much on what the teacher was doing and not enough on the impact that teaching was having on learning.

**What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that most learners benefit from meaningful work experience placements and careers information, advice and guidance, that improve their work-related skills, personal development and future opportunities? Reasonable progress**

Leaders and managers have improved learners' access to work-related learning effectively. All learners now participate in a form of work-related activity as part of their study programmes.

Leaders and managers have established partnerships with 13 businesses to secure external work experience placements for the most-able learners. At the previous inspection, they worked with one employer. Learners benefit from developing work skills. These include understanding administrative tasks, such as how a company's internal and external postal systems work, organisational skills and the handling of money. Learners who have more complex needs make items in their practical lessons that they sell at internal markets and fayres. These include herb potholders and bath 'bombs'. As a result, they develop their customer service skills and their understanding of money successfully. Other learners benefit from internal work experience. For example, they work in the college's café, where they take orders and deal confidently with money. Others work in the college's kitchen, preparing lunches and snacks for staff and their peers from predetermined orders.

Leaders and managers have put in place appropriate actions to improve the quality of the impartial careers advice and guidance (CIAG) that they provide for learners. As part of the revised curriculum, leaders introduced the Department for Education's 'preparing for adulthood' (PfA) programme. This helps learners and their parents to gain a better understanding of what pathways are available to learners when they leave the college. It also explains their rights and responsibilities. Staff attend the local PfA networking meetings frequently. They share useful information from these meetings with parents through a CIAG newsletter. Leaders and managers have strengthened their relationships with external agencies, such as Connexions, which provides impartial CIAG sessions for both learners and their parents. However, these

are relatively new initiatives and the impact of whether they improve learners' and parents' understanding of the future options available to them is not yet evident.

**How effective is the strategic vision in ensuring that leaders, managers and governors have high expectations of what all learners can achieve? Reasonable progress**

Leaders and governors have implemented a five-year strategic plan that sets out clear and focused priorities to develop a high-quality provision for all learners. Its vision is to empower young adults to live fulfilling lives, to respond quickly to the changing needs of disabled learners, and to prepare them effectively for adulthood. Leaders and governors have put relevant actions in place against most of the priorities in this plan. Staff at all levels speak articulately about the vision and how they support its implementation. For example, teachers have taken on specific and additional responsibilities in line with the plan. These include leading on the PFA developments, the implementation of new therapies, and curriculum developments and training to improve the support for visually- and hearing-impaired learners. Learners have access to a wider range of therapies, such as dance, rebound therapy, hydrotherapy and speech and language therapy.

Leaders and managers introduced a revised curriculum in September 2018. The content and breadth of learning contained within the three available 'pathways' align more closely with learners' different and diverse ranges of starting points. The new curriculum challenges learners to progress through a variety of levels within their pathway and on to the next pathway level, where appropriate.

Leaders and governors introduced the strategic plan in September 2018. Consequently, it is too soon to judge its full impact on raising the quality of the provision and expectations of learners and staff.

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