

MONITORING VISIT: MAIN FINDINGS

Name of college: Thanet College

Date of visit: 5 May 2009

Context

The college is a medium sized general college of Further Education. Thanet is the most deprived area in the south-east of England and is part of the East Kent area designated by the Government Office for the South East as a Special Assistance area. Thanet in particular has a higher than average proportion of those not in education, employment or training (NEET) and while this has reduced in 2007/08 from a baseline of 11.3%, it is still above average. Thanet also has above average numbers of looked after children and teenage parents. Thanet College's partnership contributes to vocational opportunities for 14–16 year-olds. The college is a member of two 14–19 planning forums in Kent, Thanet Forum, and the Dover, Deal and Sandwich Collegiate. The college works alongside 11 secondary schools, of which seven have sixth forms, to offer a broad range of opportunities for learners aged 14–16. The pre-vocational catering centre is well established and a combined school links programmes offering vocational tasters to some 80 Year 10 and 11 pupils from six schools and provision delivered by the college on behalf of Kent County Council's Alternative Curriculum Unit.

Achievement and standards

What further success has the college achieved in the improvement of overall success rates for learners aged 16–18?	Reasonable progress
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The previous monitoring report in 2008 judged that the college had made reasonable progress in improving the overall success rates for learners aged 16–18. The report stated that in 2006/07 the overall success rates for 16–18 year-olds on long courses was 69%, four points above the previous year's rates. Overall success rates for level 1, 2 and 3 learners had increased since the previous year 2005/06. Level 3 success rates showed significant improvements, from 66% to 75% for long courses and were above the national average.

The college continues to make reasonable progress. College data for 2007/08 shows an improved overall success rate for 16–18 year-olds on all long courses, broadly in line with the national average. In 2007/08 significant improvements were made at levels 1 and 2 and the Skills for Life provision. However, following the significant improvement for level 3 long courses in 2006/07, the overall success rate fell slightly in 2007/08 to around the national average.

Are retention rates still improving?	Reasonable progress
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The previous monitoring visit in 2008 stated that the college had made reasonable progress in improving retention rates but that they remained below the national average for both adults and learners aged 16–18.

The college is making reasonable progress. Current college data for 2007/08 shows improvement at all levels for young learners and adults particularly at level 2. The overall retention rate for 2007/08 is 88%, in line with the national average for this period which is 88% for young learners and 87% for adults. The 2008/09 college target for retention is 90%. The current in-year retention for both groups is 90%.

What further success has the college achieved in the improvement of timely completion of frameworks in work-based learning?	Insufficient progress
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The annual assessment report in 2007 stated that in most areas completion of frameworks had improved. Advanced apprentices' completion had increased from 26% in 2005/06, to 61% in 2006/07. Apprentices' achievement had risen from 50% in 2005/06 to 65% in 2006/07. Timely completion of frameworks had shown an improvement across all apprenticeships from 32% to 40%.

The college has made insufficient progress with work-based learning. Data for 2007/08 show that framework completion rates for advanced apprentices overall remained static at 61%, broadly in line with the national average. Overall framework completion rates are also in line with the national average for 2007/08. Timely completion rates for advanced apprentices fell significantly in 2007/08 to a point just above the national average. Data is now more accurate and secure. Additional workplace key skills support has improved learners' progress through their apprenticeships. The appointment of a learning success co-ordinator to support learners and tutors has proved popular and effective. Current retention and learners' progress indicate an overall timely completion success rate of 76% for 2008/09.

The College has achieved 93% of its recruitment targets on its Train to Gain provision. Achievement of those on Skills for Life programmes in 2007/08 was 100%. Achievements of level 2 and 3 qualifications were satisfactory. At level 2, achievement was 63% and at level 3 was 71% for qualifications for the same period. The current retention rate for Train to Gain learners is 92%.

Quality of provision

What further progress has been made by the college in raising the standards of teaching and learning?	Reasonable progress
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At the monitoring visit in 2008 the college was judged to have made reasonable progress in raising the standards of teaching and learning.

The college continues to make reasonable progress in this area. The new system of lesson observations introduced last year is working well. Staff understand the processes and value the support provided. Lesson observations are now unannounced and more emphasis is placed on learning and learners' progress. Some staff make good use of peer observations to enable them to reflect on their teaching practice and work towards improving the learners' experience. The Performance Standards developed by the college provide an effective framework for the lesson observation process. In 2007/08 some 80% of teaching was judged as good or better. Due to increased strength of observations, the proportion of good teaching has fallen slightly. The college is establishing a correlation in some areas between retention, success rates and the outcomes of observations. Observation records are generally comprehensive, however on some forms standard practices are recorded as strengths and sometimes the justification behind grading decisions is unclear.

What further success has the college achieved in the quality of information, advice and guidance?	Significant progress
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The college has made significant progress with the provision of information, advice and guidance since the annual assessment visit in 2007. Learners speak very highly of the support they receive from their teachers and from the good range of services available to them at Thanet. Those joining the college from school receive good quality information on the options available to them and the small number who wish to transfer courses after joining the college are supported well in doing this. Mature learners are supported very well in their return to formal education. Induction and initial assessment of learners' support needs are thorough and well managed.

Learners value the additional support they get to help them further develop their skills in literacy and numeracy. The take up of this support is good and the college provides support for over 700 learners, many of whom use this opportunity to gain accreditation in literacy and numeracy. College data indicates that learners who receive additional support in basic skills do slightly better than their peers.

Over 900 learners receive educational maintenance allowances, and some 650 access learning support fund assistance. Good partnership arrangements with the local Connexions service provides assistance for learners via the personal adviser team. This experienced team provides specialist support for those learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In addition a college-based intensive personal adviser works with a number of learners who face crises, for example as result of pregnancy, drug or alcohol-related issues, or who face homelessness. In the past year that exceeded 300 learners.

During their programme, full-time and substantive part-time learners have access to an effective tutorial entitlement. The tutorial provision is well developed and appropriately flexible to allow the needs of groups and individual learners to be met. Tutorials and careers work closely together in this aspect. Some innovative work has been carried out through the Aim Higher project and the college now has 18 Progression Agreements in place with local universities, involving approximately 150 learners. Much important guidance and support work is done in community settings such as job clubs and work with care leavers and young carers.

Leadership and management

What further success has the college had in managing course performance?	Significant progress
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At the monitoring visit in 2008 inspectors judged that the college had made reasonable progress in managing course performance.

The college has made significant progress in this area. A comprehensive system is in place for the management of course performance which is based on the agreed Performance Standards introduced in September 2008. These standards have helped improvements in course reviews by raising expectations, introducing more clarity into procedures and ensuring more consistency amongst curriculum areas.

Staff speak of a college which has team-working and strong communication at its heart. All staff have a clear view, understanding and involvement in the curriculum review process and in setting targets for improvement. Targets are negotiated with course leaders and quality improvement plans developed at course level ensure that improvements are identified and effectively monitored. Heads of Section meet regularly with course leaders to monitor the performance of courses and individuals. Interventions now take place earlier and curriculum managers are supported well in these by senior managers.

The management of data has improved significantly over the last two years. Staff are able to monitor key performance targets such as attendance, retention and learners' success more closely. This has improved the self-assessment process and enabled more accurate judgements to be made at course level. The college has recently introduced electronic registers and attendance is better managed at all levels.