

# Northern Counties College

## Inspection report

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**Unique reference number:** 131946

**Name of lead inspector:** Sue Harrison HMI

**Last day of inspection:** 29 September 2011

**Type of provider:** Independent specialist college

**Address:** Tankerville Terrace  
Jesmond  
Newcastle upon Tyne  
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**Telephone number:** 0191 2812888

## Information about the college

1. Northern Counties College is a regional provider of specialist education for young people aged between 18 and 25 years with moderate to severe learning difficulties who require significant specialist support to gain access to learning. The college is part of the Percy Hedley Foundation, a regional charity that provides a range of services to communities in the north-east of England. The college was opened in January 2006. It is located in Jesmond, near to the centre of Newcastle, and uses the local environment to support the curriculum and provide realistic social, work and cultural opportunities.
2. In 2010/11, 54 learners enrolled, nine of whom were residential. Learner statistics for 2010/2011 identify a range of disabilities including 23 learners with cerebral palsy, eight with autistic spectrum disability and eight with specific and rare syndromes. The balance of male to female students is almost equal. In line with the population from which the college recruits, very few students come from minority-ethnic backgrounds. The college operates a curriculum based on life skills and work skills, including work experience. In addition to teaching facilities, students have access to a range of therapists and other professionals who support individuals in their learning.
3. Governance is provided by a board of governors and the Director of Adult Services for the Percy Hedley Foundation. The board comprises governors from the Foundation and members recruited from the region to ensure local representation and awareness of the needs of stakeholders in the area. A new principal took up post in August 2011, and a new deputy principal in September 2011.

<b>Type of provision</b>	<b>Number of enrolled learners in 2010/11</b>
<b>Provision for young learners:</b>  Further education (16 to18)	9 full-time learners
<b>Provision for adult learners:</b> Further education (19+)	45 full-time learners

## Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

<b>Overall effectiveness of provision</b>	<b>Grade 2</b>
<b>Capacity to improve</b>	<b>Grade 2</b>
	<b>Grade</b>
Outcomes for learners	2
Quality of provision	2
Leadership and management	2
Safeguarding	2
Equality and diversity	2

## Overall effectiveness

4. This is a good college because of the successful strategies used to help learners enjoy and achieve well. Of particular note is the partnership work that enables them to take part in realistic work activities. Another key strength is the promotion of awareness of disability in the community. Teaching and learning are generally good and initial assessment processes are satisfactory. Specialist support is good, though in a few cases it is not in place sufficiently early. The work-related and life skills aspects of the curriculum work well, but whole day lessons in subjects like functional skills are less effective. Learners respond well to being treated as young adults and the atmosphere in the college is purposeful and respectful. Leaders and managers provide clear guidelines for staff and support them well in their work. Although formal quality-assurance procedures are not fully developed, the college has a good understanding of areas that require further development, as well as its strengths.

## Main findings

- Learners really enjoy their college experience. They gain confidence in communicating with other people and make good progress in learning to make choices and become more independent.
- Learners gain a good range of independent living and work-related skills. Levels of progression to work-related activities and to supported living after college are high. Success rates on accredited courses are good. In a few lessons, learners' progress is too limited.
- Learners feel safe in the college and they make good progress in learning to manage their own behaviour, to take turns and to work well with others. They

make an excellent contribution to the local community, particularly in the work they do to raise understanding of disability.

- Teaching and learning are good. In most lessons, teachers and support workers are skilled at finding ways for learners to understand work and take part successfully in the learning activity. Occasionally, support workers prompt learners too much.
- Assessment is satisfactory. The assessment of learners' personal, medical, behavioural and social needs is generally good. However, staff do not always have enough information about what learners already know or can do when they start at college and returning learners sometimes spend too long being re-assessed at the start of each year.
- The work-related and independent-living curriculum is good. Partnership work is outstanding. A particular strength of the college is the range and quality of work placements available to learners. However, other aspects of the curriculum are less effective, especially lessons that last a whole day on the same subject.
- Specialist support for learners is good. They benefit from good quality input from a range of therapists and good facilities, such as the hydrotherapy pool. In a few cases, specialist input is not in place quickly enough when learners start at the college.
- Leadership and management are good. Staff are clear about their roles and a high priority is given to staff training. The day-to-day running of the college is smooth. There is a calm, welcoming feel and staff are skilful at promoting an ethos of enjoyment as well as learning.
- The Board of Governors provides clear direction for the future of the college and they have steered the college well through the recent changes within the senior leadership team. Senior leaders and managers communicate well with staff and set out clear priorities for the college.
- Arrangements for safeguarding are good. Staff are well trained and students learn how to keep themselves safe and what to do if they have any concerns. Equality and diversity are well promoted within the college. Learners' and employers' views are taken into account well in developing the provision.
- The self-assessment report contains too much description rather than evaluation. Aspects of quality assurance are too informal. However, staff and managers know their college well. They are clear about areas for development as well as strengths of the college and inspectors' judgements concur with the grades the college awarded itself.

## **What does Northern Counties College need to do to improve further?**

- Improve the following aspects of assessment:
  - for new students, ensure that information on their prior attainment is shared quickly with staff so that targets set are sufficiently detailed and challenging

- ensure that specialist therapies for individual students are in place sufficiently early to assist initial assessment
  - for returning students, ensure that their assessment reviews are carried out within a shorter period.
- Ensure that those aspects of the quality improvement cycle that are currently too informal are captured in a more systematic way.

### **Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors**

#### **What learners like:**

- the way staff understand them, are friendly and fun, and help them to learn
- learning new things and going out in the community
- making friends
- learning to do more things for themselves
- being more confident at communicating with other people
- the work placements they go on, and the business administration course
- the social activities.

#### **What learners would like to see improved:**

- the music in the common room being too loud
- additional hydrotherapy, physiotherapy and sports, requested by a minority of learners.

### **Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors**

#### **What employers like:**

- the good level of background information they receive about learners
- the professionalism of the support workers who accompany learners
- staff who are always available if the employer needs help or guidance
- the way they see the learners grow in confidence and skills as a result of the work placements.

#### **What employers would like to see improved:**

- more information on the learners' specific targets.

## Main inspection report

### Capacity to make and sustain improvement

**Grade 2**

5. The college has maintained a good quality of provision for learners during a period of illness and retirement within the senior leadership team. During this period, the parent body provided very effective support for the strategic direction of the college. Succession planning and arrangements to put in place a new senior team were very well managed, with careful consideration given to the needs of the college in the next phase of its development. For example, governors gave due consideration to changing national priorities and funding guidance. At the same time, the day-to-day running of the college was effectively supervised. Although the formal self-assessment document is too descriptive, staff and managers have a good understanding of the college's areas for development as well as its strengths. Since the last inspection the college has addressed areas for improvement that were identified, and outcomes for learners have improved from satisfactory to good.

### Outcomes for learners

**Grade 2**

6. As a result of skills acquired at the college, learners make good progress into further education, employment, social enterprise and supported living. Of the 25 students who left the college last year, two progressed to voluntary work, six to supported employment, one to paid employment and nine to social enterprise programmes. One learner gained an internship with the NHS.
7. The effective development of vocational skills enables learners to achieve well in their work placements within college and on employers' premises. Learners enjoy working in real work environments at the college, where they gain an understanding of food preparation and service skills in the café. In the conference and business administration centre, they work to deadlines, are polite with customers and work well in teams to solve problems. Levels of participation in work placements are high and learners acquire skills with a wide range of employers, for example, within the housekeeping department of a well known arts outlet in the city.
8. Learners make good progress across a broad set of skills, including tasks for daily living and personal care, which helps them to move into independent or supported living after college where appropriate. Most importantly for these learners, they improve their confidence and their ability to make choices, communicate with others and work in teams. Success rates on foundation level qualifications are good. However, in a few lessons, learners' progress is limited by too much emphasis on completing tasks, rather than developing skills.
9. Learners feel safe. They show improved awareness of personal safety and demonstrate good levels of safe working practices. For example, whilst working on reception, learners appropriately challenge visitors to check that they are

wearing identification badges. Learners enjoy coming to college. They make good progress in learning to manage their own behaviour, to take turns and work well with others. All this prepares them well for work and community-based activities and ensures that they can participate in a wide range of learning experiences.

10. Effective therapy enables learners to gain access to the curriculum. It also helps them to gain an understanding of the impact of their disability on the choices they make and their lifestyle, for example, the impact of food and exercise choices on diabetes and heart conditions. The ability of a minority of learners to gain access to the curriculum and make choices is limited at the start of their programmes while they wait for effective communication strategies to be implemented, and this hampers their ability to make healthy choices.
11. Learners' contribution to the community is outstanding. Their involvement is influential with a wide range of partners. Learners contributed to the development of an Employers' Toolkit by undertaking access audits and mystery-shopper activities to test out services for the disabled. They deliver disability awareness training to groups of professionals, such as social workers. They help to organise, and participate well in, learner conferences hosted at the city's football ground.

## **The quality of provision**

## **Grade 2**

12. Teaching and learning are good. Staff encourage learners through the use of effective praise and an expectation of high standards of work and behaviour. They use stimulating activities, such as a cookery competition based on a popular television programme. Pair and group work effectively develop learners' interactive skills and encourage cooperative working and turn-taking. Staff generally use an appropriate range of communication strategies and ensure that learners have sufficient time to process and respond to information. Learning support staff are well trained and experienced. They are skilled at helping learners to work increasingly independently, though in a few cases they offer too much intervention. Resources to support teaching and learning are generally of a good standard.
13. Staff make good use of realistic working environments within the college to develop learners' skills. However, they do not always record sufficiently the small steps of development needed to improve personal and social skills. Termly and annual reviews provide a clear outline of learners' overall progress, but do not always contain sufficiently detailed information.
14. Assessment is satisfactory. The assessment of learners' communication, behavioural, medical and social needs is generally good. All learners undertake a six-week assessment period at the start of the academic year. However, this is not always used sufficiently to gain a clear understanding of existing skills to inform target-setting. This extended assessment is not always appropriate for returning learners.

15. The curriculum is satisfactory. The strong focus on the development of practical skills within both the work skills and life skills strands of the curriculum is a strength of the college. It provides learners with useful opportunities to develop and practise transferable skills. Learners of all abilities take part in realistic and purposeful work and use the local community well to improve their skills. However, there is not always sufficient variety of learning activity within the classroom-based timetable. For example, in a functional skills lesson, learners are timetabled in the same room and carry out similar work for a whole day, which impairs their motivation and concentration.
16. The use of partnerships to develop the provision is outstanding. An exceptional employability project, which is run with the parent company and a range of local and national employers, provides learners with an extremely wide range of opportunities for work experience. Awareness-raising for the wider public about disability is another key strength of the college and learners are fully engaged in this work. This helps them to develop a greater understanding of the access needs of people with a range of disabilities. One example is learners who worked in partnership with engineering apprentices from another provider to design adapted gardening tools to meet the specific needs of learners within the horticulture subject area.
17. Support for learners is good. Physiotherapists, speech and language and occupational therapists provide clear guidelines for staff, parents and carers, and work alongside teachers where appropriate. Hydrotherapy sessions offer opportunities for exercise and relaxation. In a few cases, communication aids are not in place quickly enough. Transition planning for when learners leave college starts early in their programme and is good.

## **Leadership and management**

## **Grade 2**

18. The leadership team provides a strong focus on maintaining a good quality of education for learners. Staff support for the leadership team, and for the values of the organisation, contributes very well to this goal. Communication is good. Clear roles and responsibilities, and a well defined line-management structure, support the staff in carrying out their duties efficiently. Professional development for staff takes a high priority.
19. The college's board of governors provides clear strategic direction, within the context of the Foundation's goals and local and national priorities. A membership audit carried out by the board shows a wide range of skills and experience that ensures the effectiveness of the board in carrying out its duties. It has also helped trustees to identify areas of expertise they wish to target in new members. Governors monitor carefully the quality of provision and outcomes for learners. They fulfil well their statutory responsibilities. Self-assessment of the board's performance is underway, but is not sufficiently developed.
20. Safeguarding procedures are good. The college is very clear about its statutory responsibilities and demonstrates good practice in its policies and procedures.

Staff are well trained in all aspects of safeguarding and are confident to report any concerns. This has led to over-recording of minor incidents and the college is reviewing its recording procedures to ensure clarity of purpose. Students are taught well how to keep safe and how they can tell staff if they have any concerns.

21. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Outcomes are analysed by age, gender, race and type of disability, and this shows no significant difference between groups. Training for students on the equality and diversity committee ensures that their input is real and valued. Last year, they identified the need for changes to the college website to ensure best practice. Students increase their understanding of equality and diversity through induction and tutorial activity. Recruitment of staff and students is monitored well and actions are taken to address areas for improvement, for example, to recruit more male support workers. The board of governors includes representation from a minority-ethnic group, which helps the college to promote links with the community. Of particular note is the work undertaken by the college to promote awareness of disability within the community.
22. Engagement with users is good. The views of learners are gathered using appropriate methods of communication. However, feedback of the outcomes to learners is patchy. Learners are represented on the board of governors and all key college committees. The student council provides another useful vehicle for gaining learners' feedback and involving learners in running the college. Learners participate in the recruitment of managers and staff. Employers' feedback to inspectors is very positive about the ways the college involves them in developing provision for learners.
23. Self-assessment is effective. Although the final self-assessment report is too descriptive, the college has a good understanding of its strengths and areas for development. Inspector judgements concurred with grades the college awarded itself. Staff are well involved in the self-assessment process. Teaching and learning are monitored regularly and action is taken to address issues identified. However, the formal analysis of the outcomes of observations and follow up work are too sketchy.

## Information about the inspection

24. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and two additional inspectors, assisted by the college's vice-principal as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors also took account of the college's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the funding body, the previous inspection report, reports from the inspectorate's quality-monitoring inspection, and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
25. Inspectors used group and individual interviews and emails to gain the views of learners and employers. They also looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed for the provider. They observed learning sessions and work placements, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subject areas the college offers.

**Record of Main Findings (RMF)**  
**Northern Counties College**

**Learning types: 14 – 16:** Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; **16-18 Learner responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; **19+ responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses; **Employer responsive:** Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades <b>using the 4 point scale</b> 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	16-18 Learner responsive	19+ Learner responsive
<b>Approximate number of enrolled learners</b>			
Full-time learners	54	9	45
Part-time learners	0	0	0
<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Capacity to improve</b>	2		
<b>Outcomes for learners</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	2		
How well do learners attain their learning goals? How well do learners progress?	2 2		
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2		
How safe do learners feel?	2		
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	3		
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	1		
<b>Quality of provision</b>	<b>2</b>		
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2		
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	3		
How well do partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	1		
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2		
<b>Leadership and management</b>	<b>2</b>		
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2		
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	2		
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2		
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	2		
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	2		
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	2		
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2		

\*where applicable to the type of provision

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