

## Innovative leadership to create and develop specialist provision

*This case study was produced by Abingdon & Witney College in collaboration with MacIntyre (a national charity providing learning, support and care) on behalf of the Excellence Gateway*



The main Abingdon campus

**Sector relevance:** Further education, Independent Service Providers and special

**Keywords:** autism, communication difficulties, leadership, collaboration, co-location.

**Summary:** The Macintyre Abingdon Partnership (**MAP**) College is an example of a specialist college not only co-locating onto a mainstream college site but operating through the systems, processes and the funding mechanisms of the general FE sector.

**Context:** MacIntyre is a national charity committed to providing the highest quality learning, support and care services for children, young people and adults with learning disabilities, including those on the autistic spectrum. Abingdon & Witney College is a medium-sized general further education college, based across 5 different campuses in south and west Oxfordshire, serving a partly rural community but with some high-tech local enterprises in the proximity of Oxford and the Thames Valley. In a recent Ofsted inspection (February 2010) Abingdon & Witney College was given grade 1 outstanding provision for our provision for learners with learning disabilities and difficulties (Independent Learning and Leisure Skills) and for Partnerships.

**No Limits Programme** is an extension of the MAP College, offering off-site provision for those not able to cope with college environment. Students are supported by highly specialised teams. There is some transfer between the MAP College and No Limits, depending on the appropriateness of on-site provision for the young people, based on their social and care requirements.

**The Challenges:** MacIntyre and Abingdon & Witney College have collaborated over a number of years. Originally there was shared off-site provision many miles from either of the main campuses. It was identified by both organisations that the provision, although excellent, was rather isolated and did not offer suitable progression opportunities for the young people. It was decided to relocate this provision to the main campus in Abingdon. This decision to co-locate the provision for autism within the campus of the main college site led to the creation of MAP – MacIntyre Abingdon Partnership College and presented a number of leadership challenges.

**Leadership aims:** Both organisations had to initially identify and agree the aims of the MAP College and to commit to the achievement of those aims. The agreed aim of the MAP College is to enable young people to develop the skills they need to live, learn and, where appropriate work locally, and to make a successful transition to adult life.

**Leadership structure:** The MAP College comprises staff from both organisations, who have varied roles. Leadership roles are shared between the two organisations, whereas staff working in the MAP College in teaching and support roles are employed directly by MacIntyre, but have access to all Abingdon & Witney College systems (i.e. IT system, student database, college intranet) and facilities (i.e. computer rooms, access to the farm campus north of Witney, the training kitchen etc).

MacIntyre contribute a Head of Operations who works at a strategic level with responsibility within her remit for MAP, plus two Curriculum Managers who each oversee all aspects of the MAP College and the No Limits provision respectively.

Abingdon & Witney College contribute an Assistant Principal working at a strategic level with responsibility within her remit for MAP/No Limits, a Head of Faculty who oversees operational matters such as student enrolments, individual funding levels, course coding etc, assisted by a Quality Manager who specifically oversees curriculum quality, IV processes and the quality of teaching and learning.

**Leadership in operation:** Students at the MAP College and in the No Limits provision 'belong' to Abingdon and Witney College but their actual provision is sub-contracted to MacIntyre. In order to effectively lead the provision strategic and operational meetings take place between both organisations at different levels. Abingdon and Witney College Principal meets MacIntyre's Managing Director a minimum of twice per academic year for overall strategic planning. On a termly basis the MAP and No Limits Curriculum Managers meet with Abingdon and Witney College's Vice Principal, Finance & Resources, the Assistant Principal, Learner Support and the Head of Faculty, Foundation. Detailed agendas are drawn up collaboratively and agreed in advance. Monthly meetings are held between the Curriculum Managers and the Head of Faculty, Foundation with informal agendas. The Quality Manager from Abingdon and Witney College liaises regularly with the Curriculum Managers and teaching staff employed by MacIntyre. Between meetings there is regular face-to-face, phone and email contact between the Head of Faculty, Foundation and the Quality Manager and the MacIntyre team based in the MAP College and operating the No Limits provision. Decisions are implemented by following through agreed, minuted actions by agreed and minuted dates. These are reviewed at the start of subsequent meetings.

There has been an ongoing change of staff on both sides, due to the usual changeover of personnel and restructuring of the college but this has not had an impact on the overall success of the project. Effective handovers of information and expertise have taken place within each major partner when roles changed, and meetings were quickly set up to enable new staff in either MacIntyre or Abingdon and Witney College to meet with their counterparts to quickly establish effective lines of communication.

**Leadership with external bodies:** Historically there has been no residential provision for young people with severe autism and no day educational provision for 16 – 19 year olds with severe autism in Oxfordshire. Before the MAP College some students with severe autism would have had out of county placements that were expensive. If out-of-county residential provision was not wanted or was deemed inappropriate, there was no suitable local provision for these young people.



Funding for MAP and No Limits students is provided via the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA). For students who are 19+ their funding is actually from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) who provide the YPLA with the funds to offer the provision. The Local Authority has the responsibility for finding a place in education for all students with learning difficulties post 16, whether this is residential, out-of-county, with an Independent Service Provider etc. The Local Authority is responsible for confirming funding decisions for individual students and review evidence of progression to ensure value for money and appropriateness of choice of provision. Both

MacIntyre and Abingdon and Witney College are very aware of the importance of the relationship with the Local Authority. This is done through regular meetings between the Abingdon and Witney College and the Local Authority where student details, forecasts and required data are discussed. Without the confirmation of the quality and effectiveness of provision that the Local authority provides, the MAP College and No Limits would not be able to continue.

**Leadership attitudes and styles:** Abingdon and Witney College Principal, Teresa Kelly, gives strong leadership to drive forward the inclusion agenda. She states: *"It is very important to offer this provision because our view here at the college is that all are entitled to an education post-16 that is appropriate and meets their needs regardless of their level of ability. That can be very, very challenging when you are looking at students who indeed do challenge us in terms of their behaviour, but the basic, fundamental ethos is that all students [...] have that right and it is down to the college to actually make sure that's delivered in the best possible way"*. Teresa's leadership style is visionary, setting new directions and destinations, freeing staff to create the most effective provision. Teresa sets the ball rolling and keeps a track of the project from a distance, with occasional interventions at a strategic level.

MacIntyre state that the MAP College offers *young people with complex learning difficulties opportunities to learn that are truly inclusive and that will prepare each young person for greater independence in their adult lives. MacIntyre are a tightly run organisation with a positively autocratic style that suits a charity that operates across the entire country. They have tightly controlled procedures for inductions, staff training, health and safety, risk assessments etc. All staff must conform to the timescales and the structures as set out by the leadership. At the same time they can be very innovative in exploring ways to support young people with these difficulties.*

**Impacts of effective leadership:** The successful collaborative approach has created effective and quality provision for young people with autism and communication difficulties in Oxfordshire and surrounding counties. Provision now exists as an option for these young people that did not exist beforehand. The isolation of the original setting of provision was found to be a drawback and the co-location of the MAP College onto the main campus in Abingdon has proved to be a huge benefit in terms of integrating the young people into an existing college environment. This has allowed the programme to be greatly enriched in terms of facilities available including access to the training kitchen, the sports hall, computer suites etc.

Emphasis is placed on working alongside the young people and their families to find out about their aspirations for the future, identify interests and motivations and then provide practically based learning opportunities aimed at developing the skills which will enable learners to lead the lives they want. Each young person has a personalised programme which is designed to promote greater independence post-college and focuses on the development of social and communication

skills which are so crucial to improving future life chances. Aspirations are thereby raised realistically and sustainably.

The visionary leadership offered by Abingdon and Witney College has allowed the continued development of the programme as it subtly changes to suit the needs of the young people. For example the original conception was just for the MAP College but in the past two years, through discussions and collaborative working, it has been possible to set up the No Limits provision that effectively meets the needs of a more demanding cohort of young people, who would not be able to cope in a college environment.

The highly controlled leadership in evidence from MacIntyre enables very high quality provision to be delivered in a safe but creative learning environment. In addition their leadership style embraces innovation and encourages the exploration of different opportunities with partners, which fits well with the approach from Abingdon and Witney College.

Although both Abingdon and Witney College and MacIntyre have worked with other partners, the closeness required of this collaboration is new in terms of the integration of systems and sharing of physical spaces. There is also a leadership commitment to sustain this provision over a long period of time rather than a short renewable contract on a yearly or biannual basis. The co-location of provision means that the MAP College can offer programmes to learners with a wide range of support needs. Learners' skills, needs and interests are carefully assessed to enable the creation of flexible and highly personalised programmes, which can draw on the wider curriculum (e.g. a farm, a work-based community enterprise etc) on offer at the main college, whilst providing continuity of specialist support and a safe base from which to transition. This example of collaborative partnership is now being copied in other neighbouring counties.

**Leadership Challenges:** There are some philosophical and strategic challenges involved in working between organisations with a different ethos (further education versus national charity) and with different structures (FE college based within one county as opposed to a national charity). Bringing two very different organisations together has required understanding, compromise and patience in terms of differing systems, formats for paperwork and the ongoing alignment of quality processes and documentation. For example, both MacIntyre and Abingdon and Witney College have different Self-Assessment Report formats. It has been agreed that these will not be aligned as both formats represent sufficient quality. Another more mundane example is the sharing of asbestos reports for the building, which is owned by Abingdon and Witney College but used entirely by the MAP College.

However, many of these perceived differences are not significant as the effective leadership structures with their regular meetings enable staff to inform each other and collaborate effectively, dealing with any issues before they become a problem. Changes of personnel within both organisations have taken place, but the robust structures and clear mutual understanding of roles and goals has meant that provision continues to be effective and creative, underlining the commitment from the leadership from both sides.

Future changes to funding mechanisms as a result of the recommendations in the Green Paper will continue to create challenges for the partnership to overcome. As further information becomes available regarding the changes brought about by the Green Paper both leaderships will continue to respond to the challenges in an innovative way that continues to provide the best possible outcomes for the young people with severe autism and communication difficulties in Oxfordshire and beyond.

#### **Useful Links:**

[The MAP College](#) – includes short film describing the MAP College  
[Abingdon & Witney College](#) [MacIntyre](#)