Written response to the recommendations from Stow College

1. Introduction. Stow College, broadly welcomes the Committee’s Report in its entirely and has paid particular attention to Recommendations 36 to 70 which apply particularly to Further and Higher Education.

The Board of Management of Stow College concluded that its Mission, Vision and especially its corporate values were best served by the adoption of an overarching Equality Diversity and Inclusion Policy, under which a number of specific Procedures and Schemes would sit and whose currency and relevance would be maintained by college senior managers working collaboratively with stakeholders

The EDI Group is the strategic level group tasked with ensuring that this is delivered and comprises a Vice Principal, two Assistant Principals and several key college managers. The group oversees the work of a number of Working Groups which comprise staff, students and stakeholder members who can monitor the implementation of the procedures and Schemes and advise the main group on what the key objectives should be and what changes and developments are necessary to deliver those objectives. The Disability Equality Working Group is one such group.

2. Policy context: The following statement is an extract from the EDI Policy: “Stow College is committed to providing all its students and employees with an environment in which they are welcomed, respected, valued and supported in all their dealings with the College without reference to their sex, race, faith, disability, sexual orientation or age.

Scope: (extract)

- The College will ensure that opportunities within the college, whether for students or staff are not unfairly or unlawfully influenced by an individual’s disability
- The College will ensure that its facilities and services are accessible to all members of the College community regardless of disability.
- The College will ensure that learning resources are accessible to all members of the College community regardless of disability and will seek to ensure that current best practice in learning and teaching informs all developments in methodology.

Stow College is committed to the provision of a welcoming, supportive and positive working environment for all its staff and learners regardless of any disability which they might have. It will seek to promote disability equality, celebrate diversity and to remove unreasonable barriers to opportunity for all members of the College community”.

It is against that general background that the following specific observations may be understood.

3. As indicated above, at Stow College, we take very seriously the importance of being a welcoming and accommodating college in terms of all
learners, not least those who face barriers because of disabilities. We value
the contribution which disabled learners make to the College community and
in a variety of ways we seek to celebrate that contribution.

In general, then, we seek to offer pre-entry advice and guidance to all
applicants, but where an applicant discloses a disability we seek to offer the
earliest possible interventions in order to allow them to make informed
decision about their course, and their individual needs and expectations. We
offer a range of points for disclosure throughout a learners’ college life, and
we seek to provide a variety of ways in which disclosure can occur in order to
maximise the opportunity and the comfort to the learner who feels awkward or
uncomfortable about disclosing.

As far as is possible, learners with disabilities will join mainstream
programmes with the assurance of appropriate additional support, provided
both within the classroom and through the Hub which is the College’s Learner
Support Centre. It is important to emphasise that the Hub is not a ‘disability
centre’; a very conscious decision was taken several years ago to de-
stigmatise the centre and to ensure that it is a service which provides supports
to all learners, whatever their needs. It happens that support for disabled
learners is one such service. In the most recent HMie Review of the College,
published in May 2007 the Inspectorate made the following observations:

“The Hub provided a warm and welcoming environment. Staff used its
appropriate range of assistive technology effectively to support learners. The
college had placed key software resources on its computer network, giving
learners access to them in most areas of the college.

Responsive mechanisms were in place for learners to be referred or to refer
themselves to all central support services. The college had established
appropriate referral mechanisms with a range of external agencies but
strategic links with key agencies involved in the support of learners with
additional support needs were not fully developed.”

The College recognises the impact of the reservation included in the final
sentence and is working actively to improve this situation.

The College has used the toolkit provided by SFC to audit its estate, facilities
and services and has under constant review at a very senior level the need to
move forward continuously in the provision of facilities and services to met the
needs of our community. The fact that, in the College Sector the learner
community changes in character very regularly can sometimes present a
challenge in this regard. However, this does not prevent us from engaging in
that continuous improvement.

Where appropriate and where it would be helpful, we are happy to engage
with outside agencies and specialist disability groups to help us to identify
improvements in services and facilities and to take on board their
recommendations. This is particularly useful given that the comparatively
short ‘shelf-life’ of a typical college student which is often manifested in a
limited willingness to engage in activities beyond the boundaries of their core curricular commitments. It is important to note that this is not universally true and we do have some very highly motivated and enthusiastic learners who are contributors to the DEWG and who have added greatly to the College’s understanding.

One area of the Committee’s report where we feel it might be important to comment is in relation to Recommendation 42; it has unfortunately, been our experience on some occasions that local education authorities have been reluctant to pass on information about young learners progressing from secondary education to vocational programmes in college. We have had some informal discussions with other colleges around this matter and there is at least a possibility that this is a ‘relationship-building’ issue. Where a college is fed by a single local authority or at least significantly so, the opportunity for strong personal bonds between local schools, authority officers and key college staff is clear. Stow is a city-centre college which recruits from many local authorities and very many schools and it is suggested that these personal links are more difficult to forge.

That said, we are not convinced that any problems we have experience have impacted significantly on the individual learner; it may have imposed additional burdens on college staff to pursue the information, but we have sought at all times to ensure that the individual learner is not directly affected by any of these challenges. It should also be noted that, where we recruit learners who have profound and complex disabilities (Dominant Programme Group 18) from schools and centres with whom we have build a relationship over time, the information flow, in both directions, is significantly better. The reservation expressed above relates mainly to the individual learner who joins a mainstream programme but who may require additional learning support, however simple or elaborate that support plan may be.

In relation to information for learners we would wish to draw to the attention of the Committee two points:

- In terms of individual information, advice and guidance the College encourages and supports its staff in maintaining the currency and relevance of their CPD in appropriate areas. We would seek, therefore to ensure that all learners, and especially learners who experience barriers because of disability, have access to good advice and information in house. In addition we are constantly seeking to build up the database of external organisations, groups and agencies with whom we can network to the benefit of our learners in this regard. Prompt and relevant referral is as important as good in house services.
- We work to develop high quality and high value publications which will provide useful and reliable information to learners before they come to Stow, while they are at Stow and even after they have left Stow. These are available in alternative media. In addition we are reviewing the value which imaginative use if ICLT can add to information and advice giving.
We have good working relations with Careers Scotland and use its services regularly to support our learners. However, recognising that even this valuable service is a finite resource we have sought to engage in capacity-building in house to supplement the specialist services Careers Scotland provides and the in house service is based within the Support for Learning unit referred to earlier (The Hub).

One area where we would specifically agree with the Committee is in relation to the College to University point of transition. One frequently reported experience of our learners who seek to progress on to degree courses is that universities are very large and impersonal, especially when compared with much smaller and closer-knit college communities. The best of the HEIs with whom we work deal with disabled learners very well and provide excellent support; the worst seems at times to present the view that it is a privilege to be admitted to the institution and that it is not their role to look after the more vulnerable. It is the view of Stow College that we must work with our articulation partners to continuously improve the transitional experiences of our disabled learners but we would certainly welcome any additional support and encouragement which the Scottish Parliament or the Scottish Funding Council could provide to help move this agenda forward.

The committee will not be surprised if the College’s most specific concerns relate to issues of funding, both for the learner and for the College. Stow College supports fully and enthusiastically the step change which is currently in progress to move from a medical model of diagnosis towards a highly individualised model of provision (and consequently funding) based on need. The College has invested in staff training and development to be able to support this shift and has committed itself to assisting in whatever ways it can in the sectoral move. There are, then, a few areas of concern which flow from that:

- Where the learner is concerned: It does seem that, in assisting students to apply for Disabled Student’s Allowance, we encounter variations in the application of rules or standards. In some cases, the College’s analysis of need is accepted without question and the student receives appropriate support. In almost identical cases, the student is told that he or she needs, for example, an Educational Psychologist’s report to receive funding. The colleges and their learners need consistency, but it is essential that we have consistency around the needs-led model.

- Where the colleges are concerned: we understand that part of the purpose of needs-led assessment is to ensure that as far as possible, support for disabled learners is mainstreamed and that additional funding (ELS funding) is given only for that which is genuinely additional and beyond what would and should be offered to all learners. Nonetheless, as colleges become ever more inclusive and welcome more and more learners into their communities there are growing pressures on mainstream budgets to stretch to provide the kinds of services and facilities which are essential to meet the shifting patterns of need, and the changing volume of need which we encounter. The
quantum of funding available to provide additional support requires urgent and thoughtful review if colleges are not to find themselves caught between the demands of legislation and the justified expectations of disabled learners on the one hand, and the pressures to maintain high-specification mainstream provision on the other. We would urge the Committee to consider how these tensions could be resolved.

Finally, the College has recognised that DPG18 courses run the risk of being insufficiently challenging and lacking in progression and in proper metrics. Stow College uses its annual programme life-cycle analysis to challenge the validity of the DPG18 programmes which it has supported very successfully for several years now and has used this mechanism to review and improve programmes where it was identified necessary. The staff on these programmes liaise with staff from the schools and day-centres from which the learners come to help to provide this analysis.

Stow College has a stated commitment to inclusion and to the provision of a high quality learning experience for all learners, regardless of the barriers they might face, whether because of disability or race, or other obstacle. We welcome the close attention which the Parliament’s EOC has focussed on the issues and look forward to continuing to work in partnership and cooperation with all who can assist us to improve provision and the learner experience in the coming years.

Stow College
7 December 2007