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Mr Marcus Clinton  
Principal and Chief Executive  
Northumberland College  
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Dear Mr Clinton

### **Short inspection of Northumberland College**

Following the short inspection on 4–5 May 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The inspection was the first short inspection carried out since the college was judged to be good in February 2013.

#### **This provider continues to be good.**

You and your leaders and governors have a clear vision, underpinned by clearly defined strategies for Northumberland College to deliver high-quality learning programmes that meet the diverse needs of Northumberland's communities and employers. Leaders and governors have an accurate understanding of the quality of provision and outcomes for learners across all aspects of the college's work. You have maintained the strengths identified at the previous inspection. A few weaknesses remain, including outcomes in English and mathematics for learners following 16 to 19 study programmes and the quality of provision on a minority of apprenticeship programmes. However, leaders' accurate self-assessment and clearly defined improvement plans are bringing about the required improvements in these areas.

Since your appointment as principal in 2014, you and other leaders and managers have strengthened the college's quality improvement and performance management arrangements. Academy heads are held to account well for the quality of provision and outcomes for learners. Staff have access to, and participate in, a good range of training and development activities to maintain and improve their practice as teachers. Staff who are identified as underperforming are provided with bespoke training and development to enable them to improve. A few staff have left the college as a result of the application of performance management procedures.

Leaders and staff at Northumberland College reinforce effectively the importance to learners of developing good work-related skills and attitudes. As well as carrying out work experience placements, learners on 16 to 19 study programmes benefit from many good realistic working environments at the college. Learners in motor vehicle work in a licensed Ministry of Transport test centre, and the working farm and extensive zoo at the Kirkley Hall campus provide learners on agriculture, horticulture and animal care courses with excellent real working environments.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

Leaders and managers have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that action is taken to safeguard all learners. Leaders effectively promote a culture of safety across all college activities. Safeguarding policies and procedures are clear, and managers communicate them effectively to staff and learners. Staff at all of the college's campuses use effectively the online system for recording concerns about learners. The college's central safeguarding team responds to any concerns swiftly, categorising them into potential issues that require immediate action while also sharing more general concerns with staff responsible for learners' support, so that appropriate support for individual learners is provided. Incident logs for safeguarding concerns are detailed and record actions taken, including where referrals are made to external agencies.

Governors have identified a lead governor for safeguarding who ensures that the board is fully briefed about general safeguarding issues and those relevant to learners at the college. The designated safeguarding lead officer holds an appropriate central record for all staff who work in regulated activity, confirming that they are eligible and have had all the necessary checks. Leaders responsible for safeguarding ensure that the 33 learners aged 14 to 16 who attend the college on alternative learning programmes through their schools are supervised at all times, and have learning and social areas that are separate from those used by adult learners.

All staff and governors have carried out training in the 'Prevent' duty. Leaders and governors have a good understanding of the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism in the context of communities in Northumberland.

### **Inspection findings**

- Leaders and governors are ambitious for Northumberland College to provide high-quality education and training that enable learners, many of whom join the college with low prior attainments, to achieve and progress to further learning or employment. Governors, the principal and other leaders have successfully established a culture of high expectations for staff and for what learners can achieve. Leaders and managers implement quality improvement arrangements appropriately. This leads to an accurate self-assessment report which provides leaders and governors with a good understanding of the college's strengths and remaining areas for improvement. Leaders are knowledgeable about the effectiveness of different curriculum areas of the college. They accurately identify outstanding features, such as in arts, media and publishing, and

provision that requires improvement, such as in construction and engineering. Leaders and managers use a wide range of performance indicators which they update regularly to maintain a well-informed view about the progress that the college is making in bringing about improvements and maintaining strengths. Governors use these performance indicators effectively to hold the principal and senior leaders to account. Governors and leaders are committed to resolving the remaining areas for improvement to achieve their ambition that Northumberland College will become an outstanding college.

- Leaders and managers ensure that the requirements of 16 to 19 study programmes are met effectively in all subject areas. Learners carry out planned work experience or, if they are not yet ready to participate in external placements, have a challenging experience of work built into their study programme. Learners improve their employability skills within the college through working in a good range of real working environments. They improve their interpersonal skills and behaviour through a wide range of enrichment activities, including a 'boot camp' at the college's outdoor activity centre. The passport to employment encourages learners to record the personal and work-related skills they develop through their study programme activities. Learners' academic and vocational achievements are celebrated effectively across the college through their participation in regional and national competitions and graduation events. A wide range of cross-college events and themed tutorials raise learners' awareness about topics such as online safety, mental, physical and sexual health, and the risks associated with extremism and radicalisation.
- All learners on 16 to 19 study programmes who have not already achieved GCSEs at grades A\* to C in English and/or mathematics take qualifications in these subjects. Managers correctly recognised that, in 2015/16, the quality of provision and learners' progress and achievement, particularly in functional skills qualifications in both English and mathematics, were not good enough. Leaders took prompt action to bring about improvements. They established an English and mathematics academy and appointed new managers. The robust application of performance management arrangements in the new academy led to a number of staff leaving the college. Managers recruit new staff carefully to ensure that they have appropriate skills and qualifications.
- Managers have improved the rigour of the arrangements for identifying accurately learners' starting points and the specific English and mathematical skills that learners need to improve. They have also introduced a more rigorous system for monitoring and recording learners' progress and achievement on English and mathematics courses. Through this, they are able to identify promptly those learners who are at risk of not achieving, and put appropriate additional support in place. As a result of the improvements made since September 2016, many more learners are now making good progress in improving their skills and achieving qualifications in both English and mathematics. Managers correctly recognise, however, that despite the progress that the college has made in 2016/17, further improvements are required before they can evaluate the quality of provision and outcomes for learners in English and mathematics as consistently good. Learners' attendance, particularly in mathematics lessons, is too low. Although the proportion of learners who

achieve functional skills qualifications is improving, achievement rates remain around the average for similar colleges in England.

- Leaders and managers consider a wide range of appropriate evidence to underpin their evaluation that the quality of provision and outcomes for learners on programmes in arts, media and publishing are outstanding. Leadership and management of this provision are highly effective. Teachers plan learning thoroughly, considering carefully the diverse needs of learners, many of whom have complex needs and barriers to learning. Learners gain a good understanding about the expectations of employers in the sector because they undertake live assignments with local clients. Learners acquire excellent skills through their learning activities. The standards of learners' work and performance are particularly high. A very high proportion of learners achieve their intended qualifications. The large majority of learners who achieve qualifications at levels 1 and 2 progress to the next level at Northumberland College. A very high proportion of learners who achieve qualifications at level 3 join higher education courses, many at prestigious universities.
- After evaluating the quality of delivery and outcomes on the apprenticeship programme as requiring improvement in 2015/16, leaders put in place a range of appropriate actions to bring about improvements. Previously delivered within academies, the quality of provision and outcomes for apprentices varied too much across the college. In summer 2016, leaders established an apprenticeship academy and transferred responsibility for the delivery of apprenticeships, including the management of staff, to this academy and its new manager. Since the establishment of the academy, common process and practices across the delivery of all apprenticeship provision have been introduced, and procedures to monitor and record apprentices' progress have been strengthened. Managers of apprenticeship programmes and the staff who deliver on them have improved their use of data about apprentices' progress to identify apprentices who are at risk of falling behind. They now use this information to put appropriate additional support in place. Managers now apply the college's performance management arrangements to all staff who deliver apprenticeships. This has enabled managers to identify a few instances where staff are not performing well, and provide support and challenge to help them to improve. The actions put in place since summer 2016 are beginning to have an impact on improving the quality of apprenticeship delivery and the progress that apprentices make. However, managers recognise that further improvements are necessary before they can evaluate all apprenticeship provision across the college as being good.
- The previous inspection found that learners received excellent support and this was a key factor in motivating them to succeed and overcome barriers to learning. Leaders and managers continue to ensure that learners benefit from a comprehensive range of learning, pastoral and financial support, including help to travel to the college. This enables the large majority to stay on their programmes and make progress in their learning. Leaders and managers evaluate routinely the impact of support provided for learners and any interventions made. As a result, they respond effectively to the changing needs of learners: for example, they responded well to an increase in mental health referrals this year. Mentors in each academy respond quickly to learners' support

needs, including through making referrals for more specialist support when necessary. Mentors design group tutorial activities and resources that enable learners to improve their understanding about a range of topics related to their personal development, safety and welfare. Through the work of the careers and pastoral support team, learners receive good advice about the learning and course options available to them based on their planned next steps in learning and their career ambitions.

### **Next steps for the provider**

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- all of the actions set out in the curriculum and improvement strategies for English and mathematics provision are implemented, and strengthened where necessary, to ensure that the quality of provision and the outcomes that learners achieve continue to improve
- managers responsible for apprenticeship provision continue to implement the necessary improvements to all areas of apprenticeship delivery so that the quality of provision and outcomes for apprentices are consistently good or better
- through the consistent application of the performance management process, the small minority of teachers whose performance is identified as not good enough continues to reduce and that this leads to further improvements in the quality of provision and outcomes for all learners across the college.

I am copying this letter to the Education and Skills Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Fraser  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

Inspectors were assisted by the vice-principal quality, learning and outcomes. We met with senior leaders and spoke to governors. We observed lessons and assessments taking place. We held meetings with, or spoke to, managers, teachers and learners. We scrutinised learners' work and assessment records. We scrutinised key documents relating to the college's strategy and implementation plans, self-assessment and improvement planning, and safeguarding. We considered the views of learners through discussions during learning sessions and through the responses received through Ofsted's online questionnaire.