

# South Thames Colleges Group

Monitoring visit report

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## Monitoring visit: main findings

### Context and focus of visit

In August 2017, the three colleges – Carshalton, Kingston and South Thames – merged to form the South Thames Colleges Group (STCG). Prior to merger, Kingston and Carshalton Colleges had been working as a federation. In the most recent Ofsted inspections before merger, Kingston College had been rated as ‘good’, while South Thames College and Carshalton College were both judged to ‘require improvement’.

This monitoring visit took place to review and evaluate the progress that governors, leaders and staff have made to establish the strategic priorities of the new STCG, and address weaknesses in the quality of provision in the predecessor colleges.

STCG operates from four main campuses located at Carshalton, Kingston, Merton and Wandsworth, spread across four London boroughs.

At the time of the monitoring visit, there are around 11,000 learners across the group, with roughly a quarter at the Kingston and Carshalton/Merton campuses, respectively, and around a half at the Wandsworth campus.

### Themes

**What progress have leaders, managers and governors made in bringing together the three colleges, establishing a shared vision, mission and values, identifying strategic priorities and creating an effective management structure for the group?**

**Reasonable progress**

Leaders, managers and governors have successfully established clear strategic priorities and an effective management structure for the group, while maintaining the local identities and brands of each of the different campuses. They have created an effective centralised leadership team and matrix management structure across the campuses. Staff are clear about their responsibilities. Leaders and managers have rationalised central services to develop common systems and procedures across the group. These have increased the effectiveness of services and led to necessary cost savings.

Governors and senior leaders have designed a strategic focus that helps ensure that each campus provides for the particular needs and priorities of each region and local authority. Leaders and managers maintain effective links with a broad range of organisations close to each campus, including the local authorities, chambers of commerce, economic development offices, business improvement districts and nearby employers. As a result, leaders and managers have positioned the campuses well to enable them to serve the needs of their communities.

Staff maintain their commitment to each campus, while also recognising and appreciating the opportunities and benefits that leaders have created through establishing the group. In particular, they appreciate the opportunities to share good practice, raise standards, consolidate the curriculum and bring about cost efficiencies. Leaders and managers use regular updates, blogs and full staff meetings to inform staff about developments.

During the first year of operation following the merger, governors and leaders of STCG have successfully achieved their short-term priorities. They have established an effective management structure to serve the needs of the group. They have linked the campuses at Merton and Carshalton more closely to reduce duplication and to improve the course offer across the two campuses. They have reduced costs by around £4 million. They have started to address the key weaknesses of the predecessor colleges, and have increased the proportion of learners who achieve their qualifications. Having implemented this first phase of the merger, leaders and governors recognise the need to instigate a more comprehensive curriculum review – for implementation by September 2019 and beyond – and to continue to prioritise improvements, prioritising areas of weaker provision.

At the time of the monitoring visit, governors had just agreed the strategic priorities for the group for the next three years. Staff had not received a full briefing on these priorities, but the chief executive officer (CEO) plans to communicate the detail and implications of these priorities to staff.

**What progress have senior leaders and governors made in establishing an effective governance structure that has a suitable breadth of expertise, can oversee strategic decision-making and quality of provision, and serves the needs of the group?**

**Reasonable progress**

In creating the new group, the CEO, senior leaders and the shadow board have successfully established a board of governors which incorporates representation from each predecessor college. They have selected board members who possess a suitable breadth and depth of skills to help to ensure that the board can fulfil its functions and carry out its responsibilities effectively. In making appointments to the new board, the CEO and shadow board have developed a sound schedule of succession planning – with staggered lengths of service – to ensure that they can replace board members on a rolling basis.

Governors continue to review the skill set of the board, and have accurately identified areas which they need to strengthen. These include representation from higher education, from special educational needs and disabilities and from the student cohort. These areas form priorities for new appointments to the board in the forthcoming months.

Eight committees support the main board, each of which has a clear remit. This helps to ensure that the corporation can carry out all the functions of governance effectively. Since the previous inspection, the board has appropriately focused on stabilising the financial position, defining strategic priorities, reviewing the quality of provision and monitoring the implementation of improvement initiatives.

The board recently commissioned an internal audit of governance to help check its effectiveness. This provided substantial assurance of the effectiveness of the governance arrangements that have been put in place so far.

At the time of this monitoring visit, governors had just completed a detailed analysis of the self-assessment report for 2017/18 and quality improvement action plan. During this process, governors provided significant support and challenge to leaders and managers. Governors have a good understanding of the key strengths and areas for improvement across the group.

Governors are in the early stages of introducing a link governor scheme, aligned to the matrix structure of the college. They have implemented these links to help ensure that each governor can develop an in-depth insight into quality and curriculum in each curriculum area.

Governors are clear about the need to review the estate and invest over the longer term to develop consistently high-quality accommodation and resources across all campuses. They also correctly acknowledge that there is more work to do on the quality and format of the information and data they receive at corporation meetings, and the ways in which they use these to review progress.

**What progress have senior leaders made in ensuring that the curriculum of the group provides for the communities in which the campuses are located, tackles skills gaps in the local economy, meets the needs of local employers and enables learners to achieve their career aspirations?**

**Reasonable progress**

In the short term, leaders and managers have rationalised the curriculum across the Merton and Carshalton sites to reduce duplication of provision and exploit the geographical proximity of the two campuses. Senior leaders communicated this well, so that staff and learners understand the rationale and appreciate the benefits of these changes.

Leaders and managers use a wide range of information – for example about the regions and local authorities and travel-to-learn patterns – when they plan the curriculum. They have introduced new courses – such as in barbering and dry lining – and a range of short courses for adults to address gaps in the market and support employment in the area. Leaders and managers have also removed the management

of GCSE adult provision from Carshalton College. This is as a response to concerns regarding poor quality. They relocated it to the Merton campus, which has a much stronger track record of delivering high-quality provision in this area.

Leaders and managers have strengthened links with local employers. They use these links well to ensure that the new curriculum responds to emerging skills deficits in the area. For example, in the construction industry, employers building new flats in the local area identified a need for individuals with skills in kitchen and bathroom installation. Curriculum managers have designed modules to address these skills needs. In addition, working with local job centres, staff have extended information technology training to enable local residents to develop the skills they need to apply online for 'universal credit' benefits.

Leaders have worked closely to improve managers' understanding of the impact of curriculum design on finances. As a result, managers pay greater attention to the financial viability of each course when planning their curriculum. They attend a monthly meeting with finance colleagues and the deputy CEO to ensure that they use resources effectively and that new courses are financially viable.

At the time of this visit, leaders were planning a comprehensive review of the curriculum across the entire group. In carrying out this review, they recognise the need to consider the longer-term needs in each region. These include the need to accommodate and embed proposed curriculum developments, such as the forthcoming T-levels. Another need is to provide a suitable range of apprenticeship programmes to meet the needs of local employers. They also need to address localised pockets of weakness in the quality of provision.

**What progress have leaders and managers made in evaluating the quality of provision, starting to address key weaknesses in predecessor colleges and drawing up sound quality improvement processes?**

**Reasonable progress**

Since the merger, leaders, managers and staff have identified those elements of quality assurance procedures in the predecessor colleges that had the most positive impact on raising standards. They have rolled these out across the group. Through the performance management system, managers have also set clear and consistent expectations of the standards they expect all staff to achieve. As a result of these changes, managers have strengthened the focus on quality review and increased the impact of quality improvement processes.

Leaders and managers have significantly strengthened the rigour and timeliness of course review meetings. At this network of meetings, managers monitor progress against a standard set of performance indicators, such as learners' grades in assessed work, attendance, the quality of teachers' target-setting and assessment, and findings from lesson observations. This network of review meetings helps staff

to make more accurate predictions of learners' outcomes, identify when learners are at risk of falling behind and take appropriate actions to help raise standards.

As a result of the course reviews, leaders and managers have accurately identified and prioritised those weaker-performing areas across the group, such as apprenticeship provision, GCSE mathematics, Association of Accounting Technicians and adult provision at Carshalton. Staff understand the priorities for improvement in their respective departments. For example, they know they should focus on improving differentiation for learners in lessons and planning more customised programmes for learners. They have started to put strategies in place to raise standards in these areas. However, they recognise that they have work to do to ensure that all areas are good or better.

Staff and governors have also completed the first full round of self-assessment for each campus and for the group. In grading the different areas, they have been suitably self-critical and have accurately identified the key priorities where the quality of provision and outcomes for learners are not yet good enough. They have put in place suitable action plans to begin to address these weaknesses. While the resulting quality improvement plan has had a positive impact on raising standards, the plan does not always state clearly enough what specific actions will be needed to enable improvements.

Staff are clear about their own personal targets. These include raising learners' attendance and punctuality, setting aspirational grades for learners and embedding English and mathematics into lessons. Leaders, managers and staff continue to focus on areas that require improvements, such as the proportion of learners who access high-quality work experience and work-related activities.

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