

# West Kent and Ashford College

Report following a monitoring visit to a 'requires improvement' provider

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**Unique reference number:** 130727

**Name of lead inspector:** Andy Fitt, Her Majesty's Inspector

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**Type of provider:** General further education college

**Address:** Brook Street  
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## Monitoring visit: main findings

### Context and focus of visit

West Kent and Ashford college was inspected in October 2018. At that time, inspectors judged the overall effectiveness of the provision to require improvement.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to evaluate the progress that leaders and managers have made in addressing the main areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection.

West Kent and Ashford College is a general further education college located in Tonbridge and Ashford in Kent. It provides a range of academic and vocational further and higher education courses as well as apprenticeships. The college is part of The Hadlow Group, which includes other further education colleges, a rural community school and a community pre-school. At the time of the visit the college had around 2,200 16- to 18-year-old students and 650 adult students. Around 230 apprentices study on a mixture of framework and standards apprenticeships.

In early 2019, the college was referred for formal Further Education (FE) Commissioner intervention. Following visits by the FE Commissioner and his team, the chair of the board of governors, vice-chair and other external board members and the board clerk resigned. The CEO/principal and deputy CEO/principal were suspended pending the outcome of an internal investigation and subsequently resigned. In August 2019 the college was put into educational administration and the accountancy and business advisory firm BDO were appointed. The FE Commissioner has undertaken an options review to decide the future of West Kent and Ashford College.

### Themes

**What progress have leaders and managers made in improving retention and achievement for adults on English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses and students aged 16–18, on level 1 and level 3 diploma courses and GCSE mathematics? Reasonable progress**

More learners now stay at college, complete their studies and achieve their qualifications than at the time of the previous inspection. Leaders and managers have accomplished this by improving induction procedures and support for new learners. Managers have developed the curriculum to further engage learners and appointed new staff to improve teaching. Although the proportion of learners achieving at level 1 exceeded college targets in 2018/19, leaders recognise that not enough learners at level 3 stay at college to take their qualifications.

Leaders have worked closely with department managers to improve the provision. For example, managers of sports courses changed the qualifications they offer to enable learners to study on a more practical and stimulating curriculum. Sports staff improved induction processes to make sure that learners were on the correct courses. Managers standardised feedback to learners to give them clearer information about what they need to do to improve their work. As a result, substantially more learners on sports courses achieved their qualifications at levels 1 and 3 than in the previous year. Managers of media courses worked successfully with teachers to improve classroom teaching through a programme of coaching and mentoring. Managers restructured the timetable to give staff more time to contact parents of learners causing concern, which improved attendance. As a result, very few learners on level 3 media courses in 2018/19 left their courses early. More learners gained distinction grades than at the time of the previous inspection.

A far greater proportion of learners now achieve grades 9 to 4 in GCSE mathematics than at the time of the previous inspection. More adults studying on ESOL courses stay at college to complete their qualifications.

**What progress have leaders and managers made in improving the quality of feedback that students and apprentices receive so that they can improve their work?** **Reasonable progress**

Leaders and managers have worked closely with teaching staff to improve feedback to learners. Teachers now respond more quickly and effectively to learners' practical and written work. Most give rapid feedback which now emphasises more clearly what learners need to do to improve. Leaders recognise that although many staff have made substantial progress with improving feedback to learners, a few teachers have been slower to adapt to change.

GCSE mathematics teachers have improved the effectiveness of their feedback by clearly identifying gaps in learners' knowledge. They inform learners how to improve their work quickly. They follow this up immediately with work targeting learners' weaknesses. As a result, learners practice and improve knowledge that they had previously not understood. This has led to a substantial rise in the numbers of learners improving their grades in GCSE mathematics.

Media teachers have enhanced the range of methods they use to feed back to learners. Learners in media subjects can give clear examples of how feedback from staff helps them to improve their work. They benefit from the easy access they have to digitally recorded feedback, which develops their organisational skills. Learners studying information technology benefit from new electronic submission of work which enables them to access feedback from staff easily. Learners studying business value the consistency of the feedback from their teachers. They benefit from comments that indicate clearly where work lacks detail and how to improve.

Most apprentices receive feedback that helps them to improve their work. For example, comments to plumbing apprentices identify alternative ways of completing tasks. Written feedback to apprentices concentrates too much on qualification achievement. Staff do not set clear targets to help apprentices improve their skills and knowledge for work.

**To what extent have leaders and managers improved their apprenticeship provision by:**

**Reasonable progress**

- **ensuring that apprentices' programmes are suitably individualised to meet their requirements**
- **checking and improving the progress that apprentices make**
- **improving apprentices' achievement of qualifications within the planned timescale**
- **improving assessors' planning of apprentices on-and off-the-job training in consultation with employers**
- **ensuring that apprentices benefit from effective impartial careers advice and guidance?**

The interim principal and senior leaders have recently restructured the management of apprenticeships, which has led to improvements. Assessors and teachers work more closely together to track apprentices' progress using improved tracking systems. Apprentices value the closer contact they have with their assessors, which helps them understand their progress. Employers understand and commit to off-the-job training for apprentices. Managers meet frequently with assessors to review apprentices' progress. Most act quickly to contact employers if they have concerns. Although more apprentices now achieve than in the previous year, too few achieve within planned timescales.

Managers now review apprentices' prior skills and experience thoroughly before they start their programmes. They use this information to ensure that most apprentices' programmes fit their job roles. They plan carefully so that apprentices take the most relevant units of their qualifications to their job roles, which helps to improve their skills at work.

Employers of business administration and engineering apprentices value the frequent communication with college staff about the progress of their apprentices. Assessors ensure that they inform employers quickly about forthcoming examinations and visits. Employers of plumbing and motor vehicle apprentices do not know in enough detail about the skills and knowledge that their apprentices gain and consequently they are not able to support them in the workplace.

Most apprentices benefit from improved careers advice from assessors, and from visits from careers coordinators. Managers acknowledge that not all apprentices receive impartial and independent careers advice to help them with their next steps. Apprentices who do not attend off-the-job training at the college do not enjoy the same level of advice and help as other apprentices, so they are less clear about the options for their next steps.

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