

# West Herts College Group

Monitoring visit report

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## Monitoring visit: main findings

### Context and focus of visit

West Herts College and Barnfield College merged to become the West Herts College Group on 1 February 2019. Barnfield College was last inspected in January 2018. Overall effectiveness was graded as requires improvement. Adult learning programmes and provision for learners with high needs were graded as good, apprenticeships were graded as inadequate, and all other areas were graded as requires improvement. West Herts College was graded as good in all areas in April 2017.

The focus of the monitoring visit was to evaluate how well senior leaders have managed the merger of the two colleges and to evaluate the progress that leaders and managers have made in actioning the main areas for improvement identified at the most recent inspection of Barnfield College.

### Themes

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

**Significant progress**

Senior leaders and governors have very quickly developed a clear, whole-college identity. Managers and staff at all levels are well informed about the vision and ethos of the new college group.

Following the merger, leaders quickly restructured the management team at the Luton campus. The head of school's roles and responsibilities are clear. Curriculum managers now have more time to support teachers. As a result, managers support teachers more effectively. They focus on raising standards and tackling long-standing weaknesses.

Senior leaders acted quickly to align management and student systems across the two colleges, such as human resource systems, finance, and student discipline, safeguarding and data management systems. Managers have access to accurate and informative data. As a result, they take decisive action to make improvements.

Senior leaders and managers have embedded a shared culture of high achievement. Managers from across the college are keen to develop their practice by sharing what works well. They use the expertise of their colleagues effectively. As a result, they make rapid progress towards meeting improvement targets.

Senior leaders and managers are improving relationships with local partners. As a result, new apprenticeships, work placements and job opportunities are available.

**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?** **Significant progress**

Before the merger, both corporations worked closely to align the strategic direction for the merged organisation. The impact was that leaders had an ambitious strategic plan upon merger. This enabled the senior leaders to move forward with their plans very quickly. Governors fully understand the needs of the communities they serve.

Governors hold senior leaders to account very effectively. They have developed a range of challenging performance indicators and targets. They ensure that all areas of the college continue to function well and improve. They understand the issues at the Luton campus such as security and access to the campus. Senior leaders have resolved many of the day-to-day issues quickly. As a result, staff and students feel safe.

Governors are well informed and trust senior leaders. Senior leaders ensure that governors are suitably apprised of the difficulties faced. Governors receive detailed and frequent reports from managers. Governors trust senior leaders to be able to make the improvements needed using tried and tested methods that have been successful in the past.

Governors are very positive about the added value the Luton campus will bring to staff and students across the whole college group. They actively promote the college to local employers. Newly appointed governors understand the local requirements of Luton employers and the community.

**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**

Leaders and managers have started to analyse local skills gaps and industry requirements. Managers successfully introduced a new travel and tourism course in September 2019 because of this work. However, much of the work with employers to meet skills gaps and business needs is still in its infancy. The impact on wider curriculum development at Luton is yet to be fully established.

Leaders and managers rightly acknowledge that the small volume of level 3 provision at the Luton campus limits students' ability to meet local skills needs. However, work by managers to raise the college's profile and to secure links with employers and regional stakeholders is beginning to have a positive impact. For example, enrolment information shows that the number of students on level 3 courses in business,

media, music, computing and engineering has increased by around 60% in 2018/19 to the start of the 2019/20 academic year.

Leaders have made good progress in improving the quality and quantity of work-related study. For example, most students studying the new technical level 3 qualifications fulfilled the significant work placement requirement of their course. However, it is too soon to assess the full impact of this initiative across all areas of the curriculum.

College leaders have recently implemented the group's procedures for gathering, recording and updating students' intended and actual post-course destinations. Managers are using this information to inform curriculum development at Luton to better meet the needs of students. However, because this is a new process, the impact on curriculum design across all subjects areas is not yet evident.

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

Leaders and managers have a very secure grasp of the college's key strengths and weaknesses, particularly at its Luton campus. Curriculum managers share this understanding. Supported by senior leaders, they diligently tackle entrenched weaknesses. The impact of these actions has resulted in significant improvements in many aspects of provision.

Leaders have significantly improved the collection and dissemination of accurate and reliable data on attendance, retention, achievement, progression and destinations. Teachers and managers now have access to high-quality data that enables them to make effective decisions about the quality of provision.

Managers have significantly improved students' behaviour at the Luton campus. Managers have secured the grounds of the campus so that unwelcome visitors no longer have easy access to the site. They have implemented a well-enforced student code of discipline and behaviour. Students and staff now wear identification badges when on college premises. The number of disruptive incidents has declined.

Leaders have taken suitable action to tackle students' poor attendance. As a result, attendance is improving. Managers rightly acknowledge that further improvement is still required.

Leaders effectively use observations of teaching and learning to develop teachers' confidence and ability to deliver high-quality learning sessions, particularly at the Luton campus. Teachers access a wide range of continuing professional development activities that are well tailored to their needs. However, the impact on improving the quality of teaching and learning across all subject areas is not yet fully embedded.

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