

# Inspection of St Helens College

Inspection dates: 14–17 January 2020

## Overall effectiveness

## Requires improvement

The quality of education	<b>Requires improvement</b>
Behaviour and attitudes	<b>Requires improvement</b>
Personal development	<b>Requires improvement</b>
Leadership and management	<b>Requires improvement</b>
Education programmes for young people	<b>Requires improvement</b>
Adult learning programmes	<b>Good</b>
Apprenticeships	<b>Requires improvement</b>
Provision for learners with high needs	<b>Inadequate</b>
Previous inspection grade	Not previously inspected

## Information about this provider

St Helens College is a general further education college. It was formed in December 2017 following a merger between St Helens College and Knowsley Community College. The college consists of five campuses. The largest is the town centre campus in St Helens which delivers approximately two thirds of the provision. The Knowsley campus provides around one quarter of delivery. The remaining provision is at the Technology campus in St Helens and the IAMTech campus in Huyton, which deliver engineering and construction courses, and the Kirby campus, which provides programmes for adults.

At the time of the inspection, the college provided education programmes for 2,220 young people who mainly followed vocational programmes from entry level to level 3. There were 44 Year 11 students on 14 to 16 full-time study programmes. The large majority of the 2,716 adult students study part time. Just under two thirds of the college's 704 apprentices are on frameworks, with the rest on standards-based apprenticeships. Most apprentices study engineering and construction. There are 127 students for whom the college receives high-needs funding. The college works with one subcontractor that provides Prince's Trust courses to young people and adults. The college offers courses in most subject areas.

## **What is it like to be a learner with this provider?**

Students and apprentices like the community feeling across the college and how well everyone gets on. They appreciate the support they receive from staff in their studies and personally. Students and apprentices are polite and respectful. They contribute to the calm and friendly environment across all campuses.

Although most students on education programmes for young people develop skills they need for their chosen careers, leaders do not always design the curriculum to meet the needs and aspirations of all students. A large majority of students who have high needs do not benefit from a broad and rich curriculum that prepares them for adulthood.

Apprenticeship programmes are designed with employers to meet specific local skills gaps and help them to develop their own staff. For example, engineering apprentices work on projects that develop their skills in interpreting and putting into practice design drawings and specifications. Although apprentices develop a range of new knowledge, skills and behaviours relevant for work and their next career steps, the majority do not develop them quickly enough.

Adult students benefit from a curriculum that is well planned and frequently reviewed. The range of programmes are designed to meet local needs such as reducing unemployment. Students show resilience and improve their confidence and organisational skills. They demonstrate positive attitudes to their learning. Students studying at level 3 go on to higher education courses as a result.

Students and apprentices feel safe. They demonstrate effective health and safety practices. For example, access to higher education students know how to sterilise equipment and reduce contamination of agar plates when carrying out work in laboratories.

## **What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?**

The interim principal has begun to stabilise the college following the merger and extensive changes to staffing and college structures. New senior leaders have a clear strategic direction, but the appointment of a permanent principal is yet to be finalised. Governors challenge leaders to improve the quality of education, but the lack of stability at the college has had a negative impact on the pace of improvement.

Appointments to the new curriculum director posts have just been finalised. Newly appointed leaders and managers have started the process of reviewing the curriculum. Their actions have yet to ensure that the curriculum for all students and apprentices is ambitious enough. Young people and those with high needs are not always placed on programmes at a high enough level. Teachers do not routinely challenge them to achieve high grades in their qualifications. A significant minority

of construction and engineering apprentices make slow progress. This is in part due to leaders not recruiting enough staff with the right expertise quickly enough.

Most staff are well qualified, knowledgeable and experienced in their vocational areas. Most teachers and assessors plan and deliver learning and training in an interesting and logical order. Consequently, students and apprentices know more and can remember more. For example, level 2 plumbing students learned how to make a copper frame within accepted tolerances. They carry out pressure tests to industry standards.

Teachers and assessors do not benefit from a well-planned professional development programme. Training to develop their teaching skills is not focused enough on individual staff's needs or the curriculum area they work in. Training that is more responsive and focuses on specific and individual development needs has begun but is not yet rolled out across the college.

The curriculum for most students with high needs is poor. It is not designed to meet the individual needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities on foundation programmes. Leaders do not ensure that managers and staff accurately assess students' skills before they start their programme. Students are frequently set unambitious goals and targets below what they can achieve. Students on foundation programmes do not work towards the outcomes set out in their education, health and care (EHC) plans. For example, students do not take part in external work placements or meaningful travel training because managers have not planned enough staff to facilitate these important aspects of their education.

Around a quarter of students with high needs study on supported internships and vocational courses. They benefit from a curriculum that is well planned and supported to meet their EHC plan targets. For example, vocational students in art and design achieve well and at the same rate as their peers. Supported interns settle into their workplace quickly. They build their knowledge and skills over time because tutors plan their learning incrementally.

Students on education programmes for young people do not all benefit from an ambitious curriculum. For example, in level 2 business, most current students wish to progress to higher education. The curriculum they are studying focuses on employment as the next step. Students in construction all start on a level 1 course regardless of prior attainment in school or at college. Consequently, students do not all achieve to the best of their ability.

Teachers do not always use assessment well enough to identify students' gaps in knowledge in their written work. For example, level 3 health and social care students do not know what they need to do to improve their assignments because feedback from teachers is unclear. Students develop their practical skills well because teachers constantly share hints and tips when students are practising until they refine their skills to an industry standard. For example, teachers in level 2 beauty therapy corrected mistakes in students' massage techniques. They supported the students

until they became confident and skilled in carrying out a hand and arm massage as part of a full manicure.

The large majority of students on education programmes for young people benefit from a wide range of work-related experiences. For example, travel and tourism students gain valuable experience when they shadow airport staff and cabin crew on a trip to Tenerife. Students studying construction courses and those aged 14 to 16 do not complete beneficial work experience.

In off-the-job training sessions, teachers do not plan learning that is ambitious enough or closely linked to apprentices' jobs. They are slow to identify and correct misunderstandings in apprentices' knowledge. Management oversight of the apprenticeship provision in construction and engineering is weak. A significant minority of apprentices remain on their programme for longer than necessary.

Apprentices on standards-based apprenticeships benefit from a well-planned curriculum. They build their skills and knowledge gradually to gain a deeper understanding of the topic they are learning about. For example, electrotechnical apprentices develop the mathematical concepts they need to know before learning about electronics and circuitry.

Leaders and managers frequently review and update the adult curriculum. Revised programmes meet adult students' career goals, local employment opportunities and community needs. For example, work-ready and mental health awareness programmes have been developed to meet the needs of unemployed adults.

Teachers on most adult learning programmes plan learning activities that enable students to know more and remember more. For example, on access to higher education courses, teachers use blood-pressure machines and heart dissection activities to embed knowledge of systolic and diastolic blood pressure in students' memories. Teachers do not always provide feedback that is clear or precise enough for students to know what they have done incorrectly and how to improve their work. For example, students achieving merits in their assignments do not know what they need to do to obtain distinctions.

Careers information, advice and guidance that young people and apprentices receive are not good enough. Guidance is often too general and superficial to prepare them for what they want to do next. Most young people are not aware of the range of options available to them on the completion of their course. In contrast, adult students are prepared well for their next steps. Access to higher education students receive clear advice and support in applying to university. Many successfully gain a place on a range of relevant degree courses.

Staff are optimistic about the future of the college under the new leadership team. Most are positive about the recent changes and value the improvements in communication. The culture across the college reflects leaders' strategy to raise students' and apprentices' aspirations through improved behaviour and attitudes.

Students and apprentices demonstrate high standards of behaviour and respect. Most take pride in their work. Despite this, students' attendance remains too low.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Governors, leaders and managers place a high priority on safeguarding. Staff follow appropriate procedures for reporting any concerns. The safeguarding team responds to concerns promptly. The team has built positive relationships with a wide range of external agencies, including support for mental health. As a result, students and apprentices receive the help they need in and out of college.

Staff, students and apprentices receive regular updates and training. This includes local and regional agendas such as knife crime and county lines drug trafficking. Students have created a poster commissioned by the local police force entitled 'real men don't carry knives' which is being used to raise awareness of knife crime. Although students and apprentices receive training about the dangers associated with radicalisation and extremism, a significant minority only have a superficial understanding of these.

## **What does the provider need to do to improve?**

- Governors should establish a stable leadership team that creates an aspirational culture and ambitious curriculum where students and apprentices thrive and achieve.
- Design programmes for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities well so that they are prepared effectively for adulthood.
- Ensure that teachers plan a curriculum that challenges students to achieve high grades in their qualifications.
- Ensure that the curriculum for apprentices, particularly those on engineering and construction frameworks, develops their knowledge, skills and behaviours quickly.
- Improve careers information, advice and guidance so that these are clear, accurate and meaningful so that students and apprentices understand the range of options available to them to meet their aspirations.
- Ensure that students attend their courses regularly.

## Provider details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	130488
<b>Address</b>	Water Street St Helens Merseyside WA10 1PP
<b>Contact number</b>	01744 733766
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.sthelens.ac.uk">www.sthelens.ac.uk</a>
<b>Principal</b>	Monica Box (interim principal)
<b>Provider type</b>	General further education college
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>Main subcontractors</b>	Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service

## Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the deputy principal, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

## Inspection team

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