

# St Helens College

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

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<b>Address:</b>	Water Street St Helens Merseyside WA10 1PP

## Monitoring visit: main findings

### Context and focus of visit

St Helens College was inspected in January 2020. 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.

St Helens College is a general further education college, consisting of five campuses. The largest is the town centre campus in St Helens. At the time of the visit, the college provided education programmes for 2,328 young people who were studying on vocational programmes from entry level to level 3. There were 599 apprentices across levels 2 to 5. Almost three quarters of these apprentices were following standards-based apprenticeships, the majority of which were in construction and engineering. The college receives high-needs funding for 143 students. The visit did not consider the adult provision, as this was judged good at the previous inspection.

### Themes

**What progress have leaders, curriculum managers and teaching staff made to ensure that learners on education programmes for young people benefit from an ambitious curriculum that is appropriate for their starting points and leads to appropriate next steps and, where appropriate, challenges learners to achieve high grades? Reasonable progress**

Leaders and managers have revised their approach to pastoral support to help to raise students' aspirations and ambitions. They have introduced progress coaches to replace personal tutors. Curriculum teams work closely with the progress coaches to ensure that coaches receive all relevant information to help them support students effectively. Managers and teachers recognise the benefits of maintaining a separation between curriculum and pastoral support. For example, students no longer use tutorial time to complete outstanding assignments. They focus fully on pastoral issues such as their mental health, applications to university and careers guidance.

Managers and teachers plan a curriculum for young people that is focused on the industry in which they want to work. For example, students in art and design benefit from live briefs from prestigious companies that expose them to different aspects of the industry, such as design and printmaking. However, not all teachers use these activities sufficiently to help students to understand how they can help them to achieve higher grades. A few teachers identify that students have gaps in particular

aspects of their knowledge or skills. They set further tasks to help students to become competent in these areas. For example, in hairdressing, students repeat activities such as rinsing hair to ensure that they meet industry-standard service times. In a few instances, students do not demonstrate that they develop appropriate behaviours and attitudes, such as arriving late to lessons.

Teachers promote English and mathematics effectively throughout the curriculum. For example, in hairdressing, teachers discuss the accuracy needed for angles in hair cutting and measuring out liquids such as conditioning and sterilising solutions. They help students to develop broader skills required by the industry, such as strong communication skills. In art and design, students learn how to critique peers' work sensitively.

Teaching staff undertake appropriate training and development opportunities. They attend industry placements regularly to ensure that they have up-to-date industry knowledge and competencies. Most are practising, industry specialists.

**What progress have leaders, curriculum managers and tutors/trainers made in ensuring that the apprenticeship curriculum develops apprentices' knowledge, skills and behaviours quickly and involves employers in its design? Significant progress**

The new apprenticeship management team has restructured the apprenticeship curriculum to meet local needs, such as the increased demand for heavy vehicle service and maintenance technicians and construction workers.

Apprentices benefit from increased opportunities to progress to higher-level or new programmes to support their promotion in the workplace. For example, engineering apprentices progress to team leading apprenticeships to support them in new management roles within their companies. Leaders recognised recently that a group of potential plumbing apprentices did not have the required English and mathematical skills for the apprenticeship standard. They developed a pre-apprenticeship programme jointly with the company's staff to support apprentices to move successfully into a level 2 plumbing apprenticeship.

Leaders and managers have a detailed knowledge of the quality of the apprenticeship provision. They hold staff fully to account for their performance. Leaders and managers understand apprentices' progress through panel reviews and comprehensive monitoring systems. They arrange additional activities if apprentices fall behind. For example, they put extra evening workshops in place to help apprentices catch up on their development of practical skills during national COVID-19 (coronavirus) restrictions.

Employers are positive about the communication and support they receive from college staff. They are now involved in the curriculum design. This results in apprentices developing substantial knowledge, skills and behaviours. Consequently, they make a valuable contribution to their employers' businesses. College assessors work effectively with workplace mentors to support apprentices. They use

comprehensive skills scans to identify what apprentices already know and what they need to learn to create an individualised curriculum. Most curriculums are broader than the requirements of the standard. For example, engineering programmes include higher-level qualifications that meet the employer's specific needs. Level 2 joinery and plumbing apprentices develop a wide range of skills, behaviours and attitudes, such as teamwork and independent decision-making, that are helpful in their job roles.

Leaders' expectation for apprentices to work towards achieving high grades is not implemented consistently. A few assessors do not link off-the-job training to the tasks that apprentices' carry out at work. Consequently, apprentices cannot practise what they learn at college logically in their job roles.

**How much progress have leaders and managers made in developing an ambitious and individualised high-needs curriculum based on the accurate assessments of learners' starting points that does not focus solely on meeting qualification outcomes? Reasonable progress**

Leaders and managers have established an effective working relationship with a centre of excellence for special educational needs and/or disabilities. This association is helping them to improve their teaching and support practices. For example, managers have introduced specific, individualised support activities, such as the development of gross and fine motor skills, where these have been identified in students' education, health and care plans. Managers have introduced a comprehensive personal, social, health and economic curriculum to help students to further understand topics such as healthy relationships and being an active citizen in society.

Teachers have started to identify what students already know and can do. They assess students' English, mathematical, employability and independent living skills. Teachers also consider students' attitudes and how effectively they work with others, as well as additional support, behaviour and sensory needs. Due to the timing of the visit, teachers have yet to identify individualised targets relating to these starting points.

Students' work shows that most develop and improve their skills such as writing and ordering of numbers over time. In independent living skills lessons, teachers link theoretical and practical work effectively. For example, students learn how to make a pizza using paper-based resources before moving into the kitchen to prepare the actual ingredients they discussed earlier. Teachers assess students' competencies in performing personal hygiene routines through an effective use of simulated activities, such as brushing their teeth. However, in too many instances, work sheets and classroom resources are not age appropriate. For example, the use of cartoon animals, such as teddy bears and dinosaurs, are not helpful in supporting the development of young adults. A few students who have been at the college for a number of years have not made the progress that they are capable of. The quality and level of their work is unambitious.

**What progress have leaders and governors made in ensuring that the new leadership arrangements and curriculum structure provide an aspirational culture that lead to high-quality experiences for learners and apprentices? Reasonable progress**

Governors have a detailed oversight of the steady progress leaders are making to rectify the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. They fully understand the weakest-performing areas of the college and the changes needed to ensure swift improvements. Governors have recently appointed a new chair of the board who is working with the principal and senior leaders to develop the college's new strategic direction.

Governors are clear that the new management structure has increased the pace of change and brought about necessary improvements at the college. It has also helped communications with the governing board and, internally, with staff. Governors can articulate how the college is changing to meet the needs of its local community and employers with the revised curriculum.

Senior leaders are passionate about raising standards and the quality of students' and apprentices' experiences. The new management structure provides greater clarity of responsibility and accountability. Middle managers have benefited from a programme of staff development to support them in their roles. The new curriculum planning process enables middle managers to develop learning programmes to meet local needs. However, in a few instances, curriculum planning at course level does not consistently reflect these new approaches.

Leaders have raised the profile of the college in the community. They now work more closely with key stakeholders and, in particular, local schools. The curriculum provides better progression opportunities at advanced level to raise students' aspirations. The initial review of the work of the new progress coaches indicates a positive impact on ensuring that students are on the right courses for their career ambitions.

Governors recognise that further work is required to ensure that the changes result in long-term stability for the college and that leaders' ambitions and expectations raise students' aspirations quickly.

**What progress have leaders and managers made in ensuring that careers information, advice and guidance arrangements provide help for learners and apprentices to understand the range of options available to them to meet their aspirations? Reasonable progress**

Leaders and managers have introduced new initiatives to improve the quality of the careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) that students receive. For example, the 'College Connect' initiative helps parents and carers to understand the influence they have on their son or daughter and how they can raise their expectations and future prospects. The 'Classroom to Career' initiative is designed to

help students to achieve their career aspirations through career ambassadors and events. Ambassadors include current students and alumni of the college who have already achieved a successful career in their chosen field.

Students make effective use of opportunities to assume real-life roles. For example, travel and tourism students become holiday representatives and cabin crew with global airlines and travel companies. Sports students coach primary children in schools. As a result, students gain a thorough understanding of what it is like to work in a particular industry.

During the COVID-19 restrictions, leaders and managers ensured that students continued to receive appropriate CEIAG, for example through online career discussions. Where students could not access certain industries, leaders introduced new courses to develop their skills to a higher level. For example, students interested in careers in passenger services and cabin crew roles progressed to the level 3 diploma in aviation operations. Hairdressing students moved onto nail and make-up courses to broaden their skills within the hair and beauty industry.

Leaders and managers build CEIAG into assessment centres for apprentices. They work with employers to help them to be impartial and allow their apprentices to understand what future careers are available to them.

Most students are clear on their next steps and future careers. A minority of students do not know what they want to do as a result of their college course. The new tutorial curriculum contains a significant focus on CEIAG. Progress coaches are working towards achieving a level 2 information, advice and guidance qualification to support them in delivering this aspect of the curriculum.

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