

North Kent College

Monitoring visit report

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Address:	Oakfield Lane Dartford Kent DA1 2JT

Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

North Kent College is a large general further education college serving the surrounding towns of Dartford, Gravesend and Tonbridge as well as more rural areas in Kent, South East London and the Thames Gateway. In 2020, the college took over the management of Hadlow College, including its Greenwich Equestrian Centre, and Tonbridge Campus of West Kent and Ashford College.

The college has around 4,294 learners aged 16 to 18, 1046 adult learners and 511 apprentices follow standards based and framework apprenticeships. 339 learners are in receipt of high needs funding. Courses are offered from entry level to degree level with a range of full- and part-time courses across all subject areas. The college works with two subcontractors, Kent School of Veterinary Nursing Ltd, for the delivery of veterinary nursing qualifications, and Dudley College of Technology, for the delivery of digital engineering apprenticeships.

This monitoring visit took place to evaluate the progress that governors, leaders and staff have made to establish strategic priorities and deal with weaknesses in leadership and management that existed at Hadlow and West Kent and Ashford colleges prior to the acquisition.

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 building an effective management structure for the college?

Reasonable progress

Leaders' strategic plan for the college clearly sets out an ambitious vision and mission. They have successfully integrated the three colleges. They have set high expectations for both staff and learners. Direction from senior leaders is clear, supportive and challenging. Leaders support staff to develop their teaching and to be innovative in their practice. Staff feel empowered to support and challenge learners, enabling them to develop the knowledge and skills they need to move to their next steps.

Leaders and managers have been effective in supporting staff transition to one college. They value the benefits that a new cross-college reporting system brings for all staff. Managers use the information to target improvements such as to initial information advice and guidance. This has resulted in a reduction in course transfers and withdrawals.

Leaders and managers have worked with staff to develop their ownership and accountability for learners' attendance in lessons. Lecturers monitor attendance and take swift action to support learners to improve where it is too low. As a result, learners' attendance and behaviours have significantly improved, including at English and mathematics lessons.

Learners value the enhancements and upgrade to the information technology infrastructure and the introduction of digital resources. These have significantly improved their access to online learning and are enhancing their enjoyment of learning. Learners benefit from the use of interactive technologies in lessons that bring them together for discussion and collaboration.

Leaders have developed an ambitious accommodation strategy and secured the necessary funding that should provide long-term financial stability for the college, particularly for provision based at the Hadlow campus. Development works are ongoing. Therefore, it is too early to judge any current impact on learners.

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 college?

Significant progress

Governance is highly effective. Governors have ensured that the skills and expertise of the governing body meet the needs, challenges and expectations of the college community. In recognition of the significant impact of the transition, they have increased the number of meetings each year and the Clerk to the Governors now works full-time. This has allowed them to provide the high levels of support and challenge required to enable senior leaders to successfully integrate the colleges.

Governors are committed to supporting leaders to implement the ambitious strategic vision of bringing together the colleges. They have an excellent understanding of the challenges of implementing significant building and infrastructure works within very tight timescales. They have been critical to the pace of progress and to securing funds that have enabled leaders to tackle significant infrastructure issues caused by lack of maintenance and investment.

Governors benefit from extensive commercial expertise, such as accounting, audit, human resources, public relations and quality in education. They carefully form sub-committees to support leaders to undertake specific tasks. For example, they formed a sub-committee focused on due diligence processes prior to the transition and secured access to funding to support capital and estates expenditure.

Governors are in the early stages of piloting a link governor scheme in sport. They have implemented these links to help ensure governors develop an in-depth insight into quality and the strengths and weaknesses of each curriculum area.

Governors have extensive links with local employers and regional business groups, including the local enterprise partnership. They have an excellent understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit on businesses. They work with leaders to inform curriculum planning, to reduce skills gaps such as those in food production, and to meet the requirement to introduce new technologies. Leaders plan to introduce courses such as automation and robotics.

What progress have senior leaders made in ensuring that the curriculum of the group provides for the communities in which 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 have set a clear strategic direction for the college with a strong focus on further developing the provision to meet local priorities. 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, they have used funding from the Skills Accelerator Programme to develop the focus on agriculture, construction and engineering, with a shared thread of decarbonisation.

Governors and leaders at the Hadlow campus have an excellent understanding of the industries they serve. They recognise the challenges presented by Brexit and climate change and have worked with staff and learners to revise the curriculum, such as the change from dairy to beef herds. Staff have effectively engaged learners in all aspects of the transition, enabling them to be involved in designing and implementing a livestock enterprise.

Leaders have a clear strategy to deliver high-quality training for employers in the food processing and manufacturing sector. They understand the impact of changes in technology and engineering on the sector. Managers use this information to plan a curriculum that includes T-levels and apprenticeships, providing progression and career pathways that meet learner and sector needs.

Leaders and managers are ambitious for learners. Learners make good and sustained progress from their starting points. They develop the specific knowledge, skills and behaviours needed for them to move into their intended next steps.

Learners are positive and enthusiastic about the teaching and support they receive from lecturers. Lecturers carefully plan the curriculum, linking their industry knowledge and experience, which enables learners to link theory to the workplace. Learners value the close and helpful pastoral and welfare support that lecturers and learning coaches provide that identifies what they do well and aspects that they need to improve.

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