

EKC Group

Monitoring visit report

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Type of provider: General further education college

Address: Ramsgate Road
Broadstairs
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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

EKC Group (the college) is a large general further education college serving the surrounding towns of Ashford, Broadstairs, Canterbury, Dover, Folkestone and Sheppey. In 2020, the college took over the management of Ashford College, formerly part of West Kent College and Canterbury Spring Lane, formerly part of Hadlow College.

The college has around 5,646 students aged 16 to 18, 2,726 adult students and 1,152 apprentices following standards-based and framework apprenticeships. There are 612 students in receipt of high-needs funding, with a total of 927 with education, health and care (EHC) plans. Courses are offered from entry level to degree level, with a range of full- and part-time courses across all subject areas. The college currently works with one subcontractor, Pipeline Youth Initiative, for the delivery of programmes that support students aged 16 to 18 in moving on to courses at EKC Group.

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 Ashford colleges prior to the acquisition.

Themes

What progress have leaders, managers and governors made in integrating Ashford College and Canterbury Spring Lane to EKC Group by:

- **establishing a shared vision, mission and values**
- **identifying strategic priorities**
- **establishing an effective management structure for the merged colleges?**

Significant progress

Leaders swiftly implemented the EKC Group strategic plan to deliver an ambitious vision and mission, supporting employers, stakeholders and students. Leaders and managers have revised the curriculums, to develop the knowledge and skills required to support the economic and social prosperity of the communities of east Kent and to enhance students' career prospects.

Governors' and leaders' robust leadership successfully enabled a smooth and well-managed transition of the staff and students at Ashford College and Spring Lane into EKC Group. The carefully considered transition plan ensured that staff at Ashford College and Spring Lane understood the relevance of EKC Group's vision, mission and values. Staff understand how they can make a positive contribution to these. For

example they carefully plan local projects for students' social action work in the community. These enable students to develop their employability skills and understand how they can contribute positively to the lives of those living and working in the locality of the college.

Staff are clear about the strategic priorities of EKC Group and their individual colleges. They value the opportunities to access funding that enables them to provide teaching and learning facilities that meet industry standards for their students. For example, in animal management, managers have identified an increased focus on marine conservation as a result of the climate summit and plan to introduce a module on marine conservation.

Governors and leaders have established highly effective local college boards, which are integral to the EKC Group's governance structure. Members represent the locality of the individual colleges, enabling them to discuss current and future skills needs with stakeholders. They provide support and challenge to their college's senior leadership team. Learning walks with leaders enable them to ensure that the quality of education meets the needs of students and the communities the college serves.

What progress have senior leaders and governors made in establishing an effective governance structure that oversees the quality of provision and that serves the needs of the integrated colleges?

Significant progress

Governance is highly effective. Governors and leaders ensured the smooth integration of staff and students into the EKC Group and its culture. Leaders swiftly implemented carefully prepared plans, such as the allocation of laptops to all staff with access to college systems. The seamless transfer for staff enabled them to focus on teaching and supporting their students, allowing them to maintain their studies without interruption.

Leaders have carefully recruited college board members who represent local employers and stakeholders. Governors benefit from an effective induction and training programme that prepares them well to carry out their strategic and legislative responsibilities and to develop their knowledge of education and training.

Governors use their extensive commercial expertise and leadership skills to adeptly provide constructive challenge to leaders. They rightly prioritise their focus on achievement of the EKC Group strategic goals. Consequently, students benefit from a well-planned and inclusive curriculum that equips them with the skills employers need to meet short- and long-term business goals.

Governors astutely use their business and sector knowledge to assess the benefits of bid applications related to curriculum developments. They meticulously assess local plans, including those of the relevant local councils, to inform strategic and

curriculum planning. Leaders have successfully bid for funding, including for an engineering hub in Ashford, providing employers with access to new technologies and training as part of the 'decarbonising Kent' initiative.

Governors provide appropriate challenge to leaders through activities focused on the quality of education, including learning walks and student voice. Support for underperforming staff has resulted in some significant improvements and an improved culture within teams. Governors value opportunities to undertake learning walks and meet students. They use the information to provide reports about students' experiences and aspirations that inform future planning.

What progress have leaders made in ensuring that the technical and vocational curriculum of the EKC Group provides for the communities in east Kent, tackles skills priorities in the local economy, meets the needs of local employers and enables students to achieve their career aspirations?

Significant progress

Leaders at Ashford and Spring Lane have used their highly effective engagement of employers and stakeholders to inform the local and east Kent curriculum plan. They have developed specialisms in care, creative, digital technologies, business, green engineering, electrical installation and sustainable plumbing. They have secured Levelling Up Funding to develop a specialist on-site education facility to support the new international television and film studios in Ashford.

Leaders have recruited programme directors and industry liaison officers whose roles are critical to managing the development and delivery of the curriculum. They successfully engage with employers, ensuring that teaching and learning facilities meet industry standards. Employers agree that students are well prepared to meet the needs of the workplace.

Leaders and managers have introduced, or have well-advanced plans to introduce, programmes that meet the needs of local employers and focus on improving students' career prospects. Leaders have collaborated with employers and stakeholders, including the Department for Work and Pensions, to develop sector-based courses. Employability courses include important topics, such as self-defence and first aid, to prepare students progressing into careers in logistics to know how to keep themselves safe.

Students are motivated and interested in the work they complete as part of their work experience. Employers give them increasing responsibilities as a result. Students are able to put into practice theory and practical skills that they have learned at college. For example, animal care students know how to assess the health of chickens by checking their nose and beak.

Students participate in well-planned 'social action weeks', where they experience opportunities to develop practical skills. They engage in a wide range of projects, from providing workshops and activity classes, through to rejuvenating community spaces and supporting local businesses. Students develop skills such as problem-solving and planning, which prepares them for their work placements and future work or further education opportunities.

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