

The Trafford College Group

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

The Trafford College Group (the group) is a large, general further education college located in Greater Manchester. It was originally formed in April 2018 as a result of a merger between Trafford College and Stockport College. In May 2021, Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College, now Cheadle and Marple College (CMC), joined the group following an assessment by the FE Commissioner due predominantly to financial concerns.

In October 2017, Trafford College had a short inspection. Inspectors judged the college to have remained good. Stockport College was inspected in January 2018. Inspectors judged adult learning programmes and personal development, behaviour and welfare to require improvement. They judged 16 to 19 study programmes, all other key judgements and overall effectiveness as inadequate. At Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College's full inspection in March 2019, inspectors judged leadership and management and overall effectiveness to require improvement because they judged the apprenticeship provision as inadequate. They judged other provision types and key judgements to be good. At the progress monitoring visit of Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College in January 2021, inspectors identified that leaders and managers had taken reasonable steps to rectify the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. Notably, leaders and managers had stopped providing apprenticeships.

The purpose of this monitoring visit was to review the progress that governors, leaders, managers and staff have made since the additional merger in May 2021. The visit was extended to three days for inspectors to review the safeguarding arrangements for students with complex needs.

Themes

What progress have senior leaders made in ensuring that organisational changes relating to the merger have had a positive impact on learners, apprentices and stakeholders both at the merged college and across the college group?

Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have implemented an effective merger of CMC into The Trafford College Group. Leaders and managers identified quickly the main weaknesses at the college. Prior to the merger, many managers at CMC had assumed additional duties, such as marketing, that took their focus away from the curriculum and the quality of the student experience. Group leaders quickly centralised key functions such as student services, safeguarding and careers. This

provided managers and staff at CMC with greater capacity to dedicate to students' learning and to reviewing the curriculum.

Group leaders further strengthened the management capacity at CMC by appointing experienced group staff to senior posts. They ensured an integration of staff across the group and CMC through successful secondment roles at middle management level, such as to the quality improvement team. This helps managers from all the colleges in the group to work collaboratively on developing new improvement strategies.

Senior leaders and managers recognised early that staff at CMC had experienced years of uncertainty in relation to the future of the college. They took time to understand fully the college's culture. Leaders and managers focused on developing staff's trust through carefully planned consultation events and joint decision-making. Consequently, leaders chose not to enforce immediate change that could be detrimental to the longer-term integration of CMC into the wider group.

Leaders and governors have successfully promoted a shared vision and set of values across the group. They are developing a broad curriculum that covers all the colleges within the group. Leaders believe that this approach will provide better educational choices for the Manchester region by allowing students to access a curriculum at any of the sites that best suits their needs and ambitions. Nevertheless, leaders are adamant that each college campus retains its own identity and community links.

Governors have been instrumental in the success of the merger. The new board includes members from the former Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College who utilised their curriculum knowledge to support the merger process. Governors work closely with senior leaders to monitor the post-merger action plan. They recognise the continuing challenges, such as developing and maintaining a shared vision and culture across five different college sites. Governors ensure that senior leaders maintain their quality improvement focus across the whole group.

What progress have senior leaders made in ensuring effective quality assurance and improvement arrangements support sustained improvements to the quality of education across the college group, in particular the newly merged college?

Reasonable progress

Senior leaders gained a rapid understanding of the quality of education at CMC at the start of the merger. They considered student outcomes and identified underperforming courses across both sites such as law, psychology, business and sport. Leaders emphasised that quality improvement strategies were collaborative across the group and not specific to campus sites. They created a larger quality improvement team to ensure that there was sufficient capacity to oversee the quality of education consistently across the whole group. Leaders recognised that good

practice existed at each of the different sites prior to the mergers. They are keen to maintain and share these best practices in their group approach. For example, the successful peer observation programme at CMC has been implemented across the group.

Due to the timing of the merger, leaders only recently introduced the group's quality improvement arrangements to CMC. These processes make effective use of staff expertise across the wider college group to support areas requiring development. For example, managers very recently completed a quality review of the English and mathematics curriculum at CMC. However, at the time of the visit, the outcomes of this review had yet to be analysed.

Leaders extended their staff development programme to include staff at CMC. This focused on developing the skills that teachers need to teach their subjects successfully. It gave staff opportunities to observe their peers across different disciplines and levels, such as vocational subjects and A levels. While it was too soon to evaluate the specific impact of this training during the visit, inspection activities at CMC identified that teachers use questioning and assessment effectively to check on students' learning and understanding. They use their subject knowledge effectively to help students to know more and remember more as a result of their learning over time. For example, in sociology, teachers use skillful and challenging questioning to help students to confidently relate the relationship between ethnic groups and family structure to key aspects of sociological views. Most teachers provide supportive, useful feedback that helps students to improve the quality and presentation of their work. However, in a few instances, written feedback is cursory and simply confirms achievement without identifying what the student has done well or could improve.

What progress have leaders, managers and governors made in ensuring that safeguarding practices keep all learners and apprentices safe and are consistent across the college group?

Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have increased substantially the capacity of pastoral support mentors and designated safeguarding leads to support the increased number of safeguarding referrals since the start of the academic year. This includes an increased capacity at CMC, including the appointment of a designated safeguarding lead (DSL). Existing staff at CMC, such as house monitors, received training to become part of the wider designated safeguarding officer (DSO) team.

Students feel safe and know how to keep themselves safe, including those with complex needs. However, leaders do not have a thorough enough oversight of the strategies and support that are in place for students with complex needs. For example, they cannot fully evidence the support that students receive to manage their behavioural needs to ensure that they access an ambitious curriculum.

All DSLs and DSOs receive appropriate training. DSLs are extensively involved in local and regional safeguarding groups. They are members of local authority safeguarding boards and attend the Greater Manchester safeguarding leads' forum. DSLs link to specialist community groups to support students further, for example anorexia support. They help students to receive urgent help rather than waiting for GP referrals.

The safeguarding team provides students with information relevant to where they live, such as online grooming, drug use, racism and support for recent tragic incidents.

Following a two-week specific safeguarding training event for students, leaders recorded a significant increase in referrals relating to sexual abuse and harassment. In particular, it caused a number of male students to seek advice about how they behave in certain situations. This resulted in positive conversations and raised students' awareness of these issues immensely.

DSLs have a well-informed understanding of safeguarding issues that can affect particular industries, for example, in construction, where suicide is three times higher than in other industries. They work closely with local authorities and partners around domestic abuse. DSLs have developed a programme to give vocational students, such as level 3 hairdressing students, training to understand the signs of domestic abuse. Students gain the confidence they need to speak to a client empathetically about their concerns.

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