

Inspection of St Helens College

Inspection dates:

28 February to 3 March 2023

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education	Requires improvement
Behaviour and attitudes	Requires improvement
Personal development	Requires improvement
Leadership and management	Requires improvement
Education programmes for young people	Requires improvement
Adult learning programmes	Requires improvement
Apprenticeships	Good
Provision for learners with high needs	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

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 six campuses. The largest is the town-centre campus in St Helens. The remaining provision is at the STEM Centre, the IAMTech campus, the Kirkby campus, the Langtree Street campus and the Knowsley main campus.

The college provides education programmes for 2,095 young people who mainly follow vocational programmes from entry level to level 3. Most of the 2,479 adult students study part time. The college offers apprenticeships from level 2 to level 7. Most of the 819 apprentices are on standards-based apprenticeships. Most apprentices study construction and engineering at level 2 and level 3. The college receives high-needs funding for 137 students. The college offers programmes in most subjects.

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

The college environment is inclusive, supportive and respectful. Students appreciate the support they receive from teachers and college staff, including support for maintaining positive mental health. Students develop their confidence as a result of their programmes.

Students' attendance and punctuality across many programmes for young people and adults are too low. Leaders and managers recognise that many students experience significant barriers in their personal lives. For example, a few adult students studying English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) have fled war-torn countries and have recently arrived in the region as refugees and asylum seekers. Others live in temporary accommodation or have very disrupted lives. However, almost one fifth of young people and adults do not attend their lessons frequently. This impedes the progress that students make.

Apprentices are sensible, professional and respectful. They demonstrate commitment to their profession and to their employers. Apprentices' attitudes towards their training are positive. They are committed to their learning and attend their off-the-job training sessions.

Students with high needs learn the skills they need to help them in their daily lives and future careers. For example, students on the supported internship programme organised a social event, which has resulted in them developing a friendship group in the local community.

Most students benefit from guest speakers and theatre companies providing students with real-life examples of the effects of current concerns, such as knife crime, the threats of radicalisation and extremism, and guilt by association. This helps students to think about 'making the right choices'.

Students feel safe at the college and know to whom they can report any issues or concerns they may have. Students report that they have not experienced sexual abuse or sexual harassment. They are confident that if there were any incidents, staff would take these very seriously and investigate any incidents swiftly and with sensitivity. Most students have a good understanding about healthy relationships. They can identify when a relationship is not healthy and how they can seek help.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The college makes a reasonable contribution to meeting skills needs.

The majority of curriculum managers have established effective links with stakeholders and employers to ensure that the curriculums they manage meet the needs of the local and regional economy to help employers to recruit and retain suitably qualified employees. For example, in animal management, teachers have established close links with local charities, zoos and safari parks to ensure that

students have a clear understanding of employment opportunities in the future. However, many of these links are new and not yet fully established.

Leaders are increasing the range of courses and qualifications they offer at level 3 to meet the need for increased, higher level skills in the area. They are aware that a high proportion of residents in the Knowsley and St Helens boroughs do not currently hold level 2 qualifications. Leaders are collaborating with civic partners such as Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and St Helens Local Authority to improve this proportion and raise aspirations.

Leaders have effective partnerships with other education providers in the local area. Leaders work with other providers to offer curriculums that complement other providers' offers. For example, a few learners completing a traineeship in construction through the chamber of commerce progress to a construction apprenticeship at the college.

Leaders and managers do not involve stakeholders or employers sufficiently in the planning, design and implementation of most programmes. Leaders and managers do not involve employers well enough in the design of the curriculums for apprenticeships.

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

Students on education programmes for young people do not achieve consistently well in their studies. Almost a quarter of students leave their courses before they gain their qualifications and the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need for the next stage of their education, employment or training. Adult learners achieve at a higher rate. However, this varies considerably across different courses. Conversely, most apprentices and students with high needs remain until the end of the programme and complete their qualifications.

Leaders and managers have selected relevant vocational curriculums that are designed to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours that students and apprentices need in order to prepare for their next stage in education and employment. Leaders have devised curriculums effectively that are purposeful and coherently planned to develop the skills necessary to meet local and regional skills shortages. For example, they provide a range of programmes to develop adults' language, mathematical and employability skills.

Teachers across most programmes organise the curriculum in a clear and logical manner. For example, young people on level 2 joinery programmes initially learn about health and safety so that they can keep themselves and each other safe. They then learn about site design and construction design and management regulations so they understand how to use their skills and learning on site. Managers and teachers on access to higher education programmes plan the sequence of learning to ensure that students have a strong grasp of core knowledge, such as the cardiovascular system and biological molecules and microorganisms, before students

apply their knowledge during debates on the ethics of infection control and practical microbiological techniques. As a result, students remember their learning and build on this incrementally.

Leaders' and managers' ambitions for their students are not high enough in several subjects. In a few areas, such as adult ESOL programmes, the level 2 cabin crew programme for young people, apprenticeships and programmes for students with high needs, managers have high expectations of what their students can achieve and how they can become active citizens in the community. However, in too many subjects, such as the level 3 science for young people and the level 2 supporting teaching and learning for adults programmes, teaching lacks ambition and does not prepare students sufficiently for their next steps or develop their learning beyond the requirements of the qualification.

Teachers do not use information about young people's and adult students' starting points carefully enough to plan lessons and teach them. For example, in adult floristry programmes and level 1 hairdressing programmes for young people, teachers use assessments to identify students' starting points, but do not use the information they gather to identify clearly gaps in students' learning. In other programmes, teachers do not identify students' starting points.

Staff use information about apprentices' starting points to align the curriculum specifically with apprentices' job roles and employers' needs. As a result, apprentices benefit from bespoke curriculums that help them learn more about the specific elements of their industry.

Leaders, teachers and support staff know students with high needs well. They have established positive working relationships with students, and consequently students feel safe to express their views and attempt activities such as reading aloud in class. Students with high needs make good progress from their starting points. Teachers celebrate students' success, and students are proud of their achievements.

On programmes for adults and young people, teachers' feedback following assessment is too variable. For too many students, feedback lacks the detail needed to help them to improve their work. Adult students on access to higher education programmes do not receive timely feedback that helps them to achieve the highest grade possible. On supporting teaching and learning programmes, teachers do not routinely identify or correct spelling and grammatical errors. This results in students not learning from their mistakes or improving their English skills.

Most teachers provide apprentices with helpful feedback on their written and practical assessments and useful, formative feedback on what is required for their final assessment preparations. Apprentices appreciate feedback following assessment from teachers who take time to provide constructive feedback that helps them to know what they do well and what they could improve.

Leaders and managers do not provide students with consistently high-quality careers guidance across all subjects that helps students to understand where their learning

can lead. For example, teachers in adult GCSE mathematics provide clear information, advice and guidance about students' next steps. However, not all teachers support young people in their university applications or provide information about other routes into subject-related destinations or progression to higher level programmes.

The majority of staff describe their workload as manageable. A few staff make effective use of the support that leaders provide, such as access to external professional support services. Staff new to teaching receive reduced timetable loads to allow time for lesson planning and assessing students' work. However, in too many curriculum areas, teachers find workloads burdensome. They feel that the workload is pressurised and demanding due to staff shortages. In a few instances, staff shortages impact negatively on students' learning experiences.

Governors have made several changes to the governance function recently. They report that these have developed the skills of board members to challenge senior leaders more effectively. However, while governors have a general understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the quality of education, they cannot articulate fully what leaders need to do to make the necessary improvements. Governors ensure that leaders meet their statutory obligations in relation to safeguarding, health and safety, and equality of opportunity.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Curriculum leaders promote student and staff safety effectively in practical workshops, laboratories and salons. Students know that they need to wear appropriate personal protective equipment, such as on the level 1 animal management programme when handling and feeding animals. Staff ensure that appropriate risk assessments are in place.

The safeguarding team records referrals comprehensively. It works extensively with appropriate agencies to ensure that students receive the full support that they need.

Most students and apprentices have a good understanding of fundamental British values and the threats of extremism and radicalisation. Teachers routinely model and promote fundamental British values and equality and diversity effectively in their lessons.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Leaders and managers should ensure that teachers use information about young people's and adult students' starting points to plan and teach ambitious programmes that prepare students for their next steps and develop their learning beyond the requirements of the qualification.

- Leaders and managers must ensure that young people and adults attend their classes frequently, so that they remain on their courses and achieve their qualifications.
- Teachers should improve feedback following assessment on programmes for adults and young people, so that it is prompt and of a consistently high standard and helps students know what they need to do to improve their work.
- Leaders and managers should provide all students with consistently high-quality careers guidance across all subjects that helps students to plan their next steps in education, employment or training.
- Leaders and managers should tackle staff shortages and ensure that staff have a manageable workload that is balanced equally across all staff.

Provider details

Unique reference number	130488
Address	Water Street St Helens Merseyside WA10 1PP
Contact number	01744 733766
Website	www.sthelens.ac.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Simon Pierce
Provider type	General further education college
Date of previous inspection	14 to 17 January 2020
Main subcontractor	Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the vice-principal curriculum development and student experience, 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 students' work, seeking the views of students, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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