

Inspection of EKC Group

Inspection dates: 7 to 10 March 2023

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

Information about this provider

EKC Group (the group) is a very large general further education college group in East Kent. The group consists of six colleges serving the communities of Ashford, Broadstairs, Canterbury, Dover, Folkestone and the Isle of Sheppey. Most colleges offer technical and vocational courses across a very broad range of subject areas and apprenticeships. There is a specialist plumbing and electrical training centre at Ashford College and, since September 2022, leaders have offered A-level courses at Canterbury College. The group offers full-time courses for 14- to 16-year-olds in Broadstairs, Canterbury and Folkestone.

Leaders offer courses from entry level up to level 5, with just under two thirds of courses being below level 3. The largest subject area across all colleges is preparation for work. Other very large areas include building and construction, mathematics, crafts, creative art and design, and health and social care. At the time of the inspection, there were approximately 5,500 learners on education programmes for young people, 90 of whom were aged 14 to 16. Approximately 1,950 learners were studying adult learning programmes and there were approximately 750 apprentices. There were just under 600 learners in receipt of high-needs funding and just over 900 had education, health and care plans. There

were approximately 260 care-experienced learners, many of whom live in some of the most deprived areas in the county.

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

Learners and apprentices thrive in calm, positive and inclusive environments. They live up to the very high behaviour expectations that staff have of them. Most learners and apprentices conduct themselves well in lessons and in communal areas. Those who are new to the colleges quickly model the polite and respectful behaviour that other learners and apprentices show towards staff and each other.

Learners and apprentices enjoy their studies and are highly motivated to learn. They work hard, listen to their teachers attentively and readily take part in class activities. As a result, learners and apprentices quickly develop a wide range of knowledge, skills and behaviours that help them succeed in their courses. The standards of work for most learners and apprentices are very high.

Learners and apprentices take up ample opportunities to participate in a wide range of additional activities that allow them to broaden their horizons and discover new interests and hobbies. They take part in competitions, commemorations of people and events, and sport activities. Through these, learners and apprentices establish new friendship groups, learn about diversity, develop empathy with others and expand their knowledge of how to keep physically and mentally healthy.

Learners and apprentices are strong ambassadors for the group in their communities. They are enthusiastically involved in an impressive range of social action projects to support their local areas. Learners volunteer in food banks, build green gyms, create art displays or give talks about their subjects at primary schools. Through these, learners and apprentices broaden their knowledge of local issues and their understanding of those with circumstances different from their own.

Learners and apprentices, including those who have high needs, make very good and sustained progress from their starting points. They gain many useful additional skills and study complementary qualifications relevant to their specialist industries that stand them in good stead to move on to their intended next steps. For example, those interested in setting up their own business, such as bricklaying learners and offenders at a local open prison, learn about self-assessment tax returns and value-added tax. Learners with profound and multiple disabilities increasingly spend more days in community and social care settings, which prepares them well for their transition to these settings at the end of their courses and training at college.

Learners and apprentices feel safe at their colleges and workplaces. They have confidence in staff to challenge bullying, harassment and discrimination. They value highly that they can report any concerns in a way that they feel most comfortable, knowing that they will be taken seriously. Learners and apprentices are rightly positive about the help and support they receive from staff and student mentors that helps them achieve, grow in confidence and develop their character. They value how well staff know, understand and respond to their individual learning and well-being needs. As a result, most learners and apprentices facing various obstacles and challenges make excellent progress and complete their studies.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The college makes a strong contribution to meeting skills needs.

Senior leaders and governors have exceptional links with a wide range of stakeholders. They work with them very well to understand local and regional skills needs. Leaders have excellent knowledge of the local economy and review their course offer to respond quickly to employers' new and developing needs, such as green technology and digital skills.

Senior leaders were a key partner in the development of the trailblazer local skills improvement plan (LSIP) for Kent and continue to work closely and effectively with Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce in the next phase of development of the LSIP. Senior leaders worked effectively with further education partners to secure a successful strategic development fund bid in decarbonisation technologies, where they are leading on the engineering and manufacturing strands.

Leaders work closely and productively with civic and community stakeholders in curriculum areas to identify and meet the needs of specific groups of learners. For example, leaders and managers worked with Kent Refugee Action Network to develop a bespoke programme for unaccompanied asylum seekers. It includes English for speakers of other languages lessons as well as a social network hub to encourage young people to make friends and ensure a smooth transition into college life.

Subject managers and teachers work very well with employers and other stakeholders to plan and design their courses so that they reflect current industry practices and future needs. Employers and stakeholders assist with the design of assessments, the introduction of new topics and the development of additional pathways. For example, in criminology, staff have introduced a 'debunking myths' initiative to reduce learners' overreliance on the media's portrayal of crime, following advice on curriculum content from a local university.

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

Leaders and governors are passionate about tackling social inequality through education and training. They rightly pride themselves in offering a range of inclusive, accessible and challenging learning opportunities to the communities in East Kent.

Governors, leaders and staff are highly ambitious for all learners and apprentices irrespective of their starting points, particularly for those with high needs or from disadvantaged groups. They place a high priority on learning and progression to ensure that learners and apprentices complete their studies and move on to their desired next steps, which most do.

Leaders, managers and staff use their extensive links with employers effectively to plan and teach curriculums that contribute to plugging local and regional skills gaps.

For example, in level 3 engineering, the curriculum covers the highly sought-after skills of 3-D modelling and simulation alongside more traditional skills. As a result, learners and apprentices are well prepared for employment.

Managers and staff carefully consider the needs of their learners when planning courses. Staff have planned and teach curriculums in the specialist supported learning programmes which are highly ambitious for learners. Covering from pre-entry level to entry level 3, they prepare learners well for their planned destinations. Learners move on to vocational learning, employment preparation programmes, supported internships, or community work and social care.

Leaders and managers work extremely well with employers to plan and teach a range of apprenticeships that respond to local needs. For example, leaders started offering apprenticeships in team leading in response to a local hospital needing to develop staff with no prior management experience into team-leading positions. Leaders and managers involve employers in choosing additional learning or qualifications for their apprentices and in reviewing their progress. Employers highly value that their employees develop the exact knowledge, skills and behaviours that they need for their current and future job roles.

Leaders and managers have designed ambitious and adaptable adult learning courses in a variety of pathways. Learners with a wide range of starting points gain the skills and knowledge they need to access university courses, return to the workplace or settle in the UK. For example, in a work programme specific to the NHS, job seekers develop their knowledge and skills for work, such as rights and responsibilities at work and interview skills. Learners gain the confidence to apply for job opportunities in the NHS, which many do successfully.

Teachers are highly experienced and qualified in their subjects. They use their expertise to present information and demonstrate skills clearly. For example, teachers in access to higher education courses explain difficult concepts thoroughly. As a result, learners quickly develop an understanding of the technical language used in biology, psychology and healthcare, which they use confidently and fluently in their work.

Most teachers use useful and relevant strategies such as recapping, quick-fire quizzes and mock exams to help learners commit their learning to long-term memory. Most teachers are skilled at using questioning to check learners' understanding and tackle misconceptions. For example, teachers in animal care use short questionnaires and tailor question-and-answer sessions skilfully to the level of their group. Learners receive focused and helpful feedback on their work that enables them to understand how to improve it. For example, in bricklaying, teachers give ongoing feedback on learners' placing of bricks and blockwork so that they can position wall ties correctly.

Teachers and support staff across all colleges work well together to support learners with additional learning needs successfully throughout their studies. They communicate with each other frequently to ensure that any required support

arrangements are in place and to monitor learners' progress, including against education, health and care (EHC) targets for those with EHC plans. As a result, staff have a thorough and comprehensive overview of learners' progress and can plan any additional adjustments or support needed so that these learners can continue to make the progress of which they are capable.

Most staff are very proud to work for the group. Teachers and support staff benefit from a broad range of focused professional development. They frequently update their vocational skills and teaching practice, which improves the quality of teaching for learners and apprentices. Teachers complete useful training on behaviour management, effective assessment methods, developing English and mathematics skills in vocational lessons, Makaton and understanding autism spectrum disorder, among others. Numerous teachers have gained their teaching qualifications and specialist expertise while working at the college group.

Learners and apprentices benefit from high-quality careers advice and first-hand experience of the world of work that helps them make informed choices about their futures. Staff ensure that learners, including those with high needs, benefit from valuable and meaningful work experience. Most placements are directly related to the industries in which learners aspire to work. Staff work carefully with employers to ensure that learners with high needs studying vocational programmes carry out their work experience in settings that will nurture and support their needs effectively. As a result, learners gain valuable insights into their chosen careers and become aware of the range of job roles available to them.

Most learners recognise and value individual differences and often take opportunities to promote equality. They consider carefully the impact that diversity may have on their chosen specialism. For example, creative media learners consider different target audiences, such as those with an interest in sustainability and those who are neurodiverse, when designing their projects.

Leaders, managers and teachers have developed an extensive and high-quality range of social, voluntary and community activities at all colleges that enhance learners' curriculums. For example, music learners plan and run music concerts and events, catering learners visit exceptionally high quality restaurants to sample food and service, and sport learners receive talks from championship football club staff about physical performance coaching. As a result, learners extend their technical, practical and life skills beyond the qualifications they are studying. They develop a strong understanding of life in modern Britain, their responsibilities at college and in their communities. Learners benefit from a comprehensive tutorial programme that covers contemporary topics, including consent and misogyny. As a result, learners feel confident that they are able to develop healthy relationships and know to take action when they can see a negative impact on their well-being.

Leaders and managers carry out frequent observations of teaching and learning sessions to assure themselves of the quality of teaching that learners and apprentices experience. They have a secure understanding of the many strengths and the areas they want to improve further. Leaders and managers continuously

review their offer to ensure that it comprehensively meets the needs of learners and the communities the colleges serve. They redesigned the curriculum for school leavers and introduced a level 2 pathway across two years. This has resulted in a significant increase in the number of learners who are able to study at this level, almost all of whom are continuing with their studies. Leaders reintroduced A-level courses at Canterbury College. Leaders and managers have a very acute understanding of why some learners miss lessons. They monitor attendance closely and put in place effective support so that these learners continue to make progress and achieve in their studies.

Governance is highly effective. Governors on the local boards at each college and the group board have the breadth of skills and expertise necessary to challenge leaders effectively. They share senior leaders' strategic goals, such as the successful integration of Ashford College and the Spring Lane campus into the group, and support them to implement them. Governors scrutinise the work of leaders closely and challenge them robustly to ensure that they continue to lead quality improvement at all the colleges in the group.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Staff make sure that learners and apprentices are safe at the group's colleges and training centres. The designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) and all staff are appropriately trained. The DSLs keep up to date with emerging safeguarding risks through the useful partnerships they have developed with relevant external groups and agencies. Staff are confident to report any concerns they have.

Leaders and managers use effective systems to identify learners and apprentices who may need help early on. Leaders respond quickly to any safeguarding concerns raised by staff. They record and monitor these in detail, referring to external safeguarding agencies where appropriate. Leaders analyse the information they collect to identify trends, which they use well to inform staff training.

Provider details

Unique reference number	130728
Address	Ramsgate Road Broadstairs Kent CT10 1PN
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Website	www.ekcgroup.ac.uk
CEO	Graham Razey OBE
Provider type	General further education college
Date of previous inspection	24 to 27 January 2017
Main subcontractors	None

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the deputy chief executive officer, 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 learners’ work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider’s documentation and records.

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