

# Inspection of North Kent College

Inspection dates: 27 February to 1 March 2024

**Overall effectiveness** **Good**

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

## Information about this provider

North Kent College is a large general further education college based in Kent. In 2020, the college took over the management of the Hadlow campus of Hadlow College, a specialist land-based college, and the Tonbridge campus of West Kent and Ashford College. Consequently, the college now has four main sites located at Dartford, Tonbridge, Gravesend and Hadlow. Just under half of learners study at the Dartford site. There is also 'the learning shop', a hub for adult learners at the Blue Water shopping centre.

Leaders offer programmes across a wide range of vocational subjects from level 1 to higher education in areas including catering, performing and visual arts, beauty therapy and equine studies. Learners also study T levels in design and development for engineering and manufacturing; accounting; design, surveying and planning for construction; and education and childcare. At the time of the inspection there were just under 4,000 learners studying programmes for young people, including around 240 learners in receipt of high needs funding. There were also just under 300 adult learners. Around 360 apprentices were receiving training in areas such as maritime studies, engineering and business administration. About a third of apprentices were aged 16 to 18 years old with the remainder over 19 years old.

Leaders do not work with any subcontractors. The college was last inspected in November 2017 when inspectors judge the quality of the provision to be good.

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

Learners and apprentices rightly appreciate the welcoming, inclusive and supportive environment that staff create at North Kent College. Learners quickly acquire important professional values that staff model successfully. Learners are respectful, tolerant and value diversity. For instance, level 1 vocational studies learners readily apply their class motto of 'Be kind', by supporting each other to contribute fully to classroom discussions. Consequently, learners develop into well-rounded, responsible individuals during their time at the college.

Learners are enthusiastic about their studies and frequently participate in activities that go beyond those required for the qualification they are studying. Dance learners perform at prestigious national exhibitions. Construction learners support local communities by creating gardens, while other learners often raise funds for worthy causes. A significant proportion of learners participate in skills competitions that challenge and motivate them to further refine and enhance their skills and knowledge. As a result, learners develop their confidence, resilience and character, enabling them to make a positive contribution to society.

Learners benefit significantly from the high-quality, often industry-standard resources that leaders provide. Musical theatre learners at Dartford justly appreciate the excellent performance and rehearsal spaces they practise and perform in, including the newly built Miskin Centre. At Hadlow, animal management learners benefit from working in a leading national centre for reptiles, developing their skills and understanding of exotic species. Consequently, most learners develop and hone industry-standard skills and knowledge that are valued by employers.

Learners often participate in a wide range of activities that enrich and broaden their experience of the programme they are studying. For instance, many learners participate in trips, such as to see West End shows or benefit from talks by guest speakers. Consequently, most learners enjoy college, and their attendance is high, including at English and mathematics lessons. However, leaders rightly recognise that the current range of activities offered across the college is limited. They have plans in place to address this, but it is too early to assess the impact.

Learners often take part in a wide range of relevant and helpful work-related activities. These experiences enable learners to consolidate their understanding of important concepts and appreciate the relevance of their studies to real-life situations. For example, animation and visual effect learners at Dartford work with the Eden Project in Cornwall to produce materials to promote music events. However, too few learners participate in an external work placement hosted by an employer that is not required by the qualification they are studying. As such, they do not benefit from the widest possible opportunities to learn about the world of work.

Learners and apprentices feel safe at college. They know who to talk to if they have a concern and are confident staff will take appropriate, swift action. Apprentices and learners know how to keep safe while in the workplace. For instance, advanced golf greenkeeper apprentices understand how to use machinery and handle potentially

hazardous chemicals safely. Most learners and apprentices understand the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism. However, a small proportion of adult learners do not fully appreciate the risks local to where they live and work, limiting their ability to identify possible concerns.

## **Contribution to meeting skills needs**

The college makes a reasonable contribution to meeting skills needs.

Leaders collaborate with a wide range of stakeholders such as employers and their representative groups, other education providers and local authorities to understand and respond to skills needs well. Following the acquisition of the Tonbridge and Hadlow sites, leaders made changes to the curriculum to provide clearer career progression pathways. This included removing some programmes at entry and level one. Consequently, a number of stakeholders report that this has reduced the options available for a small proportion of learners.

Leaders collaborate with their counterparts in neighbouring further education colleges in Kent to meet skills needs successfully. Through the Kent Further Education (KFE) partnership, they jointly plan and implement provision to meet skills needs in areas such as automation in the advanced engineering and manufacturing sectors, the modernisation of the construction industry and the decarbonisation of the economy. As part of this joint working, leaders secured funding to develop a sustainable 'concept orchard' at the Hadlow site. This uses automated agri-technology to reduce the labour-intensive nature of fruit growing and provides learners with contemporary skills and knowledge in technical orchard management required by industry.

Leaders use their extensive network of employers and their representative groups to understand skills needs and plan most programmes to meet them well. For instance, they work closely with the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) and Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce. Leaders obtained substantial funding from SELEP to develop an industry-standard performance and production digital arts centre at the Dartford site as part of the Thames Estuary creative production corridor.

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

Leaders have high aspirations for all learners, including those in receipt of high needs funding and special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). They use their understanding of the skills and employment market to provide ambitious programmes that prepare learners and apprentices for their next step in learning or work well. For example, level 2 hair dressing learners at Tonbridge learn haircuts such as uniform layer cuts, which are valued by salons and needed for higher level study. Similarly, T-level engineering learners at Gravesend learn additional electrical skills, beyond those required for the qualification, to fully meet employers' needs.

Leaders and teachers plan the order in which subjects are taught carefully. They ensure that learners have a secure grasp of foundation concepts before learning increasingly demanding topics. For example, adult learners studying the Access to HE diploma at Gravesend learn the anatomy and function of the heart before discovering how disease can affect the organ. Similarly, learners with high needs on the level 1 vocational studies programme at Dartford develop their communication skills, before applying them by interacting with other people in social situations. As a result, most learners and apprentices become confident in their application of important knowledge and skills, make positive progress and achieve their qualifications well.

Teachers are experts in their subject and often have extensive industry experience. They use their understanding of workplace practices skilfully to help learners acquire substantial new knowledge, skills and behaviours that are valued by employers. For instance, teachers on the level 3 creative practice programme at Tonbridge provide learners with resources and project briefs closely aligned to the workplace. In level 3 animal management at Hadlow, learners benefit greatly from being taught by subject experts across a range of highly relevant, specialist disciplines such as aquatics and zookeeping. As a result, learners become adept in current industry practices and are prepared well for the workplace.

Teachers explain concepts clearly, demonstrate techniques precisely and present important information effectively. They frequently make appropriate use of technical and subject specific language and terminology and support learners to quickly acquire the necessary confidence in their use. For instance, teachers on the Access to HE diploma demonstrate how to use equipment to take body temperatures diligently. Teachers enable level 2 hair dressing learners at Tonbridge to quickly become proficient in using technical terms such as crown, recession area and occipital bone in the correct context. Consequently, most apprentices and learners acquire new knowledge and skills quickly and use subject specific language correctly and fluently.

Teachers check what learners and apprentices know and can do carefully and track their progress closely. Where they identify that learners or apprentices have not understood, they intervene quickly to address misconceptions successfully. For example, level 2 musical theatre teachers ask probing questions to help learners reflect and evaluate their performance and adapt their posture and actions to better engage the audience. Most teachers provide learners and apprentices with high-quality and timely feedback on their work. This enables learners and apprentices to appreciate the progress they are making and improve the standard of their future work, which many do. For instance, teachers watch level 2 carpentry apprentices construct half lap joints and provide feedback that helps apprentices improve the precision of their work. Consequently, almost all learners and most apprentices produce work to the standard expected or better.

Staff support learners and apprentices to acquire wider knowledge and understanding and that prepares them for life in modern Britain. In tutorials, staff have helpful discussions with learners about topics including equality and diversity,

healthy, appropriate relationships, sexual consent and the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism. When discussing challenging topics learners show tact and sensitivity. Staff share with learners strategies to promote personal well-being, including positive mental health. As a result, most learners are better informed to make positive life choices and develop resilience to the challenges they may encounter.

Staff provide learners and apprentices with comprehensive, impartial careers advice and guidance. Learners hoping to progress into work hear direct from employers about current career opportunities and are supported in job search activities. For instance, the Construction Youth Trust helps learners studying construction at Gravesend to write curriculum vitae, prepare for job interviews and identify potential employers. Learners planning to move on to higher education are supported to visit universities and write and submit their UCAS application. Staff signpost learners to the college's specialist careers team where needed, but apprentices are often unaware of the support available to them through this service. Despite this, most learners and apprentices make well-informed decisions on their next step in learning and work and the vast majority move on successfully.

Staff use their industry expertise to tailor training activities carefully to provide the knowledge, skills and behaviours apprentices need to succeed in their job role. Staff plan what apprentices learn on- and off-the-job sensibly to enable apprentices to practise and consolidate their learning. For instance, advanced greenkeeper apprentices use their learning about planning and budgeting when buying turf treatment chemicals at work. Most apprentices are successful in their final assessments and progress within their chosen field of work. However, leaders rightly recognise that a small minority of apprenticeships are not at the high standard found elsewhere in the college. In these areas staff do not provide apprentices with timely feedback or discuss apprentices' progress with their employer sufficiently often. Consequently, these apprentices make slower progress. Leaders are taking action to address this, but it is too soon to see the full impact of their intervention.

Learners in receipt of high needs funding are supported by skilled and caring staff who know their requirements well. Teachers use a range of appropriate methods, such as visual representation of information, to help high needs learners understand and remember key information successfully. However, in a small number of cases staff do not fully support high needs learners to work towards taking ownership of their learning and achieving greater independence. Staff work closely with external partners to provide specialist support for learners with more complex needs. Staff adapt resources and use assistive technology skilfully to enable learners to access learning successfully. For instance, they use digital pens that read text aloud to help learners acquire greater confidence in their literacy. As a result, most high needs learners develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need, pass their qualifications in line with their peers and move on to their next stage in learning or work successfully.

Leaders have carefully selected a small range of adult learning programmes that are closely aligned to national and regional skills priorities. For instance, the Access to

HE diploma at Gravesend provides adult learners with a route into training in critical, shortage professions such as nursing and midwifery. Staff work closely with colleagues from Job Centre Plus to support adult learners to re-enter the workplace successfully. Staff provide programmes in the learning shop at Blue Water that enables adult learners to develop customer service and communication skills and secure careers in retail. As a result, nearly all adult learners develop useful skills and knowledge, pass their qualifications and move on to further learning or work successfully.

Leaders have implemented useful processes that provide them with a secure understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the provision, across the college's four sites. Leaders use the information they gather to take sensible steps to rectify areas for improvement and consolidate existing strengths. For instance, they provide staff with helpful and relevant development activities, often organised in collaboration with KFE partners. Consequently, leaders have continued to improve standards, including at the two most recently acquired sites and addressed most of the issues identified at the last inspection.

Governors possess a range of relevant and useful skills and expertise, that they use to good effect to discharge their duties well. They work purposefully with leaders to set the college strategy and deliver the vision of creating one college based around a shared, common culture. They support leaders and hold them to account suitably. For example, they ask probing questions about the quality of the provision and the curriculum that underpins it. As a result, governors and leaders ensure that the college meets its statutory responsibilities and provides relevant, high-quality training.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

### **What does the provider need to do to improve?**

- Provide all apprentices with timely, developmental feedback that enables them to understand their strengths, how to improve and consequently helps them to make excellent progress.
- Further support learners in receipt of high needs funding to take more ownership of their learning and consequently achieve greater independence in their wider lives.
- Ensure all eligible learners take part in an external work placement to extend and consolidate their understanding of workplace practices.
- Further develop the programme of cross college enrichment activities so that learners have better opportunities to explore their interests and talents.

## Provider details

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<b>Principal, CEO or equivalent</b>	David Glead
<b>Provider type</b>	General further education college
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	10 February 2014
<b>Main subcontractors</b>	None



## Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the deputy executive principal 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.

### Inspection team

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