

Inspection of South Thames Colleges Group

Inspection dates: 21 to 24 May 2024

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

Information about this provider

South Thames Colleges Group (STCG) is a large general further education colleges group in South London. Most of the provision takes place on four of the main college campuses in Kingston, Wandsworth, Carshalton and Merton and at its two centres in Tooting and Kingston. STCG works with six subcontractors for part of its programmes for adult learners and apprenticeships. The teaching for the subcontracted provision is mainly online.

STCG offers courses and training from entry level on a broad range of subjects. The largest subject area across the group is preparation for life and work. Other very large areas include building and construction, engineering, creative art and design, and health and social care. At the time of the inspection, STCG had 10,983 learners, of whom just under 5,275 were aged 16 to 18 on full-time study programmes. There were 5,222 adult learners on full-time or part-time vocational courses during the day or in the evening. There were 486 apprentices studying different standards at levels 2, 3 or 4. STCG had 703 learners in receipt of high-needs funding. Of these, around 250 learners learn in the college's specialist provision for learners with moderate to severe learning difficulties.

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

Learners and apprentices thrive in an inclusive, caring and welcoming environment at the college. Governors, leaders and staff create an environment in which all learners feel they have the opportunity to succeed, and in which diversity is acknowledged and celebrated. Staff at all levels care very much about their learners and apprentices and provide them with excellent support, including counselling, and exceptional support for mental health. Learners and apprentices feel safe and know who to turn to if they have a concern. They feel valued by staff and take pride in being part of the college. Most learners stay on their courses and achieve well.

Young learners enjoy taking part in an extensive range of enrichment activities. In their tutorials, they gain detailed knowledge of topics such as healthy eating, maintaining a healthy lifestyle and positive relationships. Learners take part in different sports, including badminton, table tennis and basketball. Consequently, learners understand the importance of keeping physically and mentally fit.

Learners participate in a wide range of interesting activities through which they make a positive contribution to their communities. These include uniformed services learners working with the Metropolitan Police to identify unsafe areas in Kingston, hairdressing learners giving free haircuts to hospital patients and beauty therapy learners providing mini manicure treatments to care home residents.

Most learners and apprentices have good attendance and are ambitious to succeed. Adult learners on access courses are highly motivated to achieve merits and distinctions. They are very resilient and committed to improving their knowledge.

Learners and apprentices demonstrate exceptional behaviour in lessons and around the campuses. Learners with high needs are polite, courteous and respectful of members of the public as they work in the café. They develop excellent social and communication skills through work experience and volunteering. Staff understand the individual needs of learners fully. They expertly integrate therapies into the curriculum and competently use therapeutic approaches to support learners.

Learners and apprentices receive high-quality careers information, advice and guidance. Staff provide detailed information to learners and apprentices on different careers in their chosen fields. Learners attend informative tutorials on employability skills, go on employer visits, hear from industry specialists and attend job fairs. Staff provide exceptional support to learners with UCAS applications and the university interview process. Most learners and apprentices who complete their courses go on to study higher-level qualifications, gain employment or go to university.

Apprentices on most standards gain new knowledge, skills and behaviours. However, too much of their training has been disrupted by staff changes. This has led to too much inconsistency in the quality of education that apprentices receive. While leaders and managers have made improvements, too many apprentices are behind in their studies and not enough achieve in a timely fashion.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The college makes a reasonable contribution to meeting skills needs.

Leaders are at the forefront of skills development work in south west London. They work closely with key strategic bodies, employers and other stakeholders such as the South London Partnership, the Central London Partnership and sector bodies such as the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) to share labour market intelligence and plan for skills needs. They lead and collaborate with stakeholders to use the local skills improvement fund to develop programmes which meet the needs of key priority areas such as construction, health and social care and green skills.

Leaders have adapted the curriculum well in most areas to respond to skills needs. For example, working with CITB they have developed a suite of accredited courses in green skills to respond to the net-zero agenda, such as fitting heat pumps, electric car charging points, wall insulation and cladding. STCG subcontracts to St George's Hospital to offer the mammography associate apprenticeship to help healthcare assistants advance in their careers and fill national skills gaps for mammographers.

Leaders work effectively with civic, community and education partners in curriculum delivery. For example, staff work with civic partners in a responsive way to design courses that allow learners to gain direct access to employment in sectors with staff shortages. Service users at the Department for Work and Pensions in Wandsworth attend short courses that lead to paid employment in reception, security and construction roles.

Leaders and managers effectively involve stakeholders in the design and implementation of the curriculum in many curriculum areas. For example, an employer panel contributed to the design of the curriculum in art and design, which now includes more team projects and industry-style promotions. In hairdressing, a salon chain teaches learners new and emerging trends such as balayage and shag cuts. Learners with high needs have good work placement and volunteering opportunities as a result of the well-established partnership that leaders have with an NHS Trust.

In apprenticeships, leaders and managers are at an early stage of involving employers in the design and implementation of the curriculum. Employers are not involved enough in reviewing curriculum content or in reviews of apprentices' progress.

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

Governors and senior leaders have created a strong group identity for the college group while also maintaining the distinctive characteristic of each campus. As such, they remain rooted in their service to the communities in which they are located. Governors and senior leaders are passionate about removing social barriers through

education and training. They successfully offer a range of inclusive and ambitious learning opportunities to their communities.

Leaders and managers design their curriculums effectively to enable learners to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need to go on to higher-level courses, university or employment. For example, in A-level courses, students develop the critical analysis skills they will need for university and employment. On level 4 therapeutic counselling, adult learners take part in high-quality placements, where they learn to work effectively with clients who have complex mental health support needs. In English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses, teachers teach learners the language and digital skills they need to prepare for employment and to support their settlement in the UK. As a result, most learners are well prepared for their next steps.

Leaders provide extensive training for staff to improve their practice. They have a very good approach to updating the vocational skills of staff, maintaining their currency in digital skills and training them in the use of artificial intelligence (AI). Staff take part in very wide-ranging training activities within and outside the college. For example, creative arts teachers learn new techniques in subjects such as ceramics, millinery and jewellery making, which they incorporate into their lessons.

In most instances, teachers plan and teach curriculums that are ambitious for their learners. For example, on level 3 art and design courses, they teach young learners new technologies such as design software platforms in conjunction with AI tools. In apprenticeships, teachers teach level 4 mammography apprentices the use of tomosynthesis machines to take 2-D and 3-D digital x-ray images. In high-needs provision, teachers and support staff support students with autism on vocational and academic courses effectively to appraise each other's work and improve their confidence in public speaking.

Managers and teachers thoughtfully structure the curriculum to build on learners' and apprentices' skills over time. For example, teachers teach level 3 civil engineering apprentices about health and safety concepts right from the beginning. They consistently reinforce these throughout the year when teaching construction design, service planning and site engineering. Apprentices deepen their knowledge over time and understand well how to apply these concepts in different stages of a construction project. In business, teachers skilfully introduce young learners to finance and marketing concepts before progressing to team building, global markets and decision-making. Consequently, learners can make informed connections between various aspects of business practice and apply the appropriate knowledge when making business decisions.

Most teachers are highly qualified and experienced. In many instances, teachers are current industry practitioners who use their expertise highly effectively to teach their learners. They give detailed explanations and link theoretical concepts well with work-related examples to help learners' understanding. Adult learners on employability courses in security benefit from being taught by teachers who are qualified and experienced security specialists. A practising architect teaches technical

drawing to enrich young learners' experience through sharing practical knowledge and industry experience. As a result, learners develop a sound understanding of current working practices and trends within their chosen industries.

Teachers use a range of highly effective strategies, such as demonstration, presentation and explanation, to teach their subjects. In therapeutic counselling courses, for example, teachers give adult learners several opportunities to discuss complex case studies and frequently practise skills such as contracting, questioning and careful probing in simulated and real counselling sessions. As a result, learners master the counselling interaction techniques they require to gain employment in the sector and produce practical work of professional standard.

Staff ensure that young learners on study programmes have access to meaningful work placements. For example, learners on e-sports courses complete their placements at an e-sports organisation that hosts large-scale gaming events and volunteer at the E-sports Insider London networking event. Information technology learners complete work placements in administrator roles at web development companies using different computer systems, and learners on beauty courses complete work experience in large high street salon chains. Consequently, learners deepen their understanding of their subjects and gain valuable industry experience. This prepares them well for industry and further study.

In most cases, teachers check effectively that learners and apprentices understand what they teach them. For example, in different subjects such as ESOL for adults and A-level courses, teachers expertly use questioning to check learners' understanding and to encourage learners to reflect deeply. Most teachers plan assessments well at suitable points in the curriculum to check what learners know. They conduct mock tests using exam-style questions and past papers to prepare learners for examinations. Teachers frequently set assignments that reflect the work learners and apprentices are required to produce in the workplace. As a result, most learners are well prepared for their final assessments and examinations.

On a few programmes, teachers do not provide feedback that is of a consistently good standard. In too many instances, staff do not provide feedback in a timely manner. In functional skills mathematics, a large majority of learners do not receive constructive feedback on their formative assessments. Consequently, these learners are not aware of how to improve their work. In other instances, teachers correct learners' work for them and do not encourage self-correction. As a result, these learners repeatedly make similar errors and do not develop their spelling and punctuation quickly enough.

Most learners with high needs, including those who study in the college's specialist provision, achieve their learning goals. Staff provide effective support to meet the individual needs of learners with high needs. In lessons, they use helpful strategies and resources, such as noise-cancelling headphones, to enable learners to learn and self-regulate their behaviour. Staff support learners with complex needs exceptionally well to contribute to group discussions and take part in learning activities. Learners listen attentively to each other and ask questions. Several

learners confidently use Makaton to interact with their peers. Consequently, they develop their social and communication skills significantly well.

Teachers and support staff provide appropriate support for learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). In lessons, teachers and support staff work well together to give suitable support to learners specific to their needs. For example, they give helpful prompts and provide frequent reminders to those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder to keep them focused and on task. They also break information into simpler chunks to enable them to understand it. Consequently, most learners with SEND make good progress in line with their peers.

Staff track learners' and apprentices' progress effectively. They provide timely support to those who struggle and are at risk of falling behind. Most learners, including learners on subcontracted provision, make good progress and achieve their qualifications. However, a significant minority of learners who study GCSE English and mathematics do not achieve their qualifications. In a few curriculum areas, such as level 3 engineering and multi-skills construction, learners do not receive consistently high-quality teaching. Too many apprentices have had disruptions to their teaching and assessment. Consequently, too many apprentices do not make good progress.

Leaders have thorough quality checks in place. Through their close scrutiny of courses, they know which ones to focus on for improvement and take effective action to do so. They make good use of in-year performance data to check that improvements are made against metrics such as retention, attendance and likelihood to achieve based on assessments and in-year exams. As a result, leaders have clear oversight of the progress learners and apprentices make.

Leaders make judicious use of subcontractors. Subcontractors find their working relationship with the group to be mutually beneficial. Leaders and managers make sure subcontractors are involved in discussions around curriculum design and delivery and share best practice and resources with them. For example, Learning Curve's curriculum leads are involved in the development of the curriculum for digital and health and social care courses.

Governance arrangements across the group are highly effective. Governors, who are passionate about their communities and learners, bring rich and wide-ranging experience to the board. Governors meet with senior leaders frequently, visit the college campuses often, attend learner events and meet with learners to look at the effectiveness of teaching. Consequently, governors have an accurate and thorough understanding of their strengths and the areas for development. They support and challenge senior leaders effectively to drive improvements.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Involve employers in the design and implementation of the apprenticeship curriculum, including reviews of the progress that apprentices make, to make sure apprentices achieve their qualifications in a timely manner.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment on a small number of courses, including engineering and multi-skills construction, to ensure all learners and apprentices receive a consistently good-quality learning experience.
- Provide high-quality feedback to learners and apprentices on their work so that they know what they have done well and how to improve their work and achieve highly.

Provider details

Unique reference number	130448
Address	Kingston Hall Road Kingston upon Thames Surrey KT1 2AQ
Contact number	020 8546 2151
Website	http://www.stcg.ac.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Peter Mayhew-Smith
Provider type	General further education college
Date of previous inspection	4 to 7 February 2020
Main subcontractors	Learning Curve Limited London Learning Consortium CIC The Skills Network Limited Prevista Limited Aspire Sporting Academy Limited St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the college principal (Kingston and South Thames Colleges), 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

Saher Nijabat, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Rieks Drijver	His Majesty's Inspector
Jon Bowman	His Majesty's Inspector
Christina Christou	Ofsted Inspector
Joyce Deere	Ofsted Inspector
Shehnaz Awan	Ofsted Inspector
Nick Holbrook-Sutcliffe	Ofsted Inspector
Marta Gajewska-Kopczyk	Ofsted Inspector
Kay Hedges	Ofsted Inspector
Claudia Harrison	His Majesty's Inspector
Shanna King	Ofsted Inspector
Ramin Narimani	His Majesty's Inspector
Kanwaljit Dhillon	Ofsted Inspector
Debbie Ryle	Ofsted Inspector
Rebecca Jennings	His Majesty's Inspector

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2024