

City of Sunderland College

City of Sunderland College, Kirkley Hall, Kirkley, Newcastle upon Tyne NE20 0AQ

Inspection of residential provision

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this further education college with residential accommodation

The College of Northumberland merged with the City of Sunderland College in March 2019. The Kirkley Hall campus is where the residential service is situated. This site offers a variety of land-based courses, including animal management, equine, agriculture and horticulture.

An established leadership team is in place over the college and the residential service. The residential provision is situated in four houses in a gated community in the heart of the college site. Currently, three of the houses have young people of 18 years and under living in them. Seventeen residential students were present during the inspection.

The leader of the residential service has been in post since January 2021. The principal of the college has been in post since March 2019.

Inspection dates: 10 to 12 March 2025

Overall experiences and progress of young people, taking in account **outstanding**

How well young people are helped and protected outstanding

The effectiveness of leaders and managers outstanding

The college provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the college contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for young people.

Date of last inspection: 8 March 2022

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of young people: outstanding

Relationships between students and staff are built on trust and are meaningful. Visitors receive a warm welcome into the college. The atmosphere in the reception area is relaxed but vibrant and reflects the atmosphere in the wider college.

Residential students echoed the positive messages and behaviour of leaders and staff, who are excellent role models. Students feel listened to, valued and that their opinions are important. Students are proud of their college and have a strong sense of belonging there. They will leave college with positive life-long memories. For many, they will have transformative experiences.

Residential students are invested in the college and want to share their experiences with inspectors. Residential staff and course leaders enthusiastically promote activities and initiatives that galvanise the students' input. Leaders and staff are skilled at promoting and nurturing the residential students to shape their experience. In doing so, a positive, safe and lively culture has become embedded in the residence.

Leaders and staff are skilled at creating natural opportunities to further develop the students' life skills. To supplement an imaginative and skills-based curriculum, residential activities support students' academic and life skills learning. An example of this was the 'Come dine with me' event. This activity alone weaved in teamwork, meal design, costing, preparation and service, and a good deal of kindly humour. It built on the strong sense of belonging and pride that is tangible in the college.

Staff actively encourage students to share their ideas and thoughts on how life at college can be made better. Students say that they feel listened to, and compromises are made to ensure that students' ideas can be acted on to some degree. This had enhanced the extra-curricular offer with stimulating activities and resources in and away from the college grounds for students to use and enjoy.

Students talk enthusiastically about how they are growing in their sense of personal responsibility and independence toward adulthood. They demonstrate a keen sense of support for each other and gave many examples of how they help each other to get through difficult patches. Staff are highly skilled in conflict avoidance and resolution, and students gave examples of how staff have helped them to improve relationships between friendship groups, fostering a genuine sense of inclusion and acceptance for all.

Staff are knowledgeable about their students' personal circumstances. This starts with the student induction and engagement with parents to learn about the students' emotional and practical support needs. The introductory BBQ provides a foundation to start the process of bonding with other students and staff. Staff soon become astutely aware of the students' needs and are skilled with their

interventions. When a student needs more help, the college is persistent in acquiring the necessary external interventions.

Leaders value the contribution residential staff make to improve students' ability to learn, thrive and go on to fulfil their aspirations. The holistic emotional and practical care that the students receive is exceptional.

How well young people are helped and protected: outstanding

The depth of knowledge and understanding that all staff have for their students greatly assists in their ability to safeguard the students. Life-changing interventions have been made possible for some because of the all-inclusive approach to understanding the importance of observation, curiosity and prompt reporting of concerns.

An electronic recording system is used effectively by all staff to promote accountability for student care. Entries give clear context to the concern and audit trails for decision-making are clear. This promotes opportunities for reflection and continuous improvement in student support.

The designated safeguarding officers work together to act on and review effectively all safeguarding incidents. Weekly meetings and on-call duty systems ensure that information-sharing is prompt and fluid. Software systems and a firewall alert help staff to identify students who may be struggling in silence, but are using social media or the internet to seek help or guidance. Designated safeguarding officers are quick to act on, seek out and support any student who indicates online that they are struggling with their mental health.

Responding to student concerns, leaders helped students to feel safer on the campus. Students' accommodation is now a gated community that only they are free to access, and they understand the value of keeping the keycode confidential. This showed the respect that residential students have for one another's sense of safety and is a further example of the bond that residential students have developed for 'our place'.

Staff are skilled at, and see the value of, empowering students to resolve minor conflicts at root before these issues grow into something more problematic. The staff are flexible in this approach, which is grounded in the research that leaders have subtly introduced into the college's way of working.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

All college leaders, from the governance board to the on-site multi-disciplinary senior team, are visible and supportive. They are persistent in understanding the strengths and development needs of the residential provision and have addressed both points for improvement from the last inspection.

Leaders confidently showcased their knowledge of the college and the students in residence. Their regular on-site presence demonstrates a commitment to the holistic approach so evident throughout the campus. This translates into direct practice with students that is affirming and aspirational. How staff feel about their work is demonstrably shared in the daily exchanges they have with students. In turn, students feel validated and aspire to be the best that they can be.

Staff say that they feel valued, and that residence is also valued among all colleagues. This was evident in the testimony of many curriculum staff, who wanted to emphasise the significant contribution of halls staff.

Teamwork is a golden thread that connects all staff. At every level, individuals are invested in, challenged, held to account and supported to do their best for every residential student. Roles are carefully crafted to encourage specialism and expertise, but the edges of those roles are blended through dynamic and equitable communication to ensure that there is a secure safety net for all students, whatever their needs might be.

Innovation is a college trademark. A relationships-based approach is embedded into college life supported by effective training, reflection and practice. All staff, including administrative and catering staff, offer a warm and welcoming, student-focused service, where curiosity and open-mindedness sets people at ease, validates their presence and maintains a sense of safety and calm.

The chief executive officer has developed and launched a residentially focused online platform where all staff can contribute articles of research or good practice for others to read and comment on. All residential staff read, reflect and put into practice the elements that suit the ethos of the college. They use the platform to share their experiences and discuss what works well, how it supported students and what did not work so well. This is worthy of wider dissemination among other colleges.

Governors and senior leaders use their breadth of knowledge and experience to reach out to and build relationships with the many community groups who can provide additional context to community living and an understanding of wider social issues. Students develop a sense of integration and inclusivity, as well as enhance their understanding of personal safety and well-being.

A recent initiative is the development of a project for social cohesion. The development of this project typifies the research-informed approach embedded into college strategy. Governors remain keenly interested in the progress of the project. The practical application of the project reflects the 'How will this benefit our students?' approach so evident throughout the inspection. It addresses the locality risks for the campus and the rural area in which it sits. This is primarily related to poverty and poor emotional health and welfare. This is another well-being project that is worth sharing its outcomes.

College leaders continuously engage with local health and protection professionals. They are not afraid to challenge poor responses from professionals when they believe student needs are being overlooked. This persistence has enhanced the welfare and safety of students, and in some cases their wider families. Parents comment on the significant difference staff have made to their child's happiness and progress.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of young people, using the social care common inspection framework. This inspection was carried out under the Children Act 1989 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the national minimum standards.

Further education college with residential accommodation details

Social care unique reference number: SC046042

Principal/CEO: Ms Ellen Thinnesen

Inspectors

Denise Jolly, Social Care Inspector
Steve Guirey, Social Care Inspector

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