

Mid-Cheshire College

Inspection report

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Grading

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

The descriptors for the four grades are:

- *grade 1 – outstanding*
- *grade 2 – good*
- *grade 3 – satisfactory*
- *grade 4 – inadequate*

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body; and where appropriate the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk); reports from the inspectorate annual assessment visits or quality monitoring inspection; and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the last inspection. This inspection focused on the following aspects:

- overall effectiveness of the organisation and its capacity to improve further
- achievement and standards
- quality of provision
- leadership and management.

Description of the provider

1. Mid-Cheshire College is a medium sized general further education (GFE) located in Vale Royal, a rural and urban district of Cheshire. The college has three sites. Most provision is located at the college's site at Hartford, just outside Northwich. Two other sites, one near the centre of Northwich and one at Winsford, house courses in photography, fashion, health and social care, childcare, public services, access to higher education and Skills for Life. The college also offers provision at a range of local centres as well as on employers' premises.
2. The college provides an extensive range of programmes in 13 of the 15 sector subject areas. The areas with the largest number of enrolments are Art and design, Performing arts, Beauty, Sport, Construction and Care and Fashion. Courses range from entry level to level 4. There is a small apprenticeship and advanced apprenticeship programme. Train to Gain programmes commenced in 2006/07 and have grown to over 300 learners during 2007/08. Approximately 350 pupils aged 14 to 16 are enrolled on college courses.
3. In 2007/08 the college enrolled 3,820 learners; approximately two thirds of all learners are aged 16 to 18 and the remainder are adults. Just over 50% of learners are female. Learners are evenly spread at levels 1, 2 and 3. Around 2% of learners are of minority ethnic origin, which is slightly higher than that found in the local population. Just under 30% of learners come from disadvantaged groups. Most full-time learners are aged 16 to 18, since 2003 the number of full-time learners in this age group has increased from 998 to 1,634, an increase of 64%. Almost all part-time learners are adults.
4. Vale Royal has an employer base of 3,200 mainly small companies and a workforce of 75,900. Approximately 70% of employees in the area work in the service sector. In 2007, the percentage of pupils in Cheshire, achieving five good GCSE grades, including English and mathematics, was higher than the national average.
5. The college mission statement is "Mid-Cheshire College – where learning comes first".

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Outstanding: Grade 1
Capacity to improve	Outstanding: Grade 1
Achievement and standards	Outstanding: Grade 1
Quality of provision	Outstanding: Grade 1
Leadership and management	Outstanding: Grade 1
<i>Equality of opportunity</i>	<i>Outstanding: grade 1</i>

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision
Grade 1

Outstanding:

7. The effectiveness of provision is outstanding. The highly effective and inspirational leadership team are committed to providing an inclusive and vocational curriculum which meets the needs of the local community.
8. Achievement and standards are outstanding. Overall success rates have improved consistently since the last inspection and are high. Key skills success rates have improved and are significantly above the national rate. Progression to further and higher education, and into work is high. Achievement of learners on work-based learning programmes are satisfactory.
9. Teaching and learning are good. Learners are well motivated, well behaved and enjoy their lessons. Generally good use is made of information learning technology (ILT) to enrich learning. Teachers are well qualified, committed and enthusiastic. There are comprehensive systems to quality assure and improve teaching and learning. Some observation records do not focus sufficiently on learning or how well the activities meet the different needs of learners.
10. Provision to meet the needs and interests of learners is outstanding. Social and educational inclusion are outstanding. The college has developed its curriculum very successfully to meet the needs of learners aged 14 to 19 from a wide range of backgrounds. It works exceptionally well with schools and other partners to target learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and young people who are in danger of dropping out of education and training. The college recruits students, of all ages, with a wide range of learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Courses are offered for adults from the travelling community, ex-offenders and learners with mental health issues. Provision is available at the college's main sites and a range of community venues. Support for learners is very good. Additional learning support is excellent. Success rates for students receiving additional support are high. The college delivers a satisfactory range of Skills for Life courses and has targeted this as an area for further growth in its strategic plan.
11. Students benefit from outstanding tutorial and learning support. Initial advice and guidance are excellent. Induction is very good, as is the range and quality of support provided by central student services. Systems to monitor the progress of learners are very effective. Some targets set for learners in their individual action plans are not sufficiently specific. The tutorial system and careers education and guidance are good. Learners receiving additional learning support achieve their main vocational qualifications at high levels.
12. Leadership and management are outstanding. There is a clear strategic direction. The management structure is highly effective with clear roles and lines of accountability. The management arrangements for work-based learning have recently improved and are now good. Financial performance and value for

money are outstanding. There are very good partnership arrangements. Quality assurance arrangements are robust and have been successful in leading to significant improvements.

Capacity to improve
Grade 1

Outstanding:

13. The college demonstrates an outstanding capacity to improve. Since the last inspection the college has made significant progress in addressing areas for improvement. There has been a sustained improvement in student success rates since the last inspection; success rates are now high. The college has maintained grade 'A' financial status. Leadership and management are outstanding. The college has an aspirational mission, underpinned by eight strategic objectives which clearly address national priorities. Action planning is effective in bringing about further improvement. The governing body has a good range of appropriate skills and experience. Staff are committed and enthusiastic advocates of the college and are focused on improving learners' performance. Staff are very well qualified. The college's self-assessment arrangements are rigorous. The report is accurate and makes good use of data on student performance. It provides managers with an accurate view of priorities and performance, which aids development and supports improvement. Quality assurance arrangements are robust and lead to improvement.

The effectiveness of the steps taken by the college to promote improvement since the last inspection

14. There has been outstanding progress in addressing the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. Success rates are high and have improved. The college has developed its vocational curriculum successfully. It has responded very effectively to recent initiatives: local and national priorities and the needs of local employers; and the local community. Since 2003 the number of full-time learners aged 16 to 18 has increased by 64%. There have been major improvements to the management and teaching of key skills. Overall success rates are now high and considerably higher than the national average. Access for those with restricted mobility remains inadequate at London Road. Where learners have particular requirements, college managers make appropriate arrangements to enable learners to access provision. The management of work-based learning has undergone significant reorganisation and is now good. Success rates on advanced apprenticeship programmes and Train to Gain programmes are satisfactory. Success rates on apprenticeship programmes are low.

Key strengths

- high success rates
- highly motivated and well behaved learners
- improved and very successful delivery of key skills
- excellent additional learning support
- outstanding response to local needs
- outstanding social and educational inclusion

- highly effective leadership and management
- successful measures to improve learner performance.

Areas for improvement

The college should address:

- low success rates on apprenticeship programmes
- insufficient focus on learning and meeting the different needs of learners on some observation of teaching and learning records.

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Outstanding: Grade 1

Work-based learning

Satisfactory: grade 3

15. In line with the college's own assessment, achievement and standards are outstanding. Success rates have continued to rise since the last inspection and are high. Success rates on levels 1 and level 2 long courses for learners aged 16 to 18 are consistently above the national average for similar colleges. Over the last five years the success rate on long courses has improved at a faster rate than the national average. Retention on long courses has improved from 78% at the time of the last inspection to 85% in 2007/08; achievement has increased from 81% to 94% over the same period. Success rates for adults on long courses are consistently well above the national average. The majority of 16 to 18 level 3 learners are on national diploma courses, the success rates for these courses have been consistently above the national rate. The overall 16 to 18 level 3 long course success rate is at the national rate for 2006/07. Key skills success rates have improved significantly and are significantly above the national rate. Success rates for school pupils aged 14 to 16 on college courses are high. Most learners make good progress, however, on a minority of courses learners make satisfactory progress. Learners receiving additional learning support achieve their main vocational qualifications at higher levels than their peers.
16. Success rates for advanced apprentices are similar to the national average; the rates for apprentices are below the national rate. Success rates for Train to Gain learners are satisfactory. Timely success rates for apprentices and Train to Gain learners are low.
17. Learners are highly motivated, they like being at the college, behave well and enjoy their lessons. Learner progression to further education and higher education and into employment is high. Standards of work are at least appropriate to the level of course and in some cases better. Attendance is good and has improved consistently. Work-based learners develop very good personal, practical and employability skills.

Quality of provision
Grade 1

Outstanding:

18. Teaching and learning are good. The most effective lessons challenge all learners with activities that meet all of their needs. Good use is made of technologies and the virtual learning environment (VLE) to enrich learning programmes. Apprentices are highly motivated by being able to develop their e-portfolios from home, using a wide variety of information technologies, including Bluetooth and digital photography. Learners develop good independent research and study skills. Teachers have high levels of subject expertise and are well qualified. There is an extensive programme of staff

development. Teachers are highly committed; their enthusiasm inspires learners to work hard. In a minority of lessons, teaching does not challenge learners sufficiently to make good progress. For example, learning activities are not sufficiently varied and teachers do not always use learning technologies effectively to enhance students' understanding. The quality of teaching is better in some subjects although this variability of practice is decreasing. Employers and parents are well informed about learners' progress.

19. Learners' additional support needs are identified and addressed promptly through excellent support. On-course and specialist individual support for learners is exemplary, including that for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The management and teaching of key skills has improved significantly. Teachers have developed good opportunities to integrate key skills into programmes. Assessment and verification practice is effective and well organised. Learners say that the feedback on their work is helpful in improving their performance.
20. Inspectors agree with the college that it is outstanding at meeting the needs and interests of learners. Curriculum development to underpin the college's mission as a vocational provider is excellent. There is a very good range of courses and progression routes from entry level through to higher education. Delivery of the curriculum is flexible to meet a wide range of needs. Innovative, flexible solutions enable learners to combine a range of courses to meet their individual needs. Partnership working with local schools is exceptionally strong. There are high numbers of school pupils aged 14 to 16 who attend a wide range of vocational options delivered by the college or jointly with the schools. Provision is tailored carefully to suit individual schools and pupils. Headteachers speak highly of the impact this has on raising aspirations and increasing motivation. Successful curriculum development and partnership work has led to a large increase in the numbers of learners aged 16 to 18 enrolling on college courses.
21. There are good collaborative arrangements with employers. Employers are very positive about the service they receive. There is a growing Train to Gain and apprenticeship programme across a range of vocational areas and levels. The college involves employers in the design of courses which ensures that they meet employer needs. Learners benefit from a good range of enrichment programmes and activities.
22. The quality of guidance and support for learners is outstanding. Systems to provide initial advice and guidance are excellent. These, and the very good arrangements for induction, ensure learners are on the right course and settle quickly into college. The central student services provide a very good range and quality of support to learners, including financial and welfare advice. Liaison between central student services and learners' personal tutors is exemplary. This ensures that appropriate support for learners is put in place very quickly and its impact is monitored closely.
23. Systems to review the progress of individual learners are very effective. The 'at risk' procedure identifies effectively learners who need extra monitoring or

support to help them achieve their target grades. Occasionally, the targets set for learners in their individual action plans are not sufficiently specific. The tutorial system is good, with a strong focus on the Every Child Matters themes. Generally, group tutorials are well delivered, but tutors are not always successful at engaging learner interest. Careers education and guidance are very good. Learners benefit from good quality impartial information and advice to help them make progression choices. This includes well targeted support for learners wishing to progress to higher education; a high proportion of these learners are successful in obtaining places at university. Support and guidance for work-based learners are good.

Leadership and management

Outstanding: Grade 1

Equality of opportunity

Outstanding: grade 1

25. Inspectors agreed with the college's own assessment that leadership and management are outstanding. A clear strategic direction has been developed in consultation with staff, students and key stakeholders. The well focused mission and values have inspired and motivated staff. Leaders and managers are committed to responding to the educational and training needs of the local area. There is extensive provision for 14 to 19 learners and very good partnership arrangements with schools, with higher education and employers.
26. There is a highly effective management structure. Roles are well defined with clear accountabilities. The new 'lean' organisation structure is effective, understood and well received by staff. Curriculum management is very well organised and with a focus on improving learner success. Management of work-based learning has very recently improved and is now good. The principal and senior managers are visible and accessible to staff. Communication is very good. Learners' opinions are sought, valued and inform improvements.
27. Financial performance is outstanding. The college has invested well in accommodation and resources. More building work to improve accommodation further is planned. There are very good financial controls in place. Value for money is outstanding.
28. The governing body has a good range of skilled individuals who are committed to the college. There are two active student governors who receive training in governance from both the clerk and the students' union, which allows them to be more effective in their role. Governors are informed of the college's performance through well presented and informative papers and they challenge the management team appropriately. They have a good understanding of the priorities for the future development of the college.
29. The promotion of equality of opportunity is outstanding. The college is very inclusive and supports learners with a range of individual needs. There has been a substantial increase in the number of learners from under-represented groups. The curriculum has been remodelled; new vocational areas offer many additional opportunities to study from level 1 to level 4. There are some very good examples of the promotion of equal opportunities through the curriculum,

including an innovative and creative project on prejudice produced by national diploma in graphic design learners.

30. The college meets the statutory requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 (DDA). Child and vulnerable adult protection training is mandatory for all permanent and fixed-term staff. Child protection and anti-bullying policies and procedures are in place and reviewed annually. Enhanced CRB checks take place on all staff, volunteers and appropriate students.
31. Quality assurance processes and procedures are robust. Good documentation supports the improvement process. The college has well established and comprehensive systems to assure and improve the quality of teaching and learning. Constructive use is made of feedback to improve teachers whose work is satisfactory or inadequate. Observation records generally provide an accurate picture of lessons. Findings are moderated well and used to inform appropriate staff development priorities. Some observation records do not focus sufficiently on learning and the learner experience or comment on how well activities meet the different needs of all learners. The college has recognised the need to do more work to disseminate the distinctive features of outstanding teaching. There is a clear cycle for self-assessment which builds from course review. The self-assessment report is comprehensive and accurate.
32. Since the last inspection in 2004, the college has significantly improved success rates. Performance monitoring at course level is very good. It is well supported by the production of timely and accurate data which is used and trusted by all staff. There remain a few inconsistencies in performance, but prompt intervention and appropriate action planning is leading to improvement.
33. Although some of the accommodation is dated, buildings are welcoming and well maintained. Plans are in place for two new capital programmes. The new arts block at the Hartford campus provides an excellent environment for learning. Staff are well qualified. There are very good learning resources and IT equipment. Systems to appraise staff are effective.

34. Learners' achievement

Table 1

Success rates on mainstream level 1 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2006 to 2008, compared with the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>
1 Long	05/06	485	75	69	6	1008	77	65	12
	06/07	402	81	74	7	1013	77	70	7
	07/08*	525	82	N/A	---	623	84	N/A	---
NVQs	05/06	89	73	72	1	62	61	74	-13
	06/07	89	83	75	8	11	73	75	-2
	07/08*	86	78	N/A	---	---	---	N/A	---
Other	05/06	396	76	69	7	946	79	65	14
	06/07	313	80	74	6	1002	77	70	7
	07/08*	439	82	N/A	---	621	85	N/A	---

* college data

Table 2

Success rates on mainstream level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2006 to 2008, compared with the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>
2 Long	05/06	752	79	66	13	940	76	66	10
	06/07	838	82	70	12	756	76	69	7
	07/08*	649	79	N/A	---	618	80	N/A	---
GCSEs	05/06	91	78	68	10	34	91	67	24
	06/07	128	84	71	13	24	92	70	22
	07/08*	67	70	N/A	---	40	75	N/A	---
GNVQs and precursors	05/06	1	100	69	31	---	---	---	---
	06/07	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
	07/08*	---	---	N/A	---	---	---	N/A	---
NVQs	05/06	113	68	65	3	152	82	68	14
	06/07	107	63	68	-5	102	70	69	1
	07/08*	130	83	N/A	---	93	74	N/A	---
Other	05/06	547	82	66	16	754	74	65	9
	06/07	603	85	70	15	630	77	69	8
	07/08*	452	79	N/A	---	485	81	N/A	---

* college data

Table 3

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2006 to 2008, compared with the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>
3 Long	05/06	700	74	71	3	558	69	64	5
	06/07	652	76	73	3	586	78	68	10
	07/08*	689	77	N/A	---	405	81	N/A	---
A/A2 Levels	05/06	19	84	87	-3	33	64	72	-8
	06/07	11	55	87	-32	23	78	76	2
	07/08*	5	60	N/A	---	4	75	N/A	---
AS Levels	05/06	6	50	67	-17	27	67	55	12
	06/07	2	50	69	-19	15	60	59	1
	07/08*	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
GNVQs and precursors	05/06	18	61	66	-5	2	50	57	-7
	06/07	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
	07/08*	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
NVQs	05/06	22	82	71	11	94	64	63	1
	06/07	29	90	74	16	114	72	69	3
	07/08*	32	84	N/A	---	73	78	N/A	---
Other	05/06	635	74	65	9	402	71	64	7
	06/07	610	76	70	6	434	80	69	11
	07/08*	652	77	N/A	---	328	82	N/A	---

* college data

Table 4

Success rates on work-based learning 'apprenticeship' programmes managed by the provider/college 2006 to 2008

Programme	End Year	Success rate	No. of learners*	Provider/college NVQ rate**	National NVQ rate**	Provider/college framework rate**	National framework rate**
Advanced Apprenticeships	05/06	overall	40	45	53	33	44
		timely	47	23	34	15	27
	06/07	overall	28	57	64	57	58
		timely	22	18	43	18	37
	07/08#	overall	19	58	---	37	---
		timely	21	25	---	15	---
Apprenticeships	05/06	overall	48	48	58	44	52
		timely	51	39	38	39	34
	06/07	overall	48	42	65	35	61
		timely	42	26	47	19	44
	07/08#	Overall	46	54	---	39	---
		timely	55	22	---	22	---

Note 'At the time of the inspection - LSC data for 2007/08 had yet to be fully validated'

- * Learners who leave later than originally planned are counted in the year they actually leave. This group of learners are then added to the learners who planned to complete in a given year and did so or left earlier than planned
- ** College/provider and national qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the 'Individual Learning Record'

Table 5a

Success rates on work-based learning Train to Gain NVQ programmes managed by the provider/college 2007 to 2008

Programme	End Year	Success rate	No. of learners*	college/provider NVQ rate**
Train to Gain NVQ	2006/07	overall	15	80%
		timely	5	33%
	2007/08	overall	273	74%
		timely	112	41%

* Learners who leave later than originally planned are counted in the year they actually leave. This group of learners are then added to the learners who planned to complete in a given year and did so or left earlier than planned

** NVQ qualification success rates are calculated using data supplied to Ofsted by the college/provider prior to inspection

Table 5b

Success rates on work-based learning Train to Gain skills for life programmes managed by the provider/college 2007 to 2008

Programme	End Year	Success rate	No. of learners*	college/provider skills for life rate**
Train to Gain (skills for life)	2006/07	overall	21	48%
		timely	21	48%
	2007/08	overall	54	35%
		timely	16	30%

* Learners who leave later than originally planned are counted in the year they actually leave. This group of learners are then added to the learners who planned to complete in a given year and did so or left earlier than planned

** Skills for life qualification success rates are calculated using data supplied to Ofsted by the college/provider prior to inspection