

# City of Sunderland College

Interim visit report

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**Unique reference number:** 131347

**Name of lead inspector:** Charles Searle HMI

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**Type of provider:** General further education college

**Address:** Bede Centre  
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## Interim visit

### Context and focus of visit

On 17 March 2020, all routine inspections were suspended due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. As part of our phased return to routine inspections, we are carrying out 'interim visits' to further education and skills providers. Interim visits are to help learners, parents, employers and government understand how providers are meeting the needs of learners and apprentices in this period, including learners with high needs and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

We intend to return to routine inspection in January 2021 but will keep the exact timing under review.

The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below and the findings are based on discussions with leaders, managers, staff and learners.

### Information about the provider

City of Sunderland College merged with Hartlepool Sixth Form College in September 2017. In March 2019, City of Sunderland College merged with Northumberland College to form the Education Partnership North East group (EPNE).

Across the three colleges within the group, there are currently 4,758 learners aged 16 to 18, 2,845 adult learners, 858 apprentices and 390 learners with high needs on programmes

EPNE covers a diverse social and economic area that includes rurally remote communities in Northumberland and inner-city wards in Sunderland and Hartlepool. A high proportion of learners live in areas with multiple indicators of social deprivation.

EPNE works with 14 subcontractors.

### **What actions are leaders taking to ensure that they provide an appropriate curriculum that responds to the reasonable needs of learners and stakeholders and adapts to changed circumstances?**

Leaders' response to the pandemic has been guided by a four-stage infectious disease policy. This sets out the roles and responsibilities of each senior leader and department as the college moved from lockdown to a return to face-to-face learning.

When lockdown started, leaders invested in the college's information technology infrastructure and the development of teachers' digital skills. The college's new professional development centre, which was planned to open before the pandemic

started, instead became a virtual centre, providing online training resources. Staff find that these resources help them with their online delivery.

The initial priority that senior leaders identified was to ensure that the most vulnerable learners were engaged in learning. They kept open two of the group's campuses during the lockdown so that the most vulnerable learners could attend. For other learners, remote learning was implemented immediately. Students who did not have the equipment to access learning were loaned laptops and hand-held devices.

Senior leaders and managers have restructured the curriculum for the new academic year. They have developed curriculum plans that they consider to be 'COVID-proof' through the integration of digital skills into all subjects and by making the plans more vocationally relevant. Managers have adapted the way that the curriculum is sequenced to help learners recover the skills, knowledge and personal confidence that many feel they have lost during lockdown.

Senior leaders are represented on a range of regional groups focused on economic recovery. Regional partners appreciate the group's specific contributions in lobbying for greater flexibilities in apprenticeship delivery and in enabling schools and colleges to work together to provide careers advice for learners in Year 11.

One of the biggest challenges that managers face is ensuring that learners get access to high-quality work placements and work experience. Managers plan to prioritise those learners who need work placements to retain their licences to practice, such as in health and social care.

### **What steps are leaders, managers and staff taking to ensure that the approaches used for building knowledge and skills are appropriate to meet the reasonable needs of learners?**

Managers and teachers have adapted the curriculum to counter some of the impact that lockdown and remote learning has had on learners' progress. Teachers at the sixth form in Hartlepool have designed an extended induction programme that identifies any gaps in learners' skills and knowledge. Learners in their second year of A-level programmes have been given more revision sessions to enable them to catch up on what they have missed during the lockdown.

Managers use a range of delivery models to meet the needs of different groups of learners across EPNE. Learners with high needs receive their entire curriculum on a face-to-face basis. Other groups, where numbers are high, are split into two groups, rotating between attending college one week and then learning remotely the next. In practical subjects, such as animal management, practical sessions are carried out on site while theoretical sessions are done remotely.

Teachers have changed the content of the curriculum to take into account COVID-19. For example, hairdressing learners take a Barbicide online course to familiarise

themselves with the guidelines that salons now have to apply to keep staff and customers safe.

Assessors explained how they have had to adapt their programmes as they could not visit some apprentices in their workplaces. They have arranged for apprentices to come into college workshops for a block of practical activity at the half-term break. They believe that this will give apprentices the opportunity to demonstrate practical skills and enable assessors to give feedback to apprentices on the standard of their work.

Managers and teachers realise that some groups of learners face specific barriers when learning online. For example, many learners on courses in English for speakers of other languages find it difficult to combine learning the language and mastering digital skills. In response, teachers focus more on the reading and writing elements of the course as they are easier to practise online.

### **How are leaders ensuring that learners are safe and well informed about potential risks, including from online sources?**

Safeguarding managers have used their links with local authorities and other support agencies to monitor the safety and welfare of their most vulnerable learners during lockdown. They deployed the college's intervention team and personal tutors to provide specific personal support for each vulnerable learner.

As lockdown eased, the main risk identified by managers became the mental well-being of many learners as they returned to full-time education. Before the new term started, managers produced virtual tours of each campus so learners could reassure themselves about what to expect when they returned.

Managers prioritise keeping learners safe online by making this a more prominent feature of the induction programme. They explained that teachers remind learners of the approved online platforms while at college. Teachers also provide information to learners about how to protect themselves from online grooming and cyber bullying.

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