

**FURTHER EDUCATION
COMMISSIONER ASSESSMENT
SUMMARY**

Norton Radstock College

JUNE 2014

Assessment

Background

1. Norton Radstock College is a small general Further Education College based in the heart of rural Bath and North East Somerset (BaNES) and serves the local communities in and around Bath, Bristol, Wiltshire and Somerset. The College has a main site in Radstock, a centre in Keynsham and a number of small community venues.
2. The College has undertaken a major transformation of its Estate and learning environment through a 20 year Capital Investment programme replacing a single 'unfit for purpose' steel framed and clad 1959 building and 42 temporary Elliot blocks with a high quality modern learning environment. This has included the provision of an ICT infrastructure and well-equipped learning spaces, professional and industrial standard workshops and practical training facilities. Some £10 million has been invested since 1994 to provide new Engineering workshops, a Construction Centre incorporating a Green Skills (Low Carbon) workshop alongside a Centre for Vocational Excellence in Care and new Land-based facilities for Horticulture, Animal Care, Equine Studies and Veterinary Nursing.
3. Most learners are on foundation and intermediate programmes and the College offers apprenticeships in six subject areas. Health, public services and care and preparation for life and work recruit the highest number of learners each year. The College has strong partnerships with schools and training providers to broaden vocational opportunities for learners aged 14 to 16, and offers foundation degrees and access to higher education courses.
4. Following the notification by the Skills Funding Agency that Norton Radstock College had been assessed as inadequate by OFSTED, the Minister for Skills and Enterprise decided that the FE Commissioner should assess the position of the college in line with the government's intervention policy set out in Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills.
5. The FE Commissioner conducted his assessment between 30th June and 12th July 2014. He assessed: the capacity and capability of the College's leadership and governance to secure a sustained recovery within an acceptable timetable; (considering the range of interventions set out in Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills); and how and when progress should be monitored and reviewed taking into account the Agency's regular monitoring arrangements.

The Role, Composition and Activities of the Board

6. The Board consists of 14 members including the Principal, 2 staff members and 2 student members. The focus historically, has been on local authority and education representation, with some new members widening the breadth of experience and expertise. Although corporation members have a wide range of skills between them, there is an absence of qualified financial expertise amongst the membership.
7. The Board operates a committee structure with the Finance and Development and the Quality, Improvement and Standards Committees meeting regularly throughout

the year but there is limited evidence of the Board holding the executive to account or in demonstrating significant challenge.

8. There have been no recent strategic days or away days to discuss the future direction of the college, although the recent inadequate Ofsted report and a weakening financial situation have resulted in the Board playing a more active role in monitoring the college's day to day activities. This has resulted at times in the boundaries between governance and management becoming blurred.
9. Clerking arrangements are good but limited in their extent by the part-time nature of the job.

The Senior Management Team

10. The Executive team consists of the Principal, VP Curriculum and Quality and VP Corporate Services. Only the Principal is a senior post holder. Two members of this team have been employed at the College for over 25 years and the VP Curriculum and Quality was appointed in the autumn of 2012.
11. College staff and governors have lost confidence in the executive and senior management team, which is seen to lack dynamism, focus and pace. There is also the feeling that the leadership of the college is too slow to take action with regard to unacceptable learner behaviour or poor staff performance. Issues appear to stay in informal processes for too long and there seems to be a reluctance to take difficult and timely decisions. Staff morale is low with complaints around increasing workloads and lack of praise and recognition.

The Quality of Provision

12. The College was inspected in May 2014 and was found to be inadequate in overall effectiveness and in the effectiveness of leadership and management. Ofsted found that, that although teaching and learning was slowly improving, it was still not good enough overall and that students were not adequately prepared for further study or work. Its main criticisms, however, were directed at the college's leadership and management concluding that "The Principal, senior leaders and managers have not carried out improvements and recommendations with sufficient urgency and effectiveness. They have been too slow to ensure planned improvements have enough impact."
13. On the positive side the inspectors recognized that effective work with young people, particularly vulnerable students, kept them in education and training, supported by good links with local schools. The responsiveness of the college to employer needs was also favourably commented upon.
14. The post inspection action plan is weak and very input focused with an over reliance on staff training. Success criteria do not always reflect the area being targeted. (E.g. reformatting schemes of work is considered an appropriate outcome to demonstrate an increase of the embedding of English and Maths into the curriculum).
15. Accountabilities for individual actions are not clear enough. There are insufficient in year milestones to demonstrate progress and targets are not sufficiently robust. Too many actions, for example, require only 85% compliance.

The Financial Position

16. In summary, the College is in a weak financial position. The College has posted deficits in each of the last three years and in each year there was an adverse variance against both the original and adjusted budgets. A significant deficit is also anticipated for 2013/14 and an even higher figure for 2014/15 which would put severe pressure on the college's cash position. Under delivery of both EFA and SFA contracts will cause further difficulties. Major contributors to this overall position are small class sizes and high staffing costs (over 70% of turnover, when the effects of subcontracted provision are excluded from the calculation).

Views of Stakeholders

17. In the course of the assessment discussions were held with a variety of stakeholders, including the LEP, local employers, and Bath and North East Somerset Council. In all cases there was a considerable amount of support for what the college was doing, although in one case, due to considerable staff turnover, the support for an apprentice in the workplace had fallen far short of what was required.
18. The stakeholders interviewed commented in particular on the highly inclusive nature of the college and its significant provision to students with learning difficulties and disabilities and those disengaged from learning. It is clear that all students receive high levels of pastoral support and the College prides itself on being exceptionally caring and focused on the needs of individuals.
19. Overall the stakeholders felt that it was important that the provision continued in the area, but recognized that the college's size meant that this was unlikely to be possible without further support.

Key Issues

20. In the course of the assessment, it became clear that there were a number of important issues that need to be urgently addressed. In summary:
 - a. The college lacks clear strategic direction and is described as 'drifting'. Even though the inclusivity ethos permeates and learners are positive about the college, the college lacks ambition, drive, urgency and pace. The roles of management and governance are blurred and overlapping.
 - b. Despite annual governance self-assessment processes, governance is weak with only a limited challenge of the executive. There are some strong individual Board members but overall the Board has been slow to respond to emerging issues and lacks expertise in financial matters.
 - c. There has been poor performance management throughout the college and no requirement for senior staff to be subject to rigorous annual performance target setting and review. Individual senior team members are not regularly appraised and have no clear quantitative performance objectives. The overall appraisal completions in the College are low at under 60%. Consequently too few staff have clear performance objectives or understand their contribution to the future direction of the College.

- d. The capacity, capability and accountabilities within the senior team are not meeting the needs of the college. The senior team does not review progress around teaching and learning with sufficient rigour or regularity.
- e. Too many staff at all levels seem comfortable with the College being seen predominantly as a caring institution for those learners who cannot travel elsewhere. Senior staff are quick to blame poor performance on the college's approach to inclusivity, describing high levels of LLDD learners, NEETS and those disaffected with learning as reasons for a lack of success. This consequently lowers ambition for all learners.
- f. The Post Inspection Action Plan (PIAP) is insufficiently ambitious and focuses on inputs rather than quantitative outcomes; many targets for completion are below 100%. The remedies around weak leadership and management are also unclear.
- g. Staff are paid at levels below sector norms and staff turnover is at abnormally high levels. (27% 12/13 – 29% 13/14) Reasons for leaving are frequently cited as pay and working conditions. This is damaging staff morale.
- h. Actions to deal with unacceptable student behaviour and poor staff performance remain in informal stages for too long causing some managers to feel undermined and/or unsupported.
- i. The development of IT systems has been too slow, limiting timely access to live data with an over reliance on manual systems

Conclusions

21. Although the college has achieved much in the past in developing an inclusive and caring environment, especially for vulnerable learners, and created a modern and welcoming campus, increased funding pressures and the failure to improve the quality of provision has left it in a weak position. As one of the smallest colleges in the sector it needs to build on its strengths within a larger partnership to ensure that it can continue to meet the needs of learners in the area.

Recommendations from Further Education Commissioner

1. The College should be placed in Administered College status with immediate effect.
2. A Structure and Prospects Appraisal should be carried out in the next three months with a view to identifying a suitable merger partner. The Structure and Prospects Appraisal will take account of the Strategic Options Review currently being undertaken by Baker Tilley.

3. The capacity and capability of the senior team requires urgent attention. The College should ensure the senior leadership team has access to the skills and experiences to deliver the outcome of the Structure and Prospects Appraisal, making any necessary changes as a matter of urgency.
4. The Post Inspection Action Plan (PIAP) needs further refinement to capture quantitative success criteria and in year milestones. Its monitoring and review needs significant adjustments to create whole staff ownership. Governor involvement in the monitoring of the PIAP should sit within existing committee structures.
5. An FE Adviser should monitor and review the college's progress in implementing the FE Commissioner's recommendations, with a particular focus on ensuring that the Post Inspection Action Plan is effectively revised, implemented and monitored.
6. A new Performance Management framework is required so that accountabilities and targets for all staff can be identified and regularly monitored.
7. The College should review both the scope and quality of sub-contracted provision and ensure that adequate risk mitigation plans are in place for 14/15.
8. The College should continue to explore with the bank an extension to the timetable for the repayment of its bridging loan and review the timetable and increase the urgency with which it pursues the possibility of a land sale; Should there be difficulties in achieving either of these, the college will require advances of funding from the SFA until the land sale is concluded.

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