



Department  
for Education

# **FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment report: Northumberland College**

**October 2018**

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## FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment report: Northumberland College

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<b>Assessment undertaken by:</b>	<b>Andrew Tyley John Hogg</b>
<b>Chair of the College</b>	<b>Jacqui Henderson CBE</b>
<b>Principal / Chief Executive of the College</b>	<b>Ian Clinton</b>
<b>Date of Assessment</b>	<b>18 July 2018</b>

# Background to FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment

Northumberland College is the only general further education college located in the county of Northumberland. It offers a broad curriculum delivering courses in eleven sector areas from entry level to higher education. The college also delivers apprenticeships. The college has two main campuses in Ashington and at Kirkley Hall near Ponteland with two smaller centres at Hexham and Berwick. The Ashington campus offers a wide range of provision including art and design, construction, engineering, sport, health and social care, hospitality and beauty therapy. Land based provision is based at Kirkley Hall.

A number of factors led to identification of the college for diagnostic assessment in April 2018, including:

- The college had been in early intervention by the Education and Skills Funding Agency following assessment of the college's financial plan (July 2017). The significant decline in the college's financial health score was followed by progressively deteriorating financial performance.
- Achievement rates had declined since 2015/16 and the college failed to meet minimum standards for apprenticeship delivery based on 2016 to 2017 data.
- Learner numbers had declined each year from 2015-16. This was due to a fall in the numbers of 16 – 18 learners and under delivery against contract.

The Commissioner team recommended that the college be referred for formal FE Commissioner Intervention and that a Further Education Commission Structure and Prospects Appraisal be undertaken. This change of intervention status was accepted by the college and the FE Commissioner has now assessed the position of the college in line with the government's intervention policy.

The FE Commissioner's report is intended to advise the Minister and the Chief Executive of the Funding Agency on:

1. The capacity and capability of Northumberland College leadership and governance to implement financial recovery within an agreed timeframe (in this instance specifically in respect of a structural solution such as merger)
2. Any action that should be taken by the Minister and/or the Chief Executive of the funding agency to ensure the delivery of financial recovery and quality improvement (considering the suite of interventions set out in 'Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills') and
3. How progress should be monitored and reviewed, taking into account the Agency's regular monitoring arrangements.

## **Assessment and Methodology**

This report follows a diagnostic assessment visit that took place at the college on the 23 and 24 April 2018 and a subsequent formal intervention assessment on 18 July 2018.

The diagnostic assessment was undertaken by three members of the FE Commissioner team. The team received, in advance, extensive briefing information from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). In addition, a wide range of college documentation was reviewed and they interviewed board members, managers, staff and students supported by updated information provided for the intervention visit.

Intervention policy in colleges and expansion of the Further Education Commissioner role of November 2017 sets out the process by which, in exceptional cases, a college may be escalated from a Diagnostic Assessment into Formal Intervention. In such cases the outcomes of the Diagnostic visit and the follow-on Formal Intervention visit will be combined into the FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment report.

This report combines the findings of both the Diagnostic Assessment visit April 2018 and the Formal Intervention visit of July 2018.

# Overview of the College

## Current Position

During the North East Area Review in 2016/17 the college outlined a picture of long-term sustainability as a stand-alone college despite declining recruitment and financial health. It initiated a wide and varied range of initiatives in order to sustain its position. These included a career college, a recruitment agency, an MOT and service centre, leisure learning courses, and developing Kirkley Hall as a multi-use site. A number of these initiatives have contributed to the college's financial decline.

In February 2013, the college received an Ofsted inspection grading of 'Good'. The outcome of a short inspection in May 2017 was "continues to be good."

# **Leadership and Governance**

## **Role, Composition and Operation of the Board**

The governing body currently comprises the chair, the interim principal, two staff governors, two student governors and ten governors drawn from the higher education, private and public sector and the community. It is supported by a curriculum and quality committee which was introduced in 2017/18, a finance and resources committee, audit committee, search committee and remuneration committee. Governors have a wide range of skills and have been led, since 2012 by a highly experienced and widely respected chair who clearly understands the deteriorating financial position of the college and the urgent need for the college to consider the range of strategic options required to sustain high quality further education for its communities.

Board members are involved in the strategic planning process but there has been insufficient strategic oversight of the many new educational/commercial initiatives introduced during the past two years which have compounded an already declining financial position.

Reports to governors have not been timely or sufficiently detailed. The lack of a robust cash flow forecast until recently has impacted on the ability of governors to anticipate or address a rapidly declining working capital position. None of these deficiencies were formally or sufficiently challenged.

## **Leadership and Senior Management team**

The interim principal, who commenced in post in Spring 2018 is very experienced and has wasted no time in undertaking key improvement and cost reduction actions including a significant staff restructuring exercise. A simpler senior leadership structure now delivers clear lines of responsibility and accountability for curriculum, finance and resources and quality/student services. New interim appointments in the key areas of finance, Management Information Systems (MIS) and curriculum are starting to address the short-term operational improvements required and identify the full scale of the underlying financial challenges the college faces. The interim principal and new senior leadership team are also addressing the working relationship with governors and especially their ability to offer constructive challenge on both curriculum and financial planning.



# Curriculum and Quality Improvement

## Curriculum overview

The college offers a broad curriculum that is delivered across a number of geographically dispersed sites. Some provision has larger volumes of learners (animal, equine and vet nursing, engineering) but with a declining enrolment of both 16 to 18 and adult learners, class and group sizes are inevitably small with an average of approximately 10 learners. The college offers courses in all of the key sectors and at all levels including GCSEs, technical qualifications, and apprenticeships. There are over 30 higher education courses in partnership with the University of Cumbria, Newcastle University and University of Huddersfield. In addition, recent developments in niche curriculum areas such as renewable energies at a specialist training centre in Blyth, a commercial hairdressing salon in Hexham and a career college venture have all added additional pressure on both the efficiency and effectiveness of the college curriculum.

## Ofsted inspections

The college was last inspected in May 2017. It was the first short inspection carried out since the college was judged to be good in February 2013. The outcome of the 2017 inspection was “continues to be good”. The report stated that leaders and governors had a clear vision, underpinned by clearly defined strategies to deliver high-quality learning programmes that met the needs of Northumberland’s communities and employers. The report also listed as strengths, quality improvement and performance management arrangements including rigorous implementation of the latter. Self- assessment was described as accurate. A culture of high expectations was described. Safeguarding was described as “fit for purpose” and the 16 to 19 study programme requirements were met effectively. There was a recognition that managers responsible for apprenticeship provision should continue to implement the necessary improvements to ensure consistently good provision. Similarly, outcomes in English and mathematics were identified as a remaining weakness.

## Quality improvement

Senior and middle managers were candid that quality has not been sustained and has, in fact, been deteriorating over the past few years, to the extent that approximately 50% of apprenticeship provision falls below minimum standards. Achievement in all curriculum areas was below provider type and national average in 2016/17 albeit 16 – 18 education and training outcomes have remained stable across three years.

The college operates a rigorous internal notice to improve process for all curriculum areas and whilst much remains to be done to ensure consistently good performance

across the curriculum, there is emerging predictive evidence for 2017/18 that the year on year decline in achievement is being arrested. Senior leaders have openly admitted to governors that achievement rates in 2017/18 will not improve significantly. The college view is that this was mainly due to the fact that in September 2017 a number of apprentices who had not attended for a number of months were 'rolled forward' rather than withdrawn. The college fully recognises the risks associated with its apprenticeship provision.

A new management structure for apprenticeship provision has resolved the previous tension between the sales and delivery functions and an apprenticeship improvement plan is in place.

A new curriculum plan supported by the vice principals and head of MIS has led to rapid improvements in managers' understanding the performance of the current curriculum and in establishing the tools and processes for new curriculum and business planning.

## Curriculum planning

The college has embarked on a new approach to curriculum and business planning and a two-day intensive exercise with all relevant managers was planned for the week of the diagnostic assessment visit. Previously the college appears to have largely "rolled over" the previous year's curriculum, with limited access to management information and data to support decision making about this offer. In addition, the process did not appear to include sufficient reference to the cost of the curriculum as well as its effectiveness, and contribution levels for curriculum areas were largely unknown by the responsible senior managers. The appointment of a new interim vice principal and Head of MIS has led to rapid improvements in managers understanding the performance of the current curriculum and in establishing the process and tools for the new curriculum and business planning exercise. This new process includes finance, MIS and HR support for the Heads of Academy and oversight and leadership from the interim Vice Principal Employer, Enterprise and Commercial Services. There is a developing focus on staff utilisation, groups/class sizes and rationalising the curriculum using appropriate data. This is a priority exercise and needs to be completed quickly and effectively in order to inform the resource needed to support the curriculum plan for 2018-19.

## Attendance

Access to improved data means that the college now monitors attendance via weekly reports that are sent to Academy Heads to action on an individual basis. The Quality team maintains an oversight of this process and challenges Academy Heads over poor attendance. Actual attendance at February 2018 ranged from 79-88% with most areas in the low 80's. Learner absence and unmarked registers are all monitored and the Head of Mathematics and English Academy has developed an impressive "flash card" system for

monitoring the performance of learners. This includes a RAG rating system for attendance and an ability to monitor individual students with poor attendance. The system is improving but remains a key area for improvement.

## **Teaching, learning and assessment**

The college uses external consultants to conduct teaching observations for assessing the quality of teaching and learning. Learning Walks are also undertaken by Academy Heads and the external consultants also support the internal Academy reviews. The outcome from the teaching observation process for 2016-17 (June 2017 Data) showed that 24% of lessons exceeded and 71% of lessons met the standard expected (this equates to the old grading structure of grades 1 and 2) with only 5% below this standard. The director of quality and the vice principal quality, learning and outcomes are confident that the profile of learning and teaching is an accurate reflection, but they are aware that there is an anomaly between this level of performance and student outcomes in terms of both attendance and achievement. The total number of observations was 158. This year to date, 47 observations have been undertaken of which 95% meet or exceed expectations and there are 126 observations still to be conducted. The college has focused on the areas that required most support in English and mathematics, engineering, construction and apprentices. In-year retention is reasonably good and ranges from 94-98% with only one area (land and environment) rated red at 87%.

## **Student views**

During the Diagnostic Assessment visit in April 2018, the FEC Team met with two groups of learners from a variety of courses including full time, part time adult and apprentices. Learners were generally supportive of the college and their tutors and were aware of the importance of attendance, safeguarding and Prevent. Concerns from learners were predominantly around the lack of continuity of lectures in areas where staff are more difficult to recruit (engineering, mathematics and social care) and their ability to progress into apprenticeships from L2 courses. They felt that it was difficult to find employers willing to take on apprentices and that the college could do more to support this. Apprentices in welding and motor vehicle were very positive about staff and their industrial expertise as well as the facilities at the college for training.

Overall, learners commented on the small sizes of their classes with one L3 engineering student being the only class member. Generally, learners reported that they were in groups with between 5-10 learners with classes in motor vehicle being larger at 15.

Academy Heads monitor student satisfaction surveys and the induction survey has satisfaction levels ranging from 75% (sport, outdoor, military and tourism) to 93% (engineering, land and environment).

## **Staff views**

During the Diagnostic Assessment visit in April 2018 the FEC Team met with the UCU Union representative for teaching staff. The Unison representative is based at the County Council and was not able to attend the meeting. Teaching staff currently have concerns about the level of blended learning applied to the curriculum and the removal of tutorials from lecturers to a dedicated team of tutors. Staff fully recognise the need to develop students' experience of on line and blended learning but feel that this approach was "just introduced, not piloted and is not yet sufficiently supported." This staff sentiment of lack of past consultation and communication was reflected in a recent staff survey. Governors were particularly concerned about the outcome of this (only 30% of staff responded) and held focus groups with staff during March 2018 to both feedback the results of the survey and to understand in more detail the concerns of staff. The outcomes from this focus group exercise concluded that there were matters in relation to organisational culture, resources and infrastructure which needed to be addressed; that financial modelling and target setting approaches needed to be reviewed. The improvement suggestions that came from staff were welcomed by governors and their input should be a constant in improving staff engagement. The Action plan resulting from this is being monitored by the full board. The difficulty experienced by the college in attracting new staff, especially in STEM subjects, is set against the context of generally low staff turnover.

## **Effectiveness of the college to manage and improve quality**

The new, largely interim, senior team at the college has made significant progress to address a range of quality improvement concerns. In addition, the board has acted to introduce a more robust strategic oversight of quality by governors. It is too early to assess the impact of these measures. However, staff are feeling positive about the changes and the improved level of communication around the college. Staff feel that they are communicated "with" rather than "at". Everyone spoke positively about the impact of the Head of Standards and Compliance. The self-assessment report for this year will be more closely monitored and challenged by the board committee as well as the full board and the interim principal will be implementing significant changes to the middle and senior management structures to improve the effectiveness of the student experience.

## **Finance and Audit**

### **Recent financial history and forecasts for coming years**

After several years of growth, the college faces a substantial shortfall in income for 2017-18, which is forecast to fall short of the budget target. Income shortfalls have arisen in a number of areas including Adult Education Budget (AEB), apprenticeships, European Social Fund (ESF) and trading activities. Despite recent action to reduce pay and non-pay costs, these will not be sufficient to avoid a substantial operating deficit for 2017-18, which the College cannot afford to repeat.

Income projections for 2018-19 suggest a further (though more modest) decline in turnover, in part due to a reduction in lagged 16-18 funding a result of lower 16-18 student recruitment in the current year. In recognition of this, the interim principal has moved quickly and decisively to implement a major staff restructure which is now largely concluded. This should deliver a net reduction in pay expenditure.

### **Underlying financial performance**

Whilst in recent years the college has posted positive Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation and Amortisation (EBITDA), its operating performance has fallen well short of the area review guideline of 3-5% in both 2016-17 and 2017-18 (forecast).

Inflationary pressures coupled with a drop in 16 to 19 classroom-based funding next academic year present a major challenge to get the budget back into balance by 2018-19 and generate sufficient cash to service the college's debt.

The best-case scenario for the college's financial health is to remain satisfactory in 2017-18 and 2018-19. There is a real prospect that financial health will fall to inadequate in 2017-18.

### **Performance against funding allocations**

16 to 19 student numbers have fallen from 1,614 (allocated) in 2015-16 to 1,473 in 2017-18, which will result in a reduction in lagged programme funding for 2018-19.

Apprenticeship income is forecast to fall short of the budget target for 2017-18, due to wholly unrealistic targets for new levy apprenticeships which have not been achieved.

## **Cashflow / liquidity (including overdraft details and usage if appropriate)**

The lack of effective cashflow forecasting until the current cash crisis emerged is a major failing in financial management and oversight, which is only now being adequately addressed. Cashflow forecasts were not routinely prepared or reviewed by the finance committee. The college failed to identify a looming cash shortfall until January 2018, which resulted in last minute negotiations with the local authority to defer contractual repayments of loan principal and interest.

It is not possible at this stage to rule out a requirement by the college for Exceptional Financial Support, particularly if income forecasts fall short, costs arising from the staff restructure escalate, or the college is unable to agree terms with the council and Barclays.

## **Staff costs**

Measurement of staff costs as a percentage of income has been distorted by the high value of ESF income (of which over 80% is sub-contracted out). After adjusting for this, pay costs in 2016-17 were over 65% of turnover and are likely to exceed 70% in 2017-18.

An element of this is accounted for by an exceptionally high pension contribution rate for support staff of 26.8%. The interim principal acted quickly and decisively to identify the need for a major staff restructure.

## **Budget setting arrangements**

The significant decline in income and working capital warrants a much more robust oversight of financial performance and cashflow forecasting than was in place prior to the diagnostic assessment. Over-optimistic income targets for 2017-18 were not subject to sufficient challenge and the unacceptably slow production of monthly management accounts meant that corrective action in-year to avoid a substantial operating loss was left too late.

The college does not currently have adequate management information on course contribution rates or key efficiency measures such as space utilisation to inform resource allocation. A number of the commercial operations appear to be losing money and are in the process of being terminated.

Adequate cashflow forecasting may well have resulted in much earlier actions to rein-in capital spending and head-off the March/April 2018 cashflow crisis.

The high debt servicing costs, coupled with substantial operating losses and capital expenditure commitments have contributed to a rapid erosion of working capital.

## **Financial (budgetary) control, management and record keeping**

There is considerable scope to improve the format and presentation of the management accounts. Our main concerns at the time of the diagnostic assessment were:

- the late production of the monthly management accounts
- shortcomings in cashflow forecasting and monitoring of financial health

The college has taken on board the need for significant improvements in budgeting, cashflow forecasting and financial oversight identified during the diagnostic assessment in April 2018. The timeliness of monthly management accounts has already improved and a special meeting of the finance & resources committee has been organised to review the budget and financial plan before it is signed off by the corporation and submitted to ESFA on 31 July 2018. Despite the important strides made in recent months, the lack of working capital headroom underlines the need for robust sensitivity analysis and further testing of the forward financials including most critically the cashflow forecast. An independent review of the cashflow forecast would give a welcome degree of assurance to governors and stakeholders that the risks to future cashflows have been adequately identified and minimised.

## **Effectiveness of the financial recovery plan (as applicable)**

The interim principal and finance director are very new in post and as yet much work remains to be done on the financial recovery plan. The focus is rightly on cost reduction and staff restructuring, rather than income growth.

Whilst a number of important financial recovery actions have been put in place by the interim principal, significant work is ongoing to address the short-term financial challenges facing the college. Longer term there are more fundamental challenges including:

- reversing the recent decline in income (particularly if as expected ESF income falls away from 2019)
- achieving a sustainable level of operating surpluses (bearing in mind the area review target of 3-5% of turnover),
- the need for adequate working capital headroom (>25 cash days)
- the limited potential to get overall borrowing below the area review guideline of <40% of annual turnover

The prospects of achieving long-term financial sustainability look limited without either structural change (such as merger), further asset sales and/or debt restructuring. Notwithstanding the plan for a Structure and Prospects Appraisal (SPA) and the prospect of structural change such as merger, the college should continue at pace to implement cost reduction plans to get the 2018-19 finances back in balance.

## **Internal and external audit**

No major issues were identified by the college's external auditors and the 2016-17 accounts were signed-off as a going concern.

Given the college's tight working capital position we consider that there is considerable merit in seeking external validation / assurance on the cashflow forecast to July 2019, once this has been completed.

## **Management of financial risk**

The college has pursued a high income growth strategy which has involved a significant degree of risk, not least in respect of the apprenticeships levy; ESF contracts; and a range of entrepreneurial initiatives.

At the same time, the college has made significant and necessary investment in its estate, which has resulted in high levels of borrowing and declining cash reserves.

The college's risk management processes have failed to alert the college to a rapidly escalating cashflow crisis and its lack of financial resilience.

Decisions to commit finance leases in the last year appear to have been taken without sufficient assessment of their impact on overall levels of borrowing and the consequent decline in financial health.



# Estates and Capital Plans

## Estate and Buildings

The college's main campus is located on a freehold thirteen acre site in the town of Ashington. The campus comprises a range of fifteen buildings dating from the 1950's to the iconic STEM centre completed in 2017

The college's land-based campus is based fourteen miles inland at Kirkley Hall. Kirkley Hall itself is an attractive grade II listed building in addition to which is an extensive range of teaching, workshop, farm and residential buildings. The college also has an important presence in Berwick upon Tweed, some fifty miles to the north plus small facilities in Hexham (hairdressing); Port of Blyth (renewables); Hill Farm (agriculture); and Newcastle-Upon-Tyne (art).

The college does not currently hold space utilisation data but it was apparent during the visits that there is substantial overcapacity at the main Ashington site. Whilst classroom space at Kirkley Hall is reportedly at a premium, the student residential accommodation is very poorly utilised.

## Property management and investment

The college has made substantial investment in its estate in recent years, which has vastly improved the internal look and feel of the main Ashington campus.

The accommodation strategy has identified the need for further substantial capital investment at Kirkley Hall to bring equine facilities up to industry standard. Student accommodation (if retained) will need upgrading and improvement – for example the shared bathroom facilities. The condition of the facilities at Berwick may require short term investment pending a review of wider options for future provision in the town (including relocation onto a larger, single site with support from the local authority).

The college is in many respects asset rich and there are a number of opportunities to release surplus assets for re-investment. However, the college will need to secure the agreement of the local authority for any disposal of those assets which it is holding as security and any major disposals should be taken in the context of the long-term interests of the college and its learners.

## Conclusions

Since Easter 2018 the College has taken rapid steps to reduce its pay costs for 2018-19 to address the substantial operating deficit which has arisen in 2017-18. At the same time the College has taken steps to improve the systems and management of apprenticeships which are starting to address the pattern of significant decline in achievement.

Despite this, income is set to decline further in 2018-19 and the College expects to achieve a break-even budget at best. This will be insufficient to restore working capital and provide adequate financial resilience.

In light of this and the College's high levels of commercial loans and leasing obligations, the College should consider the case for structural change such as merger, as part of the ongoing FE Commissioner-led Structure and Prospects Appraisal.

## Recommendations

1. The Further Education Commissioner should continue to progress the Structure and Prospects Appraisal to confirm a sustainable future for Northumberland College which best meets the needs of learners.
2. Governors should give greater priority to strengthening the effectiveness of financial oversight in particular cashflow forecasting and monitoring.
3. As part of finalisation of the College's financial plan for 2018-20 the College should undertake further sensitivity analysis and contingency planning. This should identify the down-side risks to achievement of a break-even budget and mitigating actions to avoid further pressure on working capital.
4. The Curriculum and Quality Committee should actively monitor and review the impact of recent changes to the management and quality assurance of apprenticeships to ensure rapid improvement.
5. The Vice Principal Finance & Resources should ensure that a robust and detailed rolling cashflow forecast for 2018-20 which is consistent with the approved 2018-20 financial plan is completed before the start of the new financial year. Governors should commission an independent review of the forecast in August 2018 to give them assurance regarding the future working capital position.

## **Annex A - Information reviewed**

ESFA College Briefing

Area Review recommendations

College strategic plan

Self - Assessment Report

Key Performance Indicators

Quality Improvement Plan

Ofsted Reports

Quality Achievement Rate data for the last three years

In-year data on attendance/retention

Enrolment information including current, actual student numbers

Governors' papers and minutes including confidential minutes (current and past three years)

Latest management accounts and cash flow forecast

Draft two-year financial plan

Audited financial statement for the previous financial year

Financial recovery plan and outline staff restructuring plans

Risk register

Summary of external loans/overdrafts including covenant performance

Profiles of Corporation members and Clerk

Corporation skills audit

Job descriptions and CVs of senior leadership team and Appraisal documentation

Staffing information including turnover and survey results

Teaching Learning and Assessment Policy and Procedures

Performance management and appraisal policies

Internal audit report (current year only)

External audit management letters (current year only)

ESFA funding allocation for 2017/18

Complaints

## **Annex B - Interviewees**

Chair of Governors

Interim Principal/CEO

Clerk to the Governors

Interim VP Finance & Resources

Interim VP Curriculum

VP Quality/Student Services

Director of Quality and Learning

## **Additional Interviewees from Diagnostic Assessment April 2018**

Interim Director of Finance, ICT and Data

Finance Manager

Head of MIS

Director of Estates

Director of Human Resources

VP Employer, Enterprise and Commercial Services

VP Quality, Learning and Outcomes

Head of Standards and Compliance

Lead Governors for Quality and for Finance

Northumberland County Council Education Lead

Head of Academy Maths and English

Head of Academy Children and Adult, W/F and Access to HE

Head of Sport, Outdoor, Military, Football, Tourism

Director Land and Leisure and Head of Kirkley Hall campus

Director Engineering, Construction and STEM

UCU Branch Secretary

Members of the Students Association



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