



Department  
for Education

# **FE Commissioner Intervention Summary: Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College**

**June 2019**

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# FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment

## Summary Report: Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College

<b>Name and address of college</b>	<b>Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College</b>  <b>Cheadle Road</b> <b>Cheadle Hulme</b> <b>Cheshire</b> <b>SK8 5HA</b>  <b>Also at:</b> <b>Buxton Lane</b> <b>Marple</b> <b>Stockport</b> <b>SK6 7QY</b>
<b>Assessment undertaken by</b>	<b>Richard Atkins – FE Commissioner</b>  <b>John Boyle – FE Adviser</b>  <b>Josephine Nowacki – FE Adviser</b>  <b>Bob Smith – FE Adviser</b>
<b>Chair of the college</b>	<b>Dr David Lambrick</b>
<b>Principal / Chief Executive of the college</b>	<b>Jenny Singleton</b>
<b>Clerk to the Corporation</b>	<b>Lydia Smith</b>
<b>Date of assessment</b>	<b>20 to 21 June 2019</b>

# Background to FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment

Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College was referred for an FE Commissioner (FEC) assessment following the issue of a Notice to Improve by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) prompted by a request from the college for emergency funding.

The FEC's report is intended to advise the Minister and the Chief Executive of the ESFA on:

- The capacity and capability of the college's leadership and governance to secure a sustained financial recovery within an acceptable timetable;
- Any actions that should be taken by Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College to deliver a sustainable financial recovery within an acceptable timetable (considering the suite 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.

In June 2019 CAMSFC approached the ESFA for emergency funding to enable it to meet staff salaries and other operating costs, in July 2019, because its cash was exhausted. This, together with the Ofsted grade, was the trigger for the FEC intervention visit.

## Overview of the college

Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College (CAMSFC) is a designated sixth form college. It operates from two campuses about nine miles apart in the metropolitan borough of Stockport within Greater Manchester. Most of the senior leadership and administrative support teams are based at the Cheadle campus.

The current college has come about from a number of different merged institutions in the area, the earliest being founded in 1946. In 1995 Margaret Danyers College and Marple Ridge College combined to become Ridge Danyers College with two campuses. In October 2004 the college changed its name to CAMSFC and had up to 9,000 full time and part time students, including a substantial adult offering. Since then, student numbers have steadily decreased. In June 2019, there were 1,339 learners, compared with a sixth form college average of 1,877 (2018).

The college operates under the overall title of 'The C&M College Network' with three brands – 'The Cheadle College', 'Marple Sixth Form College' and 'The C&M Adult College'. There is a single board of governors and senior management team. There are no local governance arrangements.

The college offers a range of academic and vocational provision including GCSE, A level, BTECs, apprenticeships and some adult provision. The Marple campus offers a more traditional academic provision, although there are a small number of applied-vocational courses, and some level one and two courses. The Cheadle campus provides a curriculum similar to a small general further education (FE) college, with vocational courses, apprenticeships as well as A level and adult provision. Both campuses deliver a bespoke 'Choices' programme to approximately 50 students with high needs.

The borough of Stockport is relatively prosperous, although pockets of social and economic disadvantage exist. Serving some of the less prosperous areas, including south Manchester, the Cheadle campus caters for students from more diverse backgrounds than the Marple campus. Marple also attracts students from nearby Derbyshire.

CAMSFC was part of the Greater Manchester area review that concluded in November 2016. The area review recommended that the college convert to an academy, but the application experienced some difficulties related to the proposed governance structure and the college did not pursue this option further.

In early 2017, St Mary's College, a Catholic sixth-form college around forty-five miles away in Blackburn, Lancashire, was issued with a Notice to Improve by the ESFA. Shortly afterwards it was judged as Requires Improvement by Ofsted – a decline from its previously Good judgement. Key senior leaders left that college. Unusually, CAMSFC agreed to support St Mary's and the principal was appointed as principal at St Mary's in addition to the CAMSFC role. Some senior staff from CAMSFC were deployed on a part time basis to support St Mary's, including CAMSFC's then finance director.

The two colleges and Liverpool Hope University (delivering higher education provision from the St Mary's site) agreed to form a federation. The federation would be structured as an overarching trust (in the form of a company limited by guarantee) with some common governance to provide economies of scale of back office and senior leadership, mutual support and system leadership. The arrangement was called 'The Federation of Hope'.

The principal was to be appointed chief executive of the federation. Whilst the federation agreement was signed, but undated, in November 2018 little further progress appears to have been made. The proposed limited company has not been incorporated and the shadow board of trustees has not met.

The college has been in early intervention with the ESFA as they had concerns over the college's optimistic forecasting and requested a revised financial plan in October 2018. This has not yet been received. Each year since 2015 the college was assessed by the ESFA methodology as having Satisfactory financial health.

# Leadership and Governance

## Role, Composition and Operation of the Board

Although constituted as having 15 members there are only 12 board members at the current time. The governing body feels that the skills required are provided by this lower number but recognises that it lacks expertise in FE and in marketing. There is no dedicated finance committee and financial matters are considered by both the audit committee and the full governing body. Despite having some qualified accountants on the governing body, the board has failed over recent years to properly oversee the college's financial affairs.

The chair was first appointed as a governor in October 2011 and assumed the chair in January 2017. He will be stepping down in any event when his current term of office ends in October 2019. He advised that he had accepted the principal's and finance director's assurances as to the college's financial strength and had taken comfort with what appeared to be substantial reserves. He noted and gave weight to the ESFA financial health grade and unqualified audit opinions and had not identified the underlying financial position developing over a period of years. He accepts full responsibility for his personal failings and the collective failure of the governing body to fulfil its fiduciary duty.

There have been some recent retirements and appointments to the board which now includes 3 professionally qualified accountants. In the normal course of events, the current chair will step down on 2 July 2019, and will be replaced by the current vice chair

Meetings with some members of the governing body indicated that they placed great reliance on the ESFA financial health grade and an unqualified audit opinion, without much further challenge on the financial reports. They failed to identify that the financial proceeds from successive sales of assets masked an inadequate financial operating position. Governors had started to make deeper enquiries over the last 6 months, but their requests were not satisfied by the principal and former finance director.

Governors appear to have been reliant merely on the Satisfactory ESFA financial health grade and an otherwise satisfactory external audit report. Governors and leaders claim that the land sales obscured the true underlying position. However, the regular annual deficits and outward cashflow are clear to see, especially in the published and audited financial statements. Over a considerable period of time the governing body has failed to identify the deteriorating position, which is now terminal.

The clerk has been in post for two years and is new to the role. Prior records were not available but, in that time, governors have received no training on financial matters or the new insolvency regime for colleges. As a matter of urgency, they must familiarise themselves with their responsibilities regarding insolvency.

## Leadership and Senior Management team

The college was most recently inspected in March 2019. The Ofsted report says that senior leaders successfully rectified most of the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection in 2016. Inspectors made positive comments about the way that leaders and managers hold teachers to account, their management of the curriculum and their wise investment in effective initial advice and guidance for students. However, the inspection team found that managers did not address the weaknesses in apprenticeship provision, which was at that time just over 7.5% of the college's provision, and it was graded as Inadequate. The leadership team have since taken the strategic decision to withdraw from apprenticeship provision, recognising that this is available elsewhere.

The principal was appointed in February 2013 initially on an interim basis before being permanently appointed in October 2013. Immediately prior to this she held the post of assistant principal having spent most of her educational career and all of her management roles at the college.

At the time of the FEC visit, senior leadership had very recently been restructured. This was in response to financial budgetary requirements and to improve efficacy of the team overall. The structure from 10 June 2019 comprises an executive team of the principal, the deputy principal, the directors of MIS and of finance and resources. Revised structures at senior level are also in place across key areas, including quality, teaching learning and assessment, and support for students. The new structure clearly identifies the line management responsibilities of all senior leaders. There are parallels in the structures across the Cheadle and Marple sites to ensure consistency in, for example, support for students, teaching and learning, and careers guidance, but there is sufficient flexibility to reflect the different characteristics and student profiles at each centre.

The previous finance director left the college earlier this year, 2019, after inaccuracies and inadequacies in his reporting came to light. An interim finance director has been appointed with higher qualifications and direct experience of the FE sector and the ESFA.

The principal is also the accounting officer for the college. The terms of the ESFA funding agreement places personal responsibility on the principal in this regard, "which will not be delegated" (ESFA funding agreement para 4.1). The principal claims that she had relied on the previous finance director to advise her if the college was in financial difficulty and she took comfort from the ESFA financial health grade and satisfactory audit opinions. She claims that the substantial cash balances provided by asset sales masked the underlying true position of the college. In fact, the ongoing deficits and diminishing reserves had been clearly evidenced in the financial statements and management accounts over a period of several years. She has failed to make proper enquiry and has not properly discharged her responsibilities as accounting officer.

## Curriculum and Quality Improvement

In September 2016 CAMSFC was graded overall Good by Ofsted but with apprenticeships graded as Requires Improvement (RI). From the outset of the programme apprenticeship provision had been contracted out but after this Ofsted grading the college brought the provision 'in house'. An interim director of apprenticeships was appointed but has since left the college. In spring 2019 Ofsted visited CAMSFC and graded apprenticeships as Inadequate and as a result Effectiveness of leadership and management was graded Requires Improvement. Accordingly, an overall grade of RI was awarded with all other judgements being Good. The college challenged the Ofsted report but has subsequently accepted the judgement and has ceased offering new apprenticeship courses and the provision is running down.

Following the March 2019 Ofsted inspection, inspectors gave the following judgements:

Overall effectiveness	Requires Improvement
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires Improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
16 to 19 study programmes	Good
Adult learning programmes	Good
Apprenticeships	Inadequate
Provision for learners with high needs	Good

The inspection confirms that leaders and managers rectified most weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. For example, actions taken to improve the effectiveness of study programmes, which form the vast majority of the college's work, has resulted in an increase in the proportion of students who make good progress in their studies. There has also been an increase in the number of students who stay to complete their course, due largely to the college's strong initial advice and guidance and on-going careers advice. This is enabling more students to progress to the next stage of their career.

Inspectors judged teaching, learning and assessment as good in nearly all areas of the college's provision. Teachers encourage students to develop new knowledge and skills and support them to deepen their understanding and become more self-reflective. As a result of focused efforts by all staff, attendance has improved, and inspectors judged this as good. Students' behaviour and their general conduct are also good.



The Inadequate judgement for apprenticeships had an impact, on both the overall effectiveness and leadership and management of the college, which in all other areas, including quality improvement, appears to be good.

## Curriculum overview

The college has 1,339 students on 16 to 18 study programmes, which represents the majority of provision across both college sites. Study programmes were judged as 'good' in the 2019 inspection, with many strengths.

Around 77% of students are enrolled on level 3 vocational and academic programmes, with a good range of subjects to choose from. The large majority follow vocational courses. Around 17% of students aged 16 to 18 study at level 2 and the remainder are at level 1.

The college has provision for just under 170 adults, and many of them are on level 3 access to higher-education programmes. Adult-learning programmes are judged as Good by inspectors. The Ofsted report (March 2019) says that 'leaders and managers have successfully developed an access to higher-education programme that provides students with opportunities to improve their life chances'. More than 80% of adults progress from their access course into higher education.

The college receives funding for just under 50 students with high needs. Inspectors judged that provision in this area is 'good' and that leaders and managers use high-needs funding effectively to make sure it's meeting the needs of all students.

Around the time of inspection there were around 130 apprentices. At the time of the visit, FE advisers were told that around half of the apprentices have now been transferred to Trafford college. Following the college's decision to withdraw apprenticeship provision from the curriculum, the remaining apprentices are completing their standards at Cheadle and Marple college. Leaders and managers responded to Ofsted's criticisms by bringing apprenticeships under the direct supervision of college quality improvement systems.

## Quality improvement

The college's track record for quality improvement of provision, led by the principal, is strong.

Leaders and managers responded well to recommendations made in the inspection of 2019. For example,

- The effectiveness of study programmes has improved
- More students stay to complete their courses
- Students make good or better progress from their starting points

- The proportion of students on level 1 and 2 study programmes who achieve their qualifications has improved, is above that of similar colleges and is high - although achievement at level 3 has declined slightly, it remains high and above that of similar colleges

As well as tackling the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection, college leaders and managers strengthened provision in nearly all other areas including:

- Adult provision, which is judged as good, as is provision for high-needs learners
- Inspectors and students interviewed during the FE Commissioner visit commented upon the strong and impartial initial advice and guidance, and careers education
- Attendance has improved and is good, though not at the aspirational level set by the college

Despite overall and sustained improvement, the FEC team agree with inspectors that apprenticeship outcomes are poor and provision is Inadequate. It is unfortunate that the outcome for apprenticeships overshadows the quality improvements made in the majority of the college's provision, which is clearly good. It should be acknowledged that it is the principal who has been instrumental in leading quality improvements and has set high standards for all to achieve. The principal's expertise in quality improvement has also been essential in securing significant and much needed improvements in the quality of provision for students at St Mary's College which was judged as Good in their most recent inspection in April 2019.

## Attendance

Students' attendance is good. According to the most recent report from Sixth Dimensions Performance, attendance rates on A level provision at Cheadle and Marple college are 5% above the sixth-form national average in 2017/18. Attendance rates in 2018/19 are broadly the same as the college averages for last year. They have improved slightly in some faculties except mathematics at Marple and English at Cheadle. Even so, overall attendance remains high and a continued focus for everyone at the college. Ofsted inspectors said that attendance is good across the college.

## Outcomes

Achievement rates for the majority of provision at the college were judged as Good in the recent inspection. The proportion of students who stay to the end of the course and complete their qualifications is above that of similar colleges nationally and is high. For example, official data show that achievement at Cheadle and Marple college is 87% compared with a national figure of 84.1% in 2017/18. Although achievement on level 3 qualifications declined slightly in 2017/18, it remains above that of similar colleges. Apprenticeship achievement has declined and is poor.

Students on vocational courses make very good progress compared with their starting points. Students taking academic subjects make good progress.

Nearly all students, across all programmes, progress to positive destinations.

## **Student views**

Students are very positive about their experiences at Cheadle and Marple College. They spoke eloquently about the support given by their subject teachers, who often go the extra mile to ensure students don't fall behind on their work and are able to succeed on their courses. Students are highly appreciative of the personal support they receive and talk of teachers them helping them to develop confidence both in their subjects and personally. Students spoken to during the visit said they felt the college keeps them safe.

## **Staff views**

During the meeting with staff, the FEC team were struck by their loyalty to the college and their determination to help students succeed and progress. They felt that the principal had clear aspirations for the college and was a driving force behind many of the quality improvements, which centre entirely on students. Staff understand the part they play in ensuring success and felt both accountable and supported. In another meeting, senior staff reflected the same sense of loyalty and determination to improve provision for all students. Again, the FEC team were struck by their enthusiasm to secure continuous improvement through a strong focus on teaching, learning and assessment, often relating examples of best practice in the college.

None of the staff below senior leadership who were spoken to during the visit were aware of the extent of college's financial difficulties. The level of financial awareness and understanding across this college is exceptionally low, compared with other colleges that the FEC team visit.

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

There is demonstrable capacity in the college to manage and improve provision. Measures to improve quality have been effective in nearly all areas but there are weaknesses in apprenticeships, which, until recently had not been managed directly by the college. Inspectors rightly judged this aspect of the college as Inadequate. At the time of the inspection, college leaders had already begun to take action to improve apprenticeship provision. Overall, however, it is important not to lose sight of the 93% of provision across the college that is good, with some that is very good - endorsed by the Ofsted inspection in 2019.

## Finance and Audit

Over a number of years, the college has been contracting in size with a total of 1,339 students at both sites at the time of the visit. There has been a corresponding reduction in income. Insufficient action has been taken to reduce expenditure in line with this. The staff costs ratio is increasing and forecast to be 89% at the end of the current financial year.

The college has been incurring substantial annual operational deficits since at least 2013/14, and this has been accompanied with large operational cash outflows. During this period, the college has sold two parcels of land and has booked gains on the disposals. The sales bolstered the balance sheet and sustained the ongoing deficits and cash outflows. The remaining cash was used to repay pre-existing debt to the college bankers (some of which was secured on the land), the ESFA and on capital expenditure at Marple. There is a significant deficit forecast for the current year.

Management accounting has been inadequate with no cashflow or year-end re-forecasting being provided to senior leaders or the governing body, although the latter had been requesting these more recently. The narrative accompanying the management accounts was inadequate and failed to identify the key points and danger signs. Forecasts have been over-optimistic.

The new interim finance director has identified severe cash flow difficulties to the extent that exceptional ESFA support was requested in time for July salaries. Leaders initially believed the problems had only just arisen and had been hidden in the poor internal financial reporting and masked by the land sales, but it is now clear that the difficulties have been developing every year since at least 2013/14.

Without ESFA support the college is unable to meet its commitments as they fall due and therefore its solvency is in question. Financial health will be Inadequate.

The college is working on the next financial plan and developing a recovery plan. The latest iteration of this plan shows increasing student numbers in line with the improving local demography and notes that student applications to date are higher than at the same time last year. However, the effect of potential reputational damage as a result of the inspection grade has not been fully taken into account. The plan assumes an increase in income over the period of the plan. It discusses further potential land sales to provide interim funding and suggests that external funding, possibly by way of a commercial loan to be repaid by land sales, would enable the college to be sustainable. Whilst showing an improving position, the plan does not return to a year end surplus during the four year plan period. Cash continues to flow outwards and the income and expenditure reserve becomes deficit in 2021. The plan is not effective in its current form.

The college is relatively small and lacks the critical mass to be sustainable on a stand-alone basis. This situation is exacerbated by there being two sites. The college can only

continue operations with exceptional funding from the ESFA. A structural solution needs to be found in the short term and must be rapidly implemented.

## **Financial performance 2018/19**

The college currently forecasts to outturn a deficit well in excess of the deficit budgeted for. This is as a result of both income reduction and cost increases.

The reduction in income is due to two major factors. Apprenticeship income was forecast to increase reflecting the college bringing this provision back from its delivery partner with effect from 1 August 2018. The college has ceased new apprenticeship income. The college planned to introduce higher education provision with a modest income target but the provision did not run.

The staffing costs for 2018/19 were forecast to fall from 2017/18. This was due to some staff leaving the college under a voluntary exit programme. Further cost savings from 2017/18 were to be achieved by an increased proportion of the cost of some senior roles being shared with St. Mary's College Blackburn. There was also to be further work in consolidating roles and functions across both colleges to drive efficiencies. These savings were not achieved.

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

Budget planning has been poor. The college has incurred significant operating deficits (excluding FRS 102) in the last 5 years.

The closing cash position for July 2018 was significantly less than that included in the financial forecast submitted to the EFSA in 2018/19.

The finance team has been under resourced for a period of time and resource has been shared between Cheadle and Marple College and the federation with St Mary's College.

The college will need to have a thorough understanding of its finances and cashflow, particularly in the coming months, and the resources in the finance team should be reviewed to ensure that it is appropriate to the needs of the college.

The management accounts are poor and do not enable the governors to carry out their fiduciary duties. Management accounts have not been prepared since January 2019. The management accounts should be improved as a matter of urgency. Issues that should be addressed include:

- The narrative to the management accounts does not give the reader a good explanation of the variances from the budget nor set out the risks of not achieving the budget
- The management accounts do not include a full-year forecast

- The management accounts have not been produced since January 2019. Management accounts should be produced monthly
- The college does not include key indicators in the management accounts
- The management accounts do not include non-financial data on student and staff numbers which would enable the reader to understand the activity underpinning the income and pay expenditure
- The management accounts do not include a monthly cashflow forecast

## **Analysis/Summary of key financial problems**

The underlying trading position of the college is weak and has not been corrected by the college over a number of years. Governors have not understood that the underlying deficit was being masked to some extent by asset sales and that this was unsustainable.

The budget planning has been too optimistic and the management accounts have not been timely or accurate in forecasting the deteriorating position.

The lack of regular management accounts and cashflow forecast has resulted in the college being weeks away from becoming insolvent without the governors or senior leadership team being aware of it.

## **Estates and Capital Plans**

CAMSFC operates from two campuses although both are in Stockport, the two campuses are around nine miles apart and serve different communities. The total area of the college is 15,200m<sup>2</sup>. The college has a significant amount of accommodation in Category C – major repairs required in less than 5 years. The college has suffered from a significant lack of investment in its estates.

## **Use and maximisation of college estates and assets**

The last utilisation study undertaken by the college was in 2016/17 and indicated the overall space utilisation was 35.9%. The utilisation figures for both campuses fall within the target range of 31 to 44% and therefore would be considered acceptable. However, in comparison with other sixth form colleges which generally operate at utilisation rates of 50 to 60%, the utilisation figures are relatively low.

The annual estate running costs for both Cheadle and Marple campuses are below the sector average for college estate expenditure.

## Conclusions

With the exception of apprenticeships, the quality of provision at the college, across both sites, is good. Leaders and managers, led by the principal, have brought about secure improvements in nearly all aspects of the college curriculum. The majority of students make good progress from their starting points. Some, especially those on advanced-vocational courses, make very good progress. The apprenticeship programme is now closed to new entrants and the existing cohort are competing their standards either at Trafford College or at Cheadle and Marple, under a revised management structure.

Financial matters, strategic leadership and financial oversight have been seriously lacking for several years. While the reporting by the previous finance director is understood to have been deficient of late, continuous annual deficits over a number of years mean that the current cash crisis would have occurred in any event. The principal, as accounting officer, and the governing body have failed in their fiduciary duties and must take responsibility.

The current recovery plan is ineffective. The college's solvency is in question and it is unlikely that the college can continue on a stand-alone basis. Structural change is required in the shorter term. Governors have not understood their responsibilities with regard to insolvency and should receive immediate training to remedy this.

## Recommendations

The FEC's recommendation is escalation to formal intervention, with the following actions:

1. The board should implement a change in leadership as soon as possible.
2. The board must work with the FEC and ESFA to secure short-term stability.
3. The FEC will carry out a structure and prospects appraisal for the college and recommend appropriate structural change to the Department for Education as quickly as possible.
4. Management accounts must be improved as a matter of urgency and should, as a minimum; be produced monthly, include full-year forecasts, and detail a monthly cashflow forecast.
5. A review of resource in the finance team should be carried out immediately to ensure that it meets the needs of the college and that adequate financial control can take place.
6. Governors must obtain training on the insolvency regime for colleges.

## **Annex A - Information reviewed**

Previous financial plans and finance records

Audited financial statements

Management accounts

Recovery plan

Governing body agenda, reports and minutes

Governor details

Governor skills audit

Self-assessment report

Quality improvement plan

Recent DfE data

Teaching and learning strategy

Ofsted Inspection report March 2019

In-year college data



## **Annex B - Interviewees**

Principal

Chair of corporation

Chair of audit committee/vice chair of corporation

2 governors

Clerk

Interim finance director

Head of finance

Senior leadership team (except deputy principal)

Panel of students

Panel of staff



Department  
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