



Department
for Education

FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment Summary Report: Newham Sixth Form College (NewVIc)

June 2024

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Background

Name of College	Newham Sixth Form College (NewVIc)
UKPRN	10004608
Type of provision	Sixth Form
Date of visit	9 May 2024
Type of visit	Intervention Assessment
Trigger for formal intervention	Inadequate Ofsted Inspection Grade
Further Education Commissioner (FEC) Team members	Deputy FEC (Lead) – Nigel Duncan FE Adviser – Kate Webb FE Adviser – Anne Whitworth
Location	Plaistow/Newham, London
Apprenticeship training provider	No
Latest Ofsted inspection grade	Inadequate
Place Based Team (PBT) Financial Health Grade	Outstanding
Latest annual financial turnover	£22.3 million

Conclusion and executive summary

Newham Sixth Form College's recent performance in relation to the quality of its provision has been inadequate. Governors and leaders have failed to effectively plan, oversee, and invest in the college's provision, leading to a significant decline in performance and recruitment over the past 4 years. The student experience and success has been adversely impacted by industrial disputes, poor management, stretched administration, and a breakdown in systems and process.

Historically, reports to governors have been weak, resulting in the challenge senior leaders received about poor performance being equally ineffective. A high level of recent management turnover has left the leadership structure too dependent on temporary interim posts and it is therefore inherently vulnerable. An immediate review of the management structure to secure key skills in the run up to merger and beyond will be critical to maintaining operational stability.

Student experience and outcomes in 2022/23 were affected by the disruption and lost teaching time caused by industrial action. However, the new leadership team have also recognised that the decline in outcomes is a 4 year trend. Teaching and learning have been adversely affected by lack of investment in resources for students. In addition, there has been limited or ineffective processes to support teachers to improve their practice. Recent errors in examination administration have resulted in a major awarding organisation suspending any further registrations on their awards. This is a significant issue that needs immediate resolution if it is not to adversely affect next year's cohort.

Governors have agreed to explore a merger with Newham College. If successful, this will reset the strategic opportunities for the sixth form provision in Newham and address the failings of recent years at Newham Sixth Form College. The merger is scheduled to take place in November 2024. In the meantime, to support recovery and prepare for transition, commencing 3 June the deputy principal of Newham College has been appointed on secondment as the interim Chief Executive Officer and principal of Newham Sixth Form College.

Recommendations

This report's recommendations and corresponding single improvement plan have been scheduled to align with the expected merger of Newham Sixth Form College with Newham GFE College in November 2024.

Recommendation 1: Supported by the FEC, governors and senior leaders must produce a Single improvement Plan (SIP), that provides the FEC and Department for Education with confidence that the actions will drive the changes needed to address the areas for improvement that have led to the college being placed into intervention. These are likely to correspond with improvements identified in the Ofsted Inspection Report, Notice to Improve additional conditions of funding, this report's recommendations, and the college's self-assessment report. **June 2024**

Recommendation 2: Senior leaders must review current examinations administration capacity on the ground, with a view to improving examination processes. To allay current students' anxieties, leaders should also establish an examinations help desk for 2024 summer series. **June 2024**

Recommendation 3: Governors and senior leaders must establish an effective pre and post-merger communications strategy that embraces all stakeholder groups. This should include establishing a formal communications framework that engages senior leaders with staff representatives on a regular basis throughout the planned merger transition process. **June 2024**

Recommendation 4: The chair, governance professional, and CEO must develop and implement a strategy for ensuring governors understand what it is like to be a student at the college. **July 2024**

Recommendation 5: The chair, Committee chairs, senior leaders, and the governance professional must strengthen corporate reports and quality documents to improve the content and information available to governors. **July 2024**

Recommendation 6: The governance professional must review the business cycle to include an appropriate proportion of face-to-face meetings. **September 2024**

Recommendation 7: Governors and senior leaders should address any potential risk of losing key leadership posts by extending and/or securing existing or revised arrangements. **June 2024**

Recommendation 8: Senior leaders must undertake a review of enrolment process and practice should be implemented immediately to ensure lessons learned from the 2023/24 performance are not repeated in 2024/25. **June 2024**

Recommendation 9: Senior leaders must develop an effective strategic and curriculum planning process that sets out how curriculum is developed and links to other strategic drivers. This should include establishing a clear resourcing tariff for each type and level of course. **June 2024**

Recommendation 10: Senior leaders should align the developing quality systems with Newham General Further Education College systems, together with combined training and development for all staff. **September 2024**

Recommendation 11: To improve quality teaching, learning, and assessment, senior leaders must develop an effective employee target setting process linked to a recognised performance management cycle. **October 2024.**

Recommendation 12: In preparation for merger, senior leaders should draft an estates position statement which highlights the immediate property needs, including estimated costs. **September 2024**

The FEC team will conduct an intervention assessment stocktake visit to review progress against recommendations, aligned with progress towards merger. **October 2024.**

Governance and leadership

Governance

Governance has been ineffective in overseeing and maintaining the quality of provision.

Governors have failed to hold senior leaders to account for the poor performance and relied too heavily on the ineffective responses senior leaders have provided. Governance is remote and disconnected from the life of the college.

Attendance at governance meetings has drifted to rely too heavily on hybrid modes of attendance, challenging the effectiveness of the meetings and reducing the benefits experienced by meeting in person.

Board reports lack focus, detail, relevant datasets, and concise levels of information to engage members. One page summary cover sheets are mixed in their quality and will need improving. Minutes must include clear and SMART actions and an allied action log through which to monitor and report progress.

Governors interviewed acknowledge the failings in corporate performance, recognising that the lack of oversight and challenge of senior leaders, and failure to act quickly when presented with evidence of inadequate performance has contributed to the position the college now finds itself in.

The new chair joined the board in March 2024 and has quickly established a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the board and is aware of areas where board operations can be improved. The board will need to focus on the critical success factors within the single improvement plan to arrest any continuing decline, whilst embracing the proposed solution of a merger with Newham General Further Education College. Recent changes to board membership has progressed the pace of improvement, leaving a small but committed team to drive the recovery in performance as NewVlc moves towards merger with Newham College.

Leadership

Leaders have presided over an extended period characterised by poor performance, industrial conflict, mutual distrust between staff, managers, and governors, deteriorating staff morale, and underinvestment in learning resources. All of which have had a direct detrimental impact on the experience and performance of learners. At the time of the visit, learners reported a dysfunctional examinations process, cancelled classes, shortages in essential equipment, and erratic timetabling.

Leaders have failed to manage and monitor individual performance through effective target setting and performance management processes. Recent organisational issues, which resulted in significant changes to leadership, industrial action, and administrative failures have sidelined the development and oversight of critically important quality improvement practices. Establishing a culture of personal accountability and ownership of performance will be crucial to achieving sustainable improvements in the quality of provision.

Staff have worked hard to improve industrial relations and recover performance wherever possible. This has had a positive impact on this year's forecast outcomes, which are showing a moderate recovery against last year. However, this moderate recovery masks a general decline in recruitment and performance over the past 4 years.

Leadership is heavily reliant on interim postholders whom, whilst working hard to maintain provision, are unsure about their own futures and how long they will be required. Establishing and stabilising effective leadership must be an immediate priority, to ensure the current positive direction of travel is maintained and the college remains operationally effective in the lead into merger (expected November 2024).

Until recently, communications between senior leaders, governors and staff have been poor, which has resulted in resentment, distrust, and an air of conflict. Recent developments in seeking a merger solution have been met with cautious optimism by staff and trade unions, but much needs to be done to reinstate a constructive model of effective dialogue. A carefully designed communications strategy will be critical to maintaining a productive, transparent, and open channel of communication.

Curriculum and quality improvement

Curriculum and provision overview

The college offers a broad full-time curriculum from entry level to level 3 including 28 A levels and over 70 vocational programmes including T Levels. There is no discrete adult provision. In 2022/23 the decision was made to close construction provision. Other providers, including Newham General FE College, also deliver locally in this sector subject area.

The college offers discrete courses for learners with High Needs at entry level to level 2. Learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD) are also supported in study programmes across the college.

Most students study at level 3. The college recruits large numbers of students in receipt of a bursary. The student community is diverse, reflecting the local catchment area. The staff body also reflects this, with around 67% from ethnic minority groups.

Curriculum planning and development

Curriculum planning processes are underdeveloped with inconsistent and variable guided learning hours (GLH) across the college. This has resulted in sub-optimal curriculum arrangements leading to the risk of lost funding. In 2023/24 the new leadership team recognised in-year that hours needed to be increased on some study programmes, necessitating in-year work to rectify. The leadership team recognise the need to establish an effective curriculum planning process for the future and work is underway to do this.

Quality: self-assessment and effectiveness to manage and improve quality

16- to 18-year-old student recruitment has declined by 20% in the last 3 years, with a significant reduction of 351 students from 2022/23 to 2023/24. Student attendance rates were poor in 2021/22 and 2022/23, and have not improved significantly in 2023/24. Student achievement has declined over the 4 years from 2019/20 and was at 76.4% in 2022/23, in part because of a decline in retention.

Student experience and outcomes in 2022/23 were affected by the disruption and lost teaching time caused by industrial action. However, the new leadership team have also recognised that the decline in outcomes is a 4 year trend.

In the last 3 years governors and senior leaders have not monitored the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, student experience or student outcomes with sufficient challenge, depth or detail. Teaching and learning have been adversely affected

by lack of investment in resources for students. In addition, there were limited or ineffective processes to support teachers to improve their practice.

The leadership team have put in place a series of interventions to improve teaching, learning and assessment. These include a renewed focus on staff training. However, as these initiatives are very recent it is too early to identify long term impact. The newly introduced lesson observation process is not yet embedded. The leadership team recognise further work is needed to develop an observation policy that promotes and supports effective practice, provides quality assurance, and identifies priorities for improvement.

Quality improvement has been hampered this year due to inadequate administrative and data processes. Enrolment processes in September 2023 were poor, resulting in gaps in student data. There have been historical issues with compliance with awarding body regulations which are now being resolved. Current exam administration has been adversely affected by a lack of expert and permanent staff. These factors have created additional workload for leaders, managers, and staff as they have put in measures to resolve issues in-year. Leaders report that student data is now complete. The administration of exams is being closely monitored and there is an urgent need to secure stable and expert staffing in this area for the long term.

Quality systems were largely ineffective or absent in the recent years prior to 2023. The current leadership team are implementing new systems and reporting. This work would benefit from shared learning with Newham General FE College as pre-merger work continues, there may be lessons to be learnt and economies of scale to be realised.

Reported in-year retention figures indicate that there may be improvements in outcomes in 2023/24, although it is too early to tell whether these will be secured. Leaders have recently implemented a detailed process with curriculum managers to capture student achievement projections. Governors and leaders now have access to this information which prudently indicates a projected achievement range of 78% to 85% for 2023/24. Leaders recognise that more work is needed to refine this process in future years, to provide further reliable and granular information to help managers and teachers to support student achievement.

The college self-assessment in December 2023 graded the college as inadequate. The Ofsted inspection in February 2024 confirmed this judgement. The leadership team have put in place a Post Inspection Action Plan, and an action plan in response to the Notice to Improve. At the time of the visit, these plans were being refined. A high-level Single Improvement Plan (SIP), supported by the FE Commissioner's team, will provide a strategic framework for improvement plans, enhancing the focus on impact and purpose.

The current leadership team have urgently worked to stabilise the college's operations and have identified the right priorities for improvement. However, the college remains heavily reliant on interim managers at all levels, including senior. Whilst working toward

merger, governors and senior leaders should secure leadership arrangements that provide continuity and momentum for quality improvement.

Student and staff views

Students felt the college experience had deteriorated in the last few years. They thought the teacher strikes in 2022/23 had a major impact on their learning and since then they perceived there had been significant teaching staff turnover and absences, particularly in maths. They reported that it was not uncommon for lessons to be cancelled and during these sessions students were simply asked to undertake independent study, without any clear direction of the subjects to cover.

Students expressed their concerns about the poor administration of exams, which was ongoing and had, for example, resulted in a lack of notice about exam timetables, lost exam papers and a failure to register some students for exams.

The students also reported that other college administration processes were disorganised, and, for example, lesson timetables had included subject clashes which meant they were unable to attend all required lessons.

Students did feel that the college had a good reputation for its sports academies and foundation learning, and they were appreciative of the pastoral, health and wellbeing support provided by the college.

Staff thought that the college's decline in performance was due to previous failures in governance and leadership, including under investment in resources for teaching and learning, and administration. They reported that poor relationships between leaders, managers and staff had resulted in the recent industrial action and a deterioration of institutional culture.

Staff considered that the governance of the college was extremely weak and that there was a lack of strategic direction and vision. Staff also considered that governors did not have a good understanding of the college's context, the community it served and what the experience was like for learners.

Staff expressed their concerns about the current instability of leadership and management due to the large number of interim arrangements. They reported that there were still ongoing issues caused by a previous lack of investment in systems, for example they considered that exams administration was still poor.

Whilst the leadership team have introduced improvements, the trust and confidence of staff is still fragile, and staff express the wish to be involved further in college decisions and operations as further improvements are made.

Finance and audit

Recent financial history

For several years, the college's financial strategy has been to generate large cash reserves to fund the college's estates strategy, which includes major refurbishments and new build.

As a result, the planned Earnings Before Interest, Tax, Depreciation and Amortisation (EBITDA) and staff to income ratios were significantly better than sector benchmarks and the college's financial health has been outstanding. However, this has led to a lack of investment in essential estates maintenance, student resources, such as IT and equipment, and staff training and development.

It is also understood that the estates strategy was not underpinned by the curriculum strategy and, therefore, there was no clear rationale for the planned refurbishments and new buildings.

Financial forecast 2023/24 to 2024/25

The approved budget for 2023/24 is an operating surplus of c£1.2 million, with an EBITDA surplus of c£2.2 million. The outturn reported by the college in May 2024 is in line with the budget. The staff to income ratio is currently reported to be c65%, despite high agency costs, and the financial health score for 2023/24 is likely to be outstanding.

The plan for 2024/25 reflects a significant reduction in learner numbers, and this, coupled with a previous lack of attention to funding rules that led to some full-time students not being fully funded, has resulted in a reduction in grant income of around £2 million. The college has taken steps to reduce staff costs, and due to a strong balance sheet means that it is still likely to have good financial health.

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

The college's cash position has been very strong for some years, with year-end cash balances increasing from c£9.2 million in July 2021 (220 cash days in hand) to £15.9 million in July 2023 (327 cash days in hand). The cash balance reported in the March 2024 management accounts was £16.1 million.

Financial liabilities/loans

The college had a long-term loan facility with Lloyds bank which had an outstanding balance of c£2.2 million at 31 July 2022. The college chose to repay this loan early and settled the outstanding balance in December 2022. Therefore, the college is now debt free.

Audit and risk

The current risk register highlights a significant number of black (very high) and red (high) risks. The highest risks include the impact of the Ofsted inspection on the college's reputation and the potential decline in student enrolments. Another black risk matter relates to exams malpractice which led to sanctions imposed by an awarding body, still to be resolved fully.

The college continues to engage an internal audit provider, and during 2022/23 they conducted audits of procurement processes, business planning, risk management, and environmental and social responsibilities. The internal auditor's opinion for the year ended 31 July 2023 was that the college had adequate and effective risk management, governance, and control processes.

The college's 2022/23 financial statements audit was completed to allow the submission of the accounts to be made on time, however, it was reported that the audit did not go smoothly, and the provision of information was delayed such that the initial governor committee deadlines were missed.

Long term sustainability

While the college's finances are currently strong, the impact of the recent Ofsted inspection on its reputation and ability to recruit new students, together with its ability to retain good staff and address essential investment needs, mean there is a risk the college would not be sustainable as a standalone institution.

Estates and capital plans

The college has one campus which is located in Plaistow, in the London Borough of Newham.

The site comprises several individual buildings, 2 of which are temporary and for which planning permission expires in November 2024. The buildings range in age with some dating back to the 1920s (purpose built classrooms for a secondary school) and others to the 1990s and 2000s.

Around a quarter of the estate is designated as general teaching space, a further 15% for specialist teaching facilities, such as science laboratories, and the remainder is for central student facilities and staff offices.

Approximately 2 thirds of the building are considered to be in a poor condition, and in some instances, they do not comply with current health and safety regulations.

While a new estates masterplan was prepared in 2023 which identified the need to undertake major refurbishments, new build, and the demolition of some blocks, it is

understood that it was not underpinned by the curriculum strategy and, therefore, lacked a clear rationale for the proposed changes.

Appendix A – Interviewees

- Chair of the College Corporation
- Interim CEO/Principal
- Head of Governance
- Vice Principal Curriculum and Quality
- Interim Vice Principal Finance, Estates, and Marketing
- Trade Union Representatives - NEU, Unison, GMB
- Interim Head of Quality
- Interim Executive Director of MIS, Examinations, and Information Technology
- Staff Group:
 - Advice and Recruitment Manager
 - Teachers x 4
 - Curriculum Manager
 - Employer Engagement and Placement Officer
 - Mental Health Adviser
 - Learning and Resources Centre Manager
 - Senior Human Resources Manager
 - Senior Progress Tutor
 - Marketing Officer
- Students x 7
- Lead Governor – Risk
- Vice Chair of Corporation (online)
- Lead Governor – Quality (online)

Appendix B – Documents reviewed

Ref. number	BOARD DOCUMENTS
B1	Last twelve months minutes and papers from board and committee meetings
	GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP
GL1	Papers specifically relating to progress made following Ofsted inspection
GL2	Corporation membership details including governance structure and committee membership
GL3	Updated college risk register
GL4	Last whole college KPI report to governors
GL6	Board self-assessment and quality improvement plan
GL7	Organisational chart/s
GL9	Governance external review
GL10	Current version of Strategic Plan
GL11	Annual Accountability Statement and Local Needs Duty statement for 2023/24
	CURRICULUM AND QUALITY
CQ1	Provider Quality Performance Table
CQ2	Updated College Self-Assessment Report or position statement
CQ3	Post-Inspection Action Plan
CQ4	College Quality improvement plan and progress against it
CQ5	Staff and student surveys and allied action plans
CQ6	Any Employer and stakeholder engagement and feedback
CQ7	Draft Single Improvement Plan – if available
CQ8	Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy
CQ9	CPD Strategy
CQ10	Any other quality improvement and assurance reports.
	FINANCE AND ESTATES
F1	Financial information
F2	FT Application data for next academic year
F3	Costed curriculum plan including contribution analysis by department/curriculum area
F4	Latest management accounts, including cashflow forecast for at least the following 12 months
F5	Brief details of bank loans and covenant compliance (if applicable)
F6	Details of recent or planned staff restructuring events (if applicable)
F7	Estates strategy
F9	Indicative budget for 24/25.