



Department  
for Education

# **FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment Summary Report: Furness College**

**December 2024**

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## Background

<b>Name of College</b>	Furness College
<b>UKPRN</b>	10002599
<b>Name of College Principal /CEO</b>	Nicola Cove
<b>Name of College Chair</b>	Gary Lovatt (from 23 <sup>rd</sup> October 2024)
<b>Type of provision</b>	GFE
<b>Date of visit</b>	10 <sup>th</sup> and 11 <sup>th</sup> December 2024
<b>Type of visit</b>	Intervention visit
<b>Trigger for formal intervention</b>	Inadequate Ofsted inspection
<b>Further Education Commissioner (FEC) Team members</b>	FEC, Shelagh Legrave Deputy FEC, Phil Cook (Lead) FE Adviser, Esme Winch FE Adviser, Pauline Hagen
<b>Location</b>	Channelside Campus, Channelside Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, LA14 2PJ The Sixth Form, The Sixth Form, Rating Lane, Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, LA13 9LE
<b>Apprenticeship training provider</b>	Yes
<b>Latest Ofsted inspection grade</b>	Inadequate (8 <sup>th</sup> October 2024)
<b>Place Based Team (PBT) Financial Health Grade</b>	Good

## Conclusion and executive summary

Furness College is a General Further Education college (GFE) based in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria. The college was placed into intervention following its overall effectiveness Ofsted judgement grade of inadequate (October 2024). Leadership and management were judged as inadequate with all other grades being judged as requires improvement. The college plays a vital role in respect of its local communities, but also nationally. Barrow is ranked as the 31st most deprived out of 317 lower tier local authorities. Based in Barrow, the BAE Systems Maritime Submarines shipyard builds the UK's nuclear submarines.

In terms of next steps, the college should work closely with a National Leader of Further Education (NLFE) and a National Leader of Governance (NLG). It should complete an independent External Board Review (EBR) and implement a detailed improvement plan. The college must focus on rapidly delivering a Post Inspection Action Plan (PIAP) and in doing so increase management capacity and capability to rapidly improve quality and teaching and learning. As part of this process the college must review leadership structures in the sixth form to accelerate the pace of improvement and support a single college culture. The college must ensure its reputation across both internal and external key stakeholders improves, by implementing a comprehensive and impactful communications strategy, and that the college grows its student cohorts.

To test the college's future sustainability and long-term resilience, framed by the college's ability to deliver high quality education and skills training to meet both national and local priorities, a Structure and Prospects Appraisal (SPA) will be initiated.

The FEC team will conduct an intervention assessment stocktake visit to review progress in March 2025.

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1: The college should be proactive in seeking support from the FEC, this is likely to include the engagement with both a National Leader of Further Education (NLFE) and a National Leader of Governance (NLG).**

- Target date: NLFE and NLG in place January 2025
- Responsibility: Chair

**Recommendation 2: Commission an independent External Board Review (EBR) and implement a detailed improvement plan.** The scope of the review, and the proposed facilitator, must be agreed with DfE's place-based team (PBT) and FEC team in advance of commissioning.

- Target date: Review scope approved (January 2025), review completed (March 2025), improvement plan in place April 2025
- Responsibility: Chair

**Recommendation 3: Deliver a robust Post Inspection Action Plan (PIAP).** Ensure a PIAP is in place, approved by DfE and FEC, that will deliver rapid improvement to leadership and management and the quality of education, specifically focused on those areas for improvement identified by Ofsted. The plan should clearly articulate how and when actions will be achieved, measured, and who is responsible for delivery, implementation and progress.

- Target date: PIAP in place and approved January 2025
- Responsibility: Principal

**Recommendation 4: Increase management capacity and capability to rapidly improve quality and teaching and learning.** Implement an impactful college-wide CPD strategy focussed firmly upon improving teaching and learning. The strategy will include increasing the college's expertise in teaching and learning (as a matter of urgency), leadership and management training for all leaders and managers, and formulating an evidence-based teaching approach. Development of the senior team, possibly through mentoring and increasing exposure to 'experts' in other colleges, should be considered an urgent priority.

- Target date: CPD strategy in place January 2025
- Responsibility: Principal

**Recommendation 5: Implement a comprehensive and impactful communications strategy to ensure the college's reputation across both internal and external key stakeholders improves.** As part of this process, college leaders should ensure that they formally evaluate key partnerships in terms of their current and potential impact on students, local communities and skills priorities, including how stakeholders shape the curriculum and contribute to its delivery. The strategy should include a clear plan to reverse the college's declining student numbers.

- Target date: Strategy in place February 2025
- Responsibility: Principal

**Recommendation 6: Review leadership structures in the sixth form to accelerate the pace of improvement and support a single college culture.** Within the review, the college should consider leadership capacity, the identity of the sixth form within the college, and the visibility of senior leaders.

- Target date: Review completed March 2025, improvement strategy in place April 2025.
- Responsibility: Principal

To test the college's future sustainability and long-term resilience, framed by the college's ability to deliver high quality education and skills training to meet both national and local priorities, a SPA will be initiated. The SPA will include a standalone option compared to the option of merging with another college. In making its decision, the SPA will evaluate options in relation to the college's future structure. Specifically, the SPA will evaluate the college's capacity to meet the area's future educational, economic and business needs along with the college's capacity to ensure the quality of provision for current and future learners will rapidly and significantly be improved.

The FEC team will conduct an intervention assessment stocktake visit to review progress in March 2025.

## Governance and leadership

Furness College is a GFE based on two sites in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria. It is a small, geographically isolated college and serves the town of Barrow (population, 55,000) and Westmorland and Furness (population 226,600). The college merged with Barrow Sixth Form College in August 2016.

The college plays a vital role in respect of its local communities, but also nationally. Barrow is ranked as the 31st most deprived out of 317 lower tier local authorities. Based in Barrow, the BAE Systems Maritime Submarines shipyard (12,000 employees in 2024) builds the UK's nuclear submarines. To support the rejuvenation of Barrow the government created the Barrow Transformation Fund (delivered by a partnership of key stakeholders called Team Barrow). The fund provides a long-term investment plan (£20m a year over the next 10 years) to strengthen Barrow's economy and increase productivity; tackling deprivation factors, significant economic inactivity and low skill levels, and to make Barrow a more attractive place to live and work. Barrow is central to the UK's defence nuclear ambitions; BAE systems will need to significantly expand its workforce over coming years to meet those ambitions. The college has a critical role to play in providing a skilled workforce, presenting a strategically significant opportunity for the college.

Furness College was placed into intervention following its overall effectiveness judgement grade from Ofsted of inadequate (October 2024). Leadership and management was judged as inadequate with all other grades being judged as requires improvement. Ofsted stated that the college “makes a limited contribution to meeting skills needs.”

In October 2024, a new chair was appointed. The chair is an experienced non-executive board member but has limited FE experience. The board is supported by a qualified clerk. The board must ensure there is sufficient capacity in board membership to place teaching, learning and assessment at the core of college business. This is likely to include the appointment of new governors and/or the appointment of a co-opted governor(s) as a short/medium term intervention. It should also seek to triangulate reports by ensuring high levels of college presence, both across committee and sub-committee meetings but also in terms of learning walks, meeting students, and so on. To provide a baseline for improvement an EBR must be commissioned. The review should focus on how the governing body supports and holds the college senior management team to account. It will evaluate the extent to which governance systems and processes are in line with the AOC code of practice and appraise the level to which reports provide sufficient detail including, where available, accurate management information that enables comparison to external benchmarks. From the review, an improvement plan must be implemented and rapidly executed. The plan must drive rapid improvement to leadership and management and the quality of education.

The board appointed a new principal in September 2023. Towards the end of 2023/24, the college implemented a significant structural review. This included the appointment of a new senior management team. The team is comparatively inexperienced and many on the team have little experience outside of Furness College. One of the challenges the college faces, both in terms of board recruitment and staff recruitment, is its geographical isolation. Whilst the college should develop strategies to increase its potential labour pool and ensure capacity and expertise at leadership and management levels, the criticality of extensive and impactful staff training for those currently in post cannot be overstated. The college has made progress in this area since the inspection but should ensure its college-wide CPD strategy is focussed firmly upon improving leadership and management and teaching and learning. Such a strategy will include increasing management capacity and capability to rapidly improve the quality of teaching and learning; leadership and management training for all leaders and managers, and formulating an evidence-based teaching approach, for example developing a teaching toolkit.

To improve the college’s reputation across both internal and external key stakeholders, the college must implement a comprehensive communications strategy. This will involve a very focused approach on improving staff morale but also ensuring support mechanisms are in place (CPD strategy) to enable staff to deliver high quality education and skills training; underpinned by clear lines of accountability. The strategic importance of BAE systems (external key stakeholder) means that the college should consider the

recruitment of a specialist contracts manager, to both ensure the college maximises the opportunities of the Barrow Transformation Fund and the partnership opportunities with BAE systems, but also to mitigate management distraction and to ensure the current management team are fully focused on improving the college's Ofsted grade.

The board must maintain firm oversight to ensure the PIAP delivers rapid improvement; receiving detailed and appropriate reports will be critical to this. In addition, the board must ensure clear and robust oversight of the CPD strategy and communications strategy alongside ensuring the college's financial position is maintained.

To support the above, the FEC will provide an experienced NLFE with extensive experience of leading high-quality teaching and learning and an NLG with substantial experience of supporting board improvement.

## **Curriculum and quality improvement**

The college delivers a broad curriculum to 1,000 young learners, 493 learners aged 19 and above and 568 apprentices. 78 students are on T level qualifications and 57 students have high needs. Young learners study qualifications from entry to level 3, and adults from entry to level 4. Approximately half of young learners study qualifications at level 3, and approximately half of these study A levels in the sixth form college.

The curriculum is planned to reflect the distinct characteristics of the local area. There are high levels of disadvantage, and the population of young people is expected to fall. The working age population has fallen in recent years and the proportion of people with qualifications at level 4 and above is below national rate. In this context, the college is well-positioned to deliver curriculums which address local need and support government skills priorities. The college has a well-established subcontracting partnership with BAE systems. Team Barrow and the Barrow Transformation Fund present significant future opportunities for the college. The college is part of the Cumbrian Colleges Group (FE4). College leaders should ensure that they formally evaluate key partnerships in terms of their impact on students, the local area and skills priorities.

Curriculum planning follows an established process and to some extent reflects the input of stakeholders, the needs of employers and the needs of the local population. Whilst some curriculum areas have effective links with employers, this is inconsistent and there is no overall strategy for ensuring that employers and stakeholders shape the curriculum and contribute to its delivery. Leaders should strengthen the existing curriculum planning cycle to bring a consistent, whole-college approach to specific local and national imperatives with clearly defined outcomes and measurable impact. The curriculum planning workstream is also important because of the declining learner numbers and the falling demographic.



Overall learner numbers are declining across all age groups and provision types, notwithstanding some increases in 16-18 apprentices and T level learners. Added to this, achievement and retention are in a three-year decline and work to improve low attendance is not yet having the impact needed. The generally positive outturn forecasting for KPIs is a reflection of leaders' ambition and commitment to rapid reversal of decline, but achievement of these will necessitate relentless and rapid action. In English and maths, both the three-year trend and year to date attendance of 67.9% and 64.3% respectively will make forecast outturn challenging to achieve. Alongside, and joined up with attendance, work on retention and achievement will be central in the college's recovery journey. Achievement must improve rapidly from a weak position against national rates, both for young learners and those aged 19+. In the sixth form college, A level achievement was 75.9% in 2023/24, and the progression rate to higher education 28%, against a sixth form college average of 70.7%. Leaders should work at pace to improve sixth form achievement rates, take action to stem declining numbers and review the sixth form curriculum. The college's recent investment in the Alps value added system will enable richer analysis of level 3 performance against starting points and more accurate forecasting for leaders and governors.

Leaders recognise that the college's approach to self-assessment has not been effective in supporting improvement, identifying weaknesses with evidence and establishing a monitored improvement journey. Consequently, governors have not been provided with the information they need to enable them to challenge leaders and hold them to account for progress against targets. The self-assessment report uses a narrative structure which makes it difficult to see clear strengths and weaknesses with supporting evidence. This narrative approach is apparent in all but the most recent performance report to the Learner Experience Committee (LEC). Governors need to see the position of the college in both a national and sector context and against KPIs which leaders have set. This will give them both the means and the confidence to hold leaders to account. The blended attendance model for governors may need to be reviewed in order to support discussion, analysis and questioning of information. Accurate and timely provision of data will be critical to a shared understanding by leaders and governors of the college position. Leaders report that since inspection, data is more readily available, and curriculum leaders report that this is supporting their own improvement journey.

Work on the combined Quality Improvement Plan and PIAP is well underway, with a structure which will bring clarity, focus on strategic level data and support forensic analysis of progress against targets. It is clear that this approach is enabling leaders to present clearer information to the LEC, with the November report making use of the most recent performance data and presenting it in a format enabling understanding and challenge. There is further work to do in using relevant comparative sector data, but there is an encouraging shift which is clear to see. The QUIP/PIAP is rightly ambitious in establishing a rapid pace with several critical workstreams underway. These include deep dives, CPD, revision to ineffective quality processes and immediate overhaul of attendance and retention processes. Whilst the latter are largely reactive, because of

their introduction at this point in the year, they will give leaders and teachers the tools for a pro-active start in September 2025. Leaders are implementing a teaching framework which will bring greater consistency across college and enable analysis of the quality of teaching and teacher expertise.

The re-organised leadership structure brings some advantages in the internal promotion of several long-serving leaders. Their knowledge and understanding of the college and their commitment to improvement is clear to see. However, this also brings some challenges regarding breadth of experience and depth of knowledge. Development of the senior team, possibly through mentoring and certainly through their exposure to their counterparts in other colleges, should be considered an urgent priority. Leadership in the sixth form requires a rapid review, and consideration should be given to an alternative leadership structure. Achievement of A level students is particularly concerning at 75.9% in 2023/24. Leadership capacity will be essential to the pace of improvement in the college's primary function, the quality of education. There is no clear accountability for teaching and learning in the current structure and consideration should be given to building capacity to enable the VP for Curriculum and Quality to lead improvement more effectively. Expertise in evidence-based pedagogy cannot be achieved at pace without investment in specialist expertise.

The curriculum leadership team has undergone a re-structure and includes both internal and external appointments. This group are supportive of recent work on teaching and learning and feel it strengthens their own leadership of learning. They have better access to data since inspection and can use this to improve performance objectively and challenge more robustly. The recent deep dives alongside the CPD in pedagogy have given this group the means to identify and tackle underperformance quickly and much more effectively and to establish standards and expectations. There was consensus in this group around uneven individual workloads and of the need for investment to ensure that heads of faculty have the resource and time to lead learning without additional curriculum leadership responsibility. The group agreed that their effectiveness would be strengthened if they had both more time and more responsibility. The meeting with sixth form college staff identified some issues around leadership capacity, the identity of the sixth form within the college, the visibility of senior leaders and declining achievement and attendance. There may be a need to review leadership structures in the sixth form to accelerate the pace of improvement and support a single college culture. A common approach to pedagogy will also help with harmonisation, since lesson visits across the college, including A level, reflect common weaknesses and a limited understanding of evidence-based pedagogy.

## **Finance and audit**

The financial health of the college is good as calculated by the financial health score. The college has maintained stable financial results for a number of years. Education EBITDA has been and is forecasted to be strong for the previous and for the current year.

The detailed budgets are set with curriculum area contributions calculated centrally and subsequently monitored but this could be developed and delegated further.

Income is spread across most income streams.

Staff costs are higher than benchmark but bearing in mind the relative size of the sixth form provision, it is not a critical factor although should be closely monitored.

The new Director of Finance had only been in post for a few weeks at the time of the visit but appeared to understand the college's financial position and challenges.

## **Cashflow/liquidity**

EBITDA figures remain positive at 4-5% and cash balances are high. The major capital expenditure, being the sixth form refurbishment is now complete.

Consequently, liquidity and cashflow are not, in the short to medium term, a high risk for the current business model.

## **Audit and risk**

External and internal audit reports did not highlight any critical issues. Compliance for apprenticeship paperwork were in the main, low-level recommendations.

## **Estates and capital plans**

The college occupies over 28,000 sqm of accommodation in all of its sites. The college holds the freeholds for both the Channelside and sixth form campuses. The smaller two sites are short leasehold and, because they house specialist provision, cannot be cost effectively relocated.

The largest campus is located at Channelside in the LA14 postcode area, on an 11 acre site. The other main site is the sixth form campus (former Barrow Sixth Form Centre).

The Channelside site was built in 2010 under legacy LSC capital funding arrangements. The campus houses modern facilities including brand new learning suites complete with the latest technology, equipment for all vocational areas as well as higher education and business training, student social areas and a restaurant and salon. The campus also houses the first dedicated centre for higher education delivery in Barrow.

The sixth form campus was constructed in the late 1970s over two levels of brick construction. The building had been subject to uncoordinated modification, but funds made available through DfE grants and Towns Fund as well college reserves, have enabled the campus to be expanded and upgraded recently.

Further developments, other than the annual routine investment, are planned only utilising grant funding when available.

## **Appendix A – Interviewees**

Chair of Governors

Chairs of sub committees

Principal

Clerk

Director of Finance

Vice Principal Curriculum and Quality

Vice Principal Resources

Head of HR

Quality Manager

Director of Curriculum and Skills

Director of Student Journey

Head of Apprenticeships

Heads of Faculty/Curriculum Areas

Support Managers

Teaching Staff - Vocational and Technical - Channelside and CORE campuses

Teaching Staff - The Sixth Form campus

## Appendix B – Documents reviewed

<b>BOARD DOCUMENTS</b>
Last twelve months minutes and papers from board and committee meetings
<b>GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP</b>
Latest college strategic plan
Whole college risk register
Last whole college KPI report to governors
Corporation (and committee structure) membership with CVs and latest skills audit
Board self-assessment and quality improvement plan, latest external board review
Organisational chart
Senior Leadership Team membership with CVs and CPD record (12 months)
<b>CURRICULUM AND QUALITY</b>
*Completed pre-visit Provider Quality Performance Table – attached via email.
Updated College Self-Assessment Report or position statement
College Quality improvement plan and progress against it
Staff and student surveys and allied action plans
<b>FINANCE AND ESTATES</b>
*Completed pre-visit financial information request template (excel format) – attached via email.
Costed curriculum plan including contribution analysis by department/curriculum area where available
Latest management accounts, including cashflow forecast for at least the following 12 months
Annual report from the internal auditors 2023/24
Details of bank loans and covenant compliance
Estates strategy
Audited Financial Accounts 2023/24
External audit report for 2023/24
<b>OTHER - CURRICULUM AND QUALITY</b>
Any Employer and stakeholder engagement and feedback



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