



Department  
for Education

# **FE Commissioner Intervention Assessment Report: Mary Ward Settlement**

**April 2025**

# Contents

Background	3
Executive summary	4
Recommendations	5
Recommendation 1	5
Recommendation 2	5
Recommendation 3	5
Recommendation 4	5
Recommendation 5	5
Recommendation 6	6
Recommendation 7	6
Governance and leadership	7
Curriculum and quality improvement	9
Curriculum and provision overview	9
Curriculum planning and development	9
Quality: self-assessment and effectiveness to manage and improve quality	10
Finance and audit	11
Recent financial history and forecasts for coming years	11
Long term sustainability	11
Estates and capital plans	13
Appendix A – Interviewees	14
Appendix B – Documents reviewed	15
Board Documents	15
Governance and Leadership	15
Curriculum and Quality	15
Finance And Estates	15

## Background

<b>Name of College</b>	Mary Ward Settlement
<b>UKPRN</b>	10007875
<b>Name of College Principal /CEO</b>	Therese Reinheimer-Jones
<b>Name of College Chair</b>	Veronica Daly
<b>Type of provision</b>	DSI
<b>Date of visit</b>	24 April 2025
<b>Type of visit</b>	Intervention
<b>Trigger for formal intervention</b>	Financial Notice to Improve
<b>Further Education Commissioner (FEC) Team members</b>	Shelagh Legrave, FE Commissioner Ellie Churchward, FE Adviser Diane Dimond, FE Adviser
<b>Location</b>	Stratford, London
<b>Apprenticeship training provider</b>	No
<b>Latest Ofsted inspection grade</b>	Good
<b>Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) Financial Health Grade</b>	Inadequate

## Executive summary

The Mary Ward Settlement (MWS) became aware in January 2025 that cash reserves were lower than expected, due to poor budgeting and inadequate financial oversight, and requested financial support from the Department for Education (DfE). Cash flow issues had not been foreseen by MWS with their July 2024 financial return forecasting “Good” financial health for year ending July 2025 and their July 2024 financial statements reporting the entity as a going concern. A Financial Notice to Improve was issued in April 2025 and MWS placed in intervention.

MWS is a registered charity and Designated Institution comprising three elements: further education delivery, the Mary Ward Legal Centre, and the Blackfriars Settlement. The latter two charities are separate subsidiaries and do not deliver DfE funded training. Judged Good by Ofsted in January 2025, MWS operates across three sites in London: the Stratford Centre, Blackfriars Centre and the Redbridge Institute. It delivers tailored learning, full cost and skills adult education to approximately 2600 individual learners across 5500 enrolments.

MWS relocated in September 2023 from Central London where they had operated for 40 years to a newly developed location for its main centre in Stratford, East London. The centre opened to students for academic year 2023/24 although construction delays adversely impacted the launch and start up period. It is taking time to adapt the offer for the new location, and this has meant that learner numbers, commercial and tuition fee income have been lower than expected contributing to the financial difficulties.

There is an urgent need to develop a robust business plan to confirm the scope to achieve a sustainable operating position by 2026/27. An FE Commissioner (FEC) led structure and prospects appraisal (SPA) should be undertaken so that the board can consider the various strategic options open to the college, this will include the option to stand-alone.

# Recommendations

## Recommendation 1

Swift action is needed to develop a robust business and financial recovery plan, to establish whether there is scope to achieve a sustainable operating position by 2026/27. The plan must include specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART), key performance indicators (KPIs), scenario modelling of future cashflows, sensitivity and risk analysis.

Target date: July 2025

Responsibility: SLT for board approval

## Recommendation 2

Ensure there is adequate and appropriate leadership capacity and systems capability to develop and deliver the recovery plan.

Target date: June 2025

Responsibility: Chair

## Recommendation 3

Develop an accurate, comprehensive, fully costed curriculum plan that includes all learning delivery activity, supported by a detailed funding and contribution analysis by curriculum area and geographic location.

Target date: June 2025

Responsibility: Deputy Warden

## Recommendation 4

Production of monthly management accounts, including a 12-month rolling cashflow forecast, KPI monitoring report and supporting commentary, within 10-15 working days of the month end.

Target date: Immediate

Responsibility: Director of finance and resources

## Recommendation 5

Implement a comprehensive system to monitor and track actions and responsibilities identified at board and committee meetings, ensuring transparency and accountability at every level is implemented with a timely objective.

Target date: July 2025

Responsibility: Chair

## **Recommendation 6**

Further development of the quality improvement plan, cycle and processes, clearly identifying impact measures that will be critical to develop all aspects of educational progress and pedagogy. Close monitoring on a more regular basis, supported by an appropriate commentary that will provide clear evidence of development and progress.

Target date: July 2025

Responsibility: Deputy warden

## **Recommendation 7**

A FEC led SPA should be undertaken so that the board can consider the various strategic options open to the college, this will include the option to stand-alone.

The FEC team will support the development of the college's Single Improvement Plan and conduct an intervention assessment stocktake visit to review progress in July 2025.

Target date: July 2025

## Governance and leadership

Following a thorough recruitment process by an external agency, MWS has recruited a committed chair who joined the board and took up the role in January 2025. Both chair and principal have approached the financial challenges MWS faces in a positive and determined manner and work well together.

The part-time clerk to the board provides a minuting service and limited administrative support. Some board agenda and minutes do not clearly record whether key documents, for instance the quarterly management accounts, have been considered by the board of trustees. There is currently no mechanism for tracking and monitoring actions agreed by trustees.

The trustees have an appropriate range of relevant expertise to support and challenge senior leaders. However, sometimes the boundary between governance and executive has become blurred, where trustees have used their expertise in a more operational capacity to support leadership team challenges.

Board members with whom the FEC team met recognised the financial challenges, but some did not fully appreciate the urgent focus required to address this. Trustees have requested that monthly management accounts be produced.

Several trustees reach the end of their term of office in summer 2025 and the board is pragmatically considering a short-term extension to terms to retain trustee expertise, and corporate memory, whilst the financial challenges are addressed.

The warden joined the centre approximately two years ago in the final stages of the MWS move from Bloomsbury to the new Stratford centre. She has taken steps to develop relationships in the local community and with stakeholders. Work is ongoing to adapt the offer for the new location and develop new sources of tuition fee and commercial income. MWS was judged to be Good with a reasonable contribution to skills needs by Ofsted at the most recent inspection in January 2025.

The deputy warden and director for finance and resources are also members of the senior leadership team and have worked for MWS for many years. Under the leadership of the previous warden, they were closely involved in the plans to move MWS to the Stratford centre. Whilst the director of finance and resources has historically had responsibility for human resources and IT, the warden has recently taken over management of these areas to allow the director of finance and resources more time to focus on the finances.

There is a lack of robust management information that can be relied upon for financial, curriculum and quality decision making. The outdated student record system is due to be replaced for the 2025/26 academic year. It is recognised that the long-standing accounting system also requires significant upgrade or replacement to streamline largely

manual processes and provide timely financial information for decision making. Despite the significant financial and cashflow challenges, management accounts are only produced on a quarterly basis; this is inadequate and has contributed to financial difficulties.

# Curriculum and quality improvement

## Curriculum and provision overview

The MWS delivers Tailored Learning (TL) and Adult Skills education to approximately 2600 individual students across 5500 enrolments. There has been a steady increase in student numbers over the last four years. However, there is still a considerable gap to achieve pre-pandemic numbers.

The curriculum offer includes qualifications for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Functional Skills (FS), digital, community interpreter, and counselling (Levels 3 and 4) funded by the Adult Skills Fund (ASF) and Free Courses for Jobs (FCFJ). In addition, there is a mix of provision covering the arts and creative, health and well-being, humanities, languages and community outreach engagement funded via first steps TL as well as a fee income collected from those able to fund their own learning.

The long-standing curriculum offer aligns to the ethos of the MWS charitable status combining other services aimed at empowerment, justice and enrichment to transform lives through learning. Since the move of the main provision to its new site in Stratford, the service has been challenged to connect with a new demographic audience in Stratford, whom the team recognises will have different needs and goals to their previous audience in Bloomsbury. The change in demographic has seen a significant rise in demand for ESOL provision, and a decrease in the number of students willing, or able, to pay fees. The service is reviewing areas of the curriculum which are now in less demand and reassessing the broader needs of the new audience in the area to inform the content of any future offer.

## Curriculum planning and development

The curriculum planning begins in January each year reviewing an outline of the previous year's delivery and populating the delivery plan provided to the Greater London Authority (GLA). As the majority funder, there are considerations for the Mayoral priorities to inform the balance of the offer. There is a renewed focus to understand and connect with new stakeholders that might inform the future curriculum which will better support local skills needs, such as employers, local community groups and the residents of Newham and Stratford. However, a strategy is needed to ensure that stakeholder input is used effectively to shape the curriculum and support the delivery.

The overall planning process requires further development to embed a fully integrated curriculum and financial planning model. This should include setting realistic planning timescales that will support any necessary development to align the curriculum with the local need and views of the stakeholders. Planning approval processes for the curriculum planning cycle are underdeveloped so do not fully inform leaders, governors and trustees to be able to effectively hold managers to account for key decision making.

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

The quality of education is good, with the recent Ofsted inspection in January 2025 recognising the experience and expertise across much of the classroom practice. Much of MWS delivery is tailored learning with approximately 1800 learners enrolled this year to date. In addition, there are approximately 1100 enrolments for qualifications in ESOL, English, maths, digital funded by the ASF, and counselling qualifications funded via FSFJ. Most of the learning at MWS is for those studying at lower levels to level 2, with a small number of students studying levels 3 and 4 for counselling, art and design, and community interpreting.

Managers are proud of their learners who achieve well. MWS achievement overall in 2023/24 compares comfortably above similar organisations in the sector. The forecast provided for the current academic year is lower than last year. Performance monitoring would benefit from a renewed focus to understand which areas of the curriculum are impacting the levels of achievement with support plans in place to maintain the prior positive trend. Retention is good, however, current attendance requires strategic oversight to understand what actions are needed to encourage improvement in attendance and embed consistency across all provision.

The service Self-Assessment Report (SAR) is highly detailed and seizes every opportunity to celebrate the success of its students. The flow of data for curriculum managers and quality analysis to support judgements is still developing and can on occasion hamper the ability to drive improvements at pace. There is a drive to remedy this using the new MIS system being implemented for 2025/26. Processes are being developed to extract relevant and useful performance data, but it must encompass training and development for all staff across the service, so that there is timely and relevant information to support curriculum decisions for planning and quality improvement.

The Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), which follows the SAR process, is currently launched in January each year, this is considered late in the academic year. To truly embed best practice and see tangible impact, it should be integrated more seamlessly from the end of the previous academic year into term one and given a higher priority focus within the cycle. The breadth of the QIP does not clearly identify service priorities, making it difficult for staff at all levels to contribute effectively to improvement priorities. Selecting key actions that focus on a small number of strategic priorities, supported by SMART objectives, will enable leaders to hold key persons accountable. Placing the monitoring of the QIP at the heart of the performance cycle will help focus accountability appropriately and, with a data-rich supporting narrative, demonstrate the necessary impact of effective positive change.

## Finance and audit

MWS became aware in January 2025 that actual and forecast cash reserves were significantly lower than expected and requested financial support from DfE. This cash flow risk had not been foreseen by MWS with their July 2024 financial return forecasting “Good” financial health for year ending July 2025 and their July 2024 financial statements, approved by trustees in December 2024, reporting the entity as a going concern.

The 24/25 budget included unrealistic income and expenditure forecasts and was not based on a comprehensive curriculum plan.

Basic management accounts are produced and issued on a quarterly basis.

The latest 2024/25 financial forecast, 2025/26 emerging draft budget and cashflow modelling show future cash flow concerns.

Whilst the board, which includes two trustees who are qualified accountants and others with general management and legal backgrounds in financial matters, has the necessary skillsets to support, challenge and manage financial risks, to further support financial oversight, the board should establish financial KPIs and monitor these monthly.

Work on the budget and a supporting curriculum plan for 2025/26 is continuing in an effort to improve the financial projections and identify additional income streams. A national cut in ASF was announced earlier this year which will reduce MWS’s funding from both DfE and GLA from 2025/26 onwards.

## Recent financial history and forecasts for coming years

Approximately six years ago, in response to the end of their 40-year lease and expected significant increases in estate costs, the trustees implemented a property strategy to relocate MWS from Central London to Stratford in the east of the city. This project was impacted by planning and funding delays as well as the pandemic. Consequently, the Stratford centre opening was delayed by more than one year and incurred significantly increased project costs. The relocation and the pandemic adversely impacted on MWS’s financial health assessment which reduced to ‘requires improvement’ in 2022/23 before improving to ‘good’ in 2023/24. Trustees and senior leaders expected this good financial performance to continue in 2024/25 and 2025/26.

## Long term sustainability

The future of government funding for adult skills remains uncertain. A national cut of 6% in the Adult Skills Budget was announced earlier this year. This will result in MWS receiving a reduced allocation from both the DfE and GLA in future years.

There is an urgent need to develop a robust business plan to confirm whether MWS may be sustainable in future as a standalone institution. A FEC led SPA should be undertaken so that the board can consider the various strategic options open to the college, including the option to stand-alone.

## **Estates and capital plans**

In September 2023, MWS relocated from Queen Square in Central London, to the newly developed Queensway House, renamed as The Mary Ward Centre, in Stratford, East London. The centre opened to students at the start of the 2023/24 academic year, although practical completion was not achieved until November 2023. There are no future capital plans. MWS also operate from the Blackfriars Centre near Waterloo and at the Redbridge Institute.

Trustees and senior leaders do not yet know whether each of the delivery centres operates efficiently or makes a positive contribution to overheads. Much needed work is underway to develop a robust costed curriculum plan and implement a new student record system which with enhanced, more timely financial reporting, should provide improved trustee and management information for decision making.

## **Appendix A – Interviewees**

Chair of trustees

Clerk

Warden & CEO

Deputy warden

Director of finance and resources

Chair of the audit and risk committee

Member of the finance committee

## **Appendix B – Documents reviewed**

### **Board Documents**

Minutes and papers from board and committee meetings

### **Governance and Leadership**

Board membership details including governance structure and committee membership

Updated risk register

Board and committee structure membership with CVs and latest skills audit

Board self-assessment and quality improvement plan

### **Curriculum and Quality**

Self-Assessment Report or position statement

Post-Inspection Action Plan

Quality improvement plan and progress against it

### **Finance And Estates**

2024/25 costed partial curriculum plan including contribution analysis by department/curriculum area

Latest management accounts, including cashflow forecast for at least the following 12 months

Brief details of bank loans and covenant compliance

Detail of recent staff restructuring events

Draft budget 2025/26 and cashflow forecast



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