



Department
for Education

FE Commissioner Summary Intervention Assessment Report: Newbury College

July 2025

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Background

Name of College	Newbury College
UKPRN	10004596
Name of College Principal /CEO	Lee Probert
Name of College Chair	Sally Osmond
Type of provision	GFE
Date of visit	8 th July 2025
Type of visit	Intervention
Trigger for formal intervention	Finance
Further Education (FE) Commissioner team members	FE Commissioner: Shelagh Legrave Deputy FE Commissioner: Frances Wadsworth FE Adviser: Anne Whitworth FE Adviser: Kate Webb Place Based Team observer – Rhys Thomas
Location	Newbury
Apprenticeship training provider	Yes
Latest Ofsted inspection grade	Requires Improvement (March and June 2023)

Conclusion and executive summary

Newbury College offers 16-19 study programmes including T Levels, adult learning programmes, apprenticeships, and higher education (HE). In addition to provision on its campus in Newbury, the college also delivers study programmes for 16-18 year olds in a number of offsite locations: Abingdon, Milton Keynes, Reading and Basingstoke. The college was graded as Requires Improvement by Ofsted following two inspection events in March and June 2023 respectively.

The college has received support from the Department for Education over the last three years in response to concerns over the quality of delivery and the college's financial position.

The Further Education (FE) Commissioner team conducted advisory visits in 2023/24 and 2024/25. These included a Health Check in 2023, and Curriculum Efficiency and Financial Sustainability Support (CEFSS) and strategic review in 2024.

The outcome of the strategic review, conducted by the Place Based Team (PBT) and FE Commissioner's team in March 2024, recommended a Structure and Prospects Appraisal (SPA) to consider strategic opportunities open to the college and to test these against the viability of a standalone option. Although the corporation initially agreed to this recommendation, they subsequently decided to pause the planned SPA in June 2024. The board has since reflected further and now considers undertaking a SPA would be judicious to ensure the college's future sustainability.

Following the retirement of the previous principal in December 2024, the college appointed an interim principal, contracted to August 2026. Other planned leadership changes have followed, with some still in progress, which aim to strengthen leadership, streamline structures and also reduce cost.

It is too early to assess the impact of the revised leadership structure, which is not yet completed. A new deputy principal has recently taken up post, as has an interim executive director of finance. They, and the interim principal, appear to be working well together. However, there has been significant change across the leadership team and this, and the interim nature of two of the three significant roles, means that the strength and stability of the leadership arrangements has yet to be proven.

A role of executive director, governance, standards and projects, with an August 2025 start, has been created in the leadership restructure. This role has been developed to strengthen support for governors, but there is a risk that this post's wider responsibilities, and reporting line to both the principal as well as the chair, might compromise the independence required of a governance professional. Support and development for the post holder will be required.

Newbury College operates under a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) agreement. Due to increasing payment obligations during the final five years of the contract, the college faces significant financial strain.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Undertake further work to ensure that reporting to the board is succinct, clear, facilitates robust discussion, and identifies areas for focus, challenge and support. This to include development of a meaningful set of KPIs for governors to facilitate in-year scrutiny and challenge, along with appropriate reporting mechanisms. Timescale: By September 2025

Recommendation 2: Undertake a review to ensure there is sufficient and appropriate management oversight of the off-site provision. Timescale: By September 2025

Recommendation 3: Ensure that the risk register is developed in line with best practice and is routinely monitored and updated by the leadership team and the board. Timescale: By September 2025

Recommendation 4: Prepare a costed risk assessment of the 2025/26 financial plan/budget to show a worst, best and realistic case. Timescale: By September 2025

Recommendation 5: Continue to develop comprehensive quality improvement plans for teaching, learning and assessment to secure further improvements in learner achievement to above national averages. Timescale: By November 2025

Recommendation 6: Update the property strategy, which currently covers the period from 2021-2026. Timescale: By December 2025

Recommendation 7: Ensure the schedule of delegation is updated to clearly delineate the makeup and responsibilities of the committees, including the SPA steering committee, and how it interacts with the full board's decision making. Timescale: By September 2025

Recommendation 8: The newly appointed executive director, governance, standards and projects should have appropriate support, training and development in place to support her when she takes up this new role. Particular emphasis should be placed on ensuring she is able to fulfil the requirements of the governance professional role in a suitably independent way. Timescale: By September 2025

Recommendation 9: Develop a comprehensive communications plan for staff and all stakeholders to ensure a consistent approach. Timescale: By September 2025

Recommendation 10: Develop the PFI transition plan to clearly detail the services and contracts which need to be procured and put in place once the PFI comes to an end, including a realistic estimate of the cost of those services. Timescale: By December 2025

Recommendation 11: The college should engage with the FE Commissioner and commence a SPA in the autumn term. Timescale: From October 2025

The FE Commissioner team will work with the college to finalise a single improvement plan, progress against which will be monitored. This will also form the basis of an intervention assessment stocktake visit in February 2026.

FE Commissioner active support has been in place for the executive director of finance, and National Leaders of Governance (NLG) and National Leader of Further Education (NLFE) support provided for the chair and interim principal. NLG support had also been in place for the governance professional. Support from an NLG for the newly recruited senior leader with this responsibility is required when they are in post.

In addition, teaching and learning support has been provided to help prepare for an Ofsted inspection, which is expected in the coming academic year.

Governance and leadership

Governance

The chair said that revising the leadership team, albeit with interim arrangements and some very recent appointments, had brought a welcome and encouraging new momentum and a changed leadership and governance dynamic to the college.

The chair advised that the board currently has three vacancies; one of which has been recruited to and will be filled in September, a staff member vacancy to be recruited to, and a vacancy which is being kept on hold. Three qualified accountants sit on the board and the chair outlined that there is a good mix of skills across the board.

The chair noted that a strengthening of governance support for the board was needed and that the restructure aimed to address this by creating the senior role of executive director governance, standards and projects. Support will be required for the new postholder, who takes up the role in August, as they do not have recent experience of governance. There also will need to be careful reflection as to whether the combination of responsibilities of this role allows the postholder the necessary independence required in their support for the board.

The chair outlined a recent change to the structure of committees, explaining that one committee, the Strategic Development Committee, has been suspended. The chair said this committee had 'outlived its usefulness.' In its place a SPA steering group has been created. Membership includes chairs of committees, but also one other board member. Whilst the chair assured that this new SPA steering group was for discussion and not decision, its relationship with the wider board needs careful thought to ensure appropriate alignment with the operation and engagement of the full board. The chair is just finalising a scheme of delegation, clarifying the remit of each committee.

Board members whom we met noted that there was a need for improvement in reporting to the board. Comment was made that some reports 'lacked focus' or were 'too woolly' and that there was a need for more detail and data.

Leadership

The leadership of the college has undergone significant change. An interim principal, (contracted to August 2026), was appointed following the retirement of the previous principal in December 2024. An interim executive director of finance has recently joined the college (the third senior finance lead in two years), and a permanent deputy principal took up post two months ago. The senior team already appears to be working well together but there has been significant turbulence across the senior leadership of the college. A leadership restructure is in progress, which aims to strengthen, streamline and reduce costs. The impact of the revised structure, with some interim posts and some

posts not yet filled, is yet to be realised. The college plans that the finalised structure will be in place for September 2025.

Whilst it is understandable, given an impending SPA process, that permanent appointments to all key posts might be inappropriate to make at this juncture, it does bring an element of uncertainty and fragility to a leadership team that has already experienced some turbulence.

The leadership team recognises that whilst there has been some improvement in availability and accuracy of data, this is an area that requires significant further work, as does the availability and use of reporting by managers and governors. Reporting generally requires attention, both across college and to the board. A KPI dashboard is needed and the risk register, whilst one exists, lacks currency and focus and does not appear to be rigorously or regularly scrutinised to effect by either senior managers or the board.

The spread of offsite provision across a number of delivery sites, with some a considerable distance away, requires appropriate, careful leadership oversight.

Given the degree of change across the college, the leadership team will need to ensure that communication, both internally and externally, is carefully targeted and considered.

Curriculum and quality improvement

Curriculum and provision overview

Newbury College recruits students from across West Berkshire and surrounding areas, including North Hampshire and South Oxfordshire. The college offers courses from entry level through to higher education (in the University Centre Newbury), including apprenticeships, part time adult education and provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

The college's full-time provision focuses on vocational and technical routes with delivery of a substantial number of study programmes in sport in offsite provision.

Learner recruitment trends show an increase in funded learner numbers. Most notably, classroom based 16–18-year-old numbers have grown by over 34%. A significant proportion of this growth is related to the offsite provision.

The apprenticeship provision is judged to be Outstanding in the Ofsted report of 2023. Apprenticeships have seen significant growth of 61%, particularly for younger people. The HE provision, whilst relatively small, has also seen growth, driven by the college's university centre. The Ofsted report indicates that the college meets the needs of the area reasonably well.

Curriculum planning and development

At the time of the visit, the college was still completing a significant restructure, realigning curriculum leadership responsibilities. This is intended to deliver efficiencies in curriculum management and delivery. In particular, this realignment has brought together different types of provision under single senior leadership. It is too early to judge the savings that will be realised. However, feedback from staff at all levels indicated a positive reaction to this change.

Leaders and governors reported that curriculum strategy and planning had improved, with consideration given to local and national priorities, aided by new software to analyse local trends and data.

Quality: self-assessment judgement and effectiveness in managing and improving quality

The college has recently implemented new systems of monitoring and quality assurance. The new leadership team and managers are clear about the college's strengths and areas for improvement.

The quality indicators show a mixed picture of performance, which is acknowledged by the current, new leadership. Attendance has generally declined, particularly for adult learners. Apprentice engagement has increased and sits above 87% indicating stable engagement in that area. Staff and leaders consider that the new unified leadership structure may present more opportunities to share and transfer good practice across different types of provision.

Retention and achievement have improved across most types of provision. There are significant forecasted improvements in achievement for classroom based 16-18-year-old learners. However, college leaders still acknowledge that more needs to be done to reach and surpass national averages in the coming years.

The college has received support from the FE Commissioner's team to improve teaching, learning and assessment. The green shoots of this work were highly visible during the intervention visit. Leaders, managers and teachers were positive about recent CPD and the renewed focus on teaching and evidence-based pedagogical practice. It was too early to see the impact of this work, but leaders were confident further improvements would be secured in the new academic year of 2025/26.

Student and staff views

Due to the timing of the intervention visit, no students were available.

A group of staff contributed their views during the visit. Staff were broadly positive about the changes that had been implemented. Whilst they acknowledged the uncertainty and turbulence that significant change brings, they were equally aware that change needed to be made to create efficiencies. It was evident that there were different levels of understanding of the college's current situation amongst staff. A clear and comprehensive approach to both internal and external communication will be essential.

Finance and audit

Financial performance 2024/25

The budget for 2024/25, approved by the board, was for an operating deficit.

The forecast outturn reported in June 2025 shows a worsened EBITDA deficit for the year.

In its budget the college had assumed it would grow its 16-18 provision and receive in-year funding for that growth. However, the college had fewer learners than planned in 2024/25 and the associated in-year growth funding was lower. This reduction in income was offset by growth in apprenticeships, higher education and the one-off post 16 grant announced by the government in the Autumn budget.

Pay costs were higher than the budget, largely due to a higher-than-expected demand for English and maths re-sit provision. The college also had additional costs due to increases in national insurance and changes in leadership posts.

Additional non-pay costs were incurred over and above the budget in respect of foundation learning work experience and external partnerships. The additional partnerships cost was offset by an increased level of Adult Skills Funding.

Financial plan 2025/26

The financial plan for 2025/26 assumes an improving financial position.

In preparing the financial plan the college has endeavoured to be more realistic about its income projections, and has taken steps to address its cost base, mainly through a restructuring of its management and teaching staff. The reduction in teaching staff has been informed by a detailed curriculum plan. It is important that the college is able to deliver this plan and reduce its costs.

The college acknowledges that the plan still represents a fragile position, with a low EBITDA, and cashflow still dependent on the receipts from the land sales and DfE's consent to use the proceeds for working capital. While some narratives around the risks within the financial plan has been included in reports to the board, the impact of these has not been costed. It is, therefore, recommended that the college prepares a costed risk assessment of the financial plan to show a worst, best and realistic case.

Financial liabilities (PFI costs)

The college is nearing the end of a 25-year PFI contract, in respect of the college site and most of the buildings. The college pays an annual unitary charge, which includes a debt and interest payment.

Audit and risk

As part of active support, the FE Commissioner had previously suggested the college review its off-site provision, which was some distance from Newbury (in Abingdon, Milton Keynes, Reading and Basingstoke) to re-assure itself that it was not a subcontracting arrangement and that there was sufficient management oversight.

The college subsequently sought advice from an experienced FE Funding consultant, who confirmed that the arrangement was not subcontracting. However, more work is required by the college to ensure there is sufficient and appropriate management oversight of this provision.

While the college does have a risk register, which is reviewed at leadership and board level, it is somewhat outdated. It is, therefore, important that the risk register is developed in line with best practice and is routinely monitored and updated by the leadership team and the board.

Long term sustainability

The college is one of the smallest GFE colleges in England, and it has a broad curriculum offer and a high-cost base. While forecasts show an improving EBITDA, as a result of staff restructuring and the end of the PFI in July 2027, the position is still fragile, and the ongoing underlying financial position will always be challenging. The cashflow is also dependent on the receipts from the land sales and DfE's consent to use the proceeds for working capital.

The sustainability of the college given its current size and its weak financial position, merits a need to consider the various strategic options available to the college.

Estates and capital plans

The current campus at Monks Lane, Newbury, sits within a 30+ acre site. The college transferred to this purpose-built campus in September 2002, vacating its previous town centre premises.

The Monks Lane campus was constructed under a PFI initiative, and the college entered into a 25-year project agreement with the PFI Partner, Education Link, to design, build, fund and operate the facility. Education Link appointed Mitie PFI to provide the facilities management services for the contract. The college pays a monthly charge to Education Link, which includes a loan repayment, a facilities management service charge, a lifecycle payment and a further payment covering management costs.

The college has expanded its facilities since 2002 to include a separate new build sports hall and construction skills centre, an extension to the main building to provide a training restaurant, an engineering solutions lab and various modifications to teaching spaces to respond to changing curriculum needs. In addition, it has also transformed part of the college to create a bespoke University Centre Newbury (UCN) and added a Renewables Centre.

The college's current property strategy ends in 2026, and therefore, it is recommended it be updated.

Appendix A – Interviewees

Chair

Interim CEO/Principal

Designate Executive Director Governance, Standards & Projects

Deputy Principal

Interim Executive Director Finance

Executive Director Corporate Services

Group of Governors

Group of Staff

Heads of Faculty

Appendix B – Documents reviewed

BOARD DOCUMENTS
Minutes of Board and committee meetings
GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP
Whole college risk register
Organisational chart
Corporation (and committee structure) membership with CVs and latest skills audit
Senior Leadership Team membership with CVs
CURRICULUM AND QUALITY
Pre-visit Provider Quality Performance Table
College Self-Assessment Report
College Quality improvement plan and progress against it
Details of partnership provision
Staff and student surveys and allied action plans
FINANCE AND ESTATES
Completed pre-visit financial information request template
Latest management accounts, including cashflow forecast
PFI contract with financial details
Updated CFFR/ version of forward financial plan
Estates strategy 2021-2026
Draft budget papers for 2025/26 for governors



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