



Department
for Education

Annual report of the Further Education Commissioner

1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025

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Introduction

As I complete my tenure as Further Education Commissioner (FEC) for England, I have reflected on the last four years and the position of the sector in 2025. When I started, I set out a strategic plan with key objectives and some ambitious KPIs to drive improvement and measure progress. This included:

- To offer active support to all colleges, tailored for those facing the greatest challenges. The latest survey suggests that:
 - 100% of colleges know that active support is available (KPI 75%)
 - 82% have accessed active support (KPI 75%)
 - 92% are positive about the support they have received from the FEC
 - The number of colleges spending time in intervention has reduced (KPI 272 weeks, actual 84 weeks)
- To increase the market share of apprentices in colleges. This has remained flat, but achievement has increased substantially.
- To increase the number of colleges offering bootcamps, which has increased from 52 colleges to 81 colleges.



Support for Local Authorities offering Adult Education has also been in place.

An important part of my strategy was around sharing practice and developing effective practice guides. In the last year, we published an effective practice guide on powerful pedagogy followed by a series of very well attended online roadshows. Powerful pedagogy reflects the crucial importance of using evidence to ensure teaching and learning is of the highest quality. Nigel Duncan, Pauline Hagen, Kate Webb and Sally Challis-Manning are now focusing on English & maths effective practice and hope to publish a guide in early 2026. Martin Sim has also led the collection of evidence around writing an effective college strategy. Other guides available are estates planning, adult education, management accounts, cultural change, senior post holder appraisal and the first 42 days.

Also importantly, I wanted to continuously highlight that further education (FE) is a key component to deliver economic growth. It was so powerful to hear Sir Kir Starmer cite FE in his conference speech, and to see that the recent FE White Paper has placed skills at the centre of economic recovery.

I am proud that the number of colleges in intervention has reduced from 23 in October 2021 to 8 in October 2025, which was another objective of my strategy. A number of colleges have also exited Post Intervention Monitoring & Support (PIMS) having been supported after exiting intervention.

It has never been my intention to force mergers on colleges, but sometimes this is the right solution. It is also becoming much more difficult to survive as a general further education college if turnover is less than £20m. During my period in office, 10 colleges have merged, some due to intervention and others have voluntarily sought greater financial resilience in a larger college group. Following most mergers, the new group has thrived, and leaders have been very thoughtful about ensuring local colleges for local communities whilst delivering strength in quality and finance.

Just One Thing and Just One More Thing has continued over the last year. In the summer, we brought together cohorts of new chairs, governance professionals and principals from 2022 to 2023, 2023 to 2024 and 2024 to 2025. Minister Jacqui Smith was one of our keynote speakers who provided inspiration and insights into her time in government. We also supported sessions led by Exeter College on apprentices, Hull College on AI, Luminate on partnerships mergers and Education Partnership North East on the role of FE leadership and governance in community development. Gill Worgan and Jo Pretty have continued to support the sector with SEND workshops encouraging colleges with an Ofsted requires improvement for high needs to attend.

Good governance continues to be a crucial element in every excellent college. In my letter to the FE sector in May 2025, I emphasised the importance of good governance and the need for decisions to be rooted in public values. Sector findings this year are a sobering reminder of where it can go wrong if public values are not underpinning the actions of governors and senior executives. Chairs and governors should be focused on continuous improvement. I am encouraged by good examples of boards using external appraisers to assess the performance of chairs or have a senior independent governor, drawing on practice from the private sector.

Whilst government investment in 16-18 further education has been very much welcome, it is much more challenging for colleges to deliver adult education. The recent Machinery of Government change to DWP has signalled the importance of adult skills in getting more people into work to strengthen the UK economy. At the same time, colleges continue to face challenges in recruiting staff in technical areas. The latest qualification reforms announced in the White Paper will require the sector to adapt their curriculum offer. However, Boards and senior teams continue to be extraordinarily resilient in adapting to change and I know you will work flexibly to deliver the Government's intended outcomes.

The FEC is only as good as her brilliant team members. Nigel Duncan and Phil Cook are retiring at Christmas and Frances Wadsworth will step back from her public office at the end of January. As I hand over to Ellen Thinnesen in early January, I want to thank the twenty fantastic deputies and advisers with whom I have worked over four years, together with our National Leaders of Governance and National Leaders of Further Education. There is no doubt that collectively the team has made a difference and supported many colleges and having visited 171 colleges, I have seen the outstanding way students are encouraged to play their part as global citizens.

Wishing you every success as you provide the leadership and governance to change lives through learning in the FE sector and thank you for all your support.

Best wishes,

Shelagh Legrave

Shelagh Legrave, CBE
FE Commissioner

Active support

Since its introduction in 2021, 'active support' offered through the FEC team has gone from strength to strength and now enjoys very strong, voluntary take-up across the FE sector. We are now considering how that is delivered in the future and the recently updated [college oversight guidance](#) makes clear that, from here onwards, active support will form part of a tiered support offer for colleges. The three tiers are:

- **Universal support** which is intended to promote collaboration and foster continuous improvement – it includes national guidance, benchmarking data, effective practice guides, and access to webinars and support for best practice.
- **Targeted support** which will preserve and prioritise some forms of support for colleges that would benefit most. Each [Regional Improvement Team](#), working closely with its dedicated Deputy FE Commissioner and drawing on the views of Strategic Authorities and feedback from colleges, will consider risk across a region and allocate support where most needed. Support in this tier includes access to peer mentoring and FEC led health checks.
- **Intensive support** will continue to be available in the small number of cases where concerns are persistent or there are significant challenges that cannot be resolved through improvement alone. This includes intervention and Structure and Prospects Appraisals.

What is set out in this report, however, reflects active support as it has been offered to date, and looks back on its particular successes.

Working with local authorities

The FEC team has continued its commitment to extend the support offer to local authority further education providers with many engaging in more than one type of support available. The support delivered included preparing for an Ofsted inspection, strategic planning for leadership and governance with the support of the national leaders of governance (NLGs), as well as health checks and curriculum efficiency and financial sustainability support (CEFSS).

61 local authorities have received support with 13 accessing more than one type of support tailored to the needs of the service. Senior leaders and elected officials in local authorities have welcomed the opportunity for the FEC to support their services who lead delivery of employment, skills and education programmes. They have actively engaged in the process, recognising their role in shaping a strategic local landscape that enables residents to access further education.

Positive feedback from those local authority providers who have directly benefitted from FEC-led support has also been cascaded through webinars and HOLEX conferences. Feedback continues to indicate that those who engaged with the FEC team were better able and more confident in reviewing quality processes, had increased confidence in implementing new teaching and learning policies and that the support had significantly

raised the quality of education, leadership and governance as well as improving or helping to maintain positive Ofsted gradings.

A webpage is available [GOV.UK](#) listing the help and support available to local authority FE providers. The FEC team also produced an [effective practice guide](#) on what works well in teaching and learning, using voices from the FE sector, including local authorities.

Case study: Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council

In December 2023, Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council's Adult Learning Service was judged as Inadequate by Ofsted. Prior to this, the service had been graded as Good since 2008. Leaders and managers were surprised and disappointed by the Ofsted result and immediately set about improving the service offered to students.

The service's vision is to "engage and inspire learners to develop skills to enable them to progress into further learning, training or employment." The service has an important role within its local community delivering a range of courses for adults, including regulated functional skills and ESOL, bespoke employer provision, and non-regulated tailored learning. Shortly after the December inspection, the FEC and her team carried out an intervention visit, which was followed up by a stocktake visit later that year. Team members kept in touch with the service, advising where appropriate, and working with the service to promote improvement.

Leaders and managers were proactive in both engaging with FEC team members and driving improvement. This included both council members and senior officers. Significant improvements were made to governance via a newly created advisory board. Clear targets were set for leaders, managers and staff, and enhanced levels of accountability embedded. The service established various partnerships, including with its local college, to ensure external support and invested in both technological and software solutions which enabled a significant improvement in information services. Leaders put in place stringent quality assurance processes to ensure that learners receive a good standard of education. These include lesson visits, standardisation of assessment and marking, and improved students' feedback. These processes enable leaders to measure and manage successfully the quality of education that learners receive. As a result, the quality of education is much improved. The service now ensures staff participate in an extensive range of CPD opportunities and has embedded high expectations with the students' learning experience prioritised.

In May 2025, Ofsted judged that all aspects of the service's provision were Good. It is fair to say the service's journey was not an easy one and required the drive, energy and commitment from leaders not just within the service but across the council. Both council members and senior officers were instrumental in driving improvements and recognise that there is still work to do. However, the service can now look forward positively, be very clear about how it can improve further and, most importantly, guarantee those adults a fit for purpose curriculum offer that will enable them to develop their own skills and competencies and positive outcomes.

Health checks

Health checks are flexible in their approach and are intended to provide a free review of a college's operations with the ability to focus on parts of a college's plan as appropriate. Available to any college, they consist of a 2-day visit to the provider by the FEC team. They look at and feedback on their current financial and curriculum plans. They also look at a range of statistical information both held by DfE and supplied by the provider. These are of particular help to new or recently appointed senior leaders, although they are helpful at any stage for any organisation.

Between August 2024 and July 2025, the FEC team conducted 4 health checks in FE colleges and 15 in local authority FE providers. Following each health check, the college/local authority FE providers have the opportunity to determine any necessary next steps and whether to seek further support from the FEC team. Where appropriate, the FEC team may undertake a Health Check follow-up visit.

Structural reviews

Structural reviews are undertaken when a change to the structure of a college or provision may be needed to maintain financial sustainability and high-quality opportunities for learners. Structural reviews are generally conducted as structure and prospects appraisals (SPAs), looking at a single institution. There are also local provision reviews, which can include more than one institution and assess provision across a defined area.

During the 2024 to 2025 academic year, 4 new FE Commissioner-led SPAs were started, of which 2 were completed. In addition, another SPA started in the previous reporting year was completed.

The recommendations from completed structural reviews may be subject to negotiations between DfE and the colleges, which also undertake their own due diligence process. This will determine the exact form in which the recommended solution may be implemented and the associated timescale.

National leaders of further education and national leaders of governance

National leaders of further education (NLFEs) are serving college leaders and finance directors who have a strong track record of delivering improvement – both at their own colleges and in working with others.

National leaders of governance (NLGs) are experienced college governors and governance professionals/clerks with a strong record of supporting college improvement.

Both NLFEs and NLGs provide mentoring and peer to peer support to other colleges on a range of issues, including curriculum, finance, and governance. They also help to share best practice and lead the 'Just One Thing' and 'Just One More Thing' strands of support provided to the further education sector.

During the academic year 2024 to 2025, NLFEs and NLGs were supporting over 60 principals, CEOs, governing bodies and local authorities. In total, NLFEs and NLGs have worked with over 300 principals, CEOs, governing bodies and local authorities since this initiative was introduced in 2018.

There are currently 8 NLFEs, 2 NLFE finance specialists and 12 NLGs. More information, and details of current [NLFEs](#) and [NLGs](#), is available on GOV.UK.

Further education leadership mentoring programme

The further education leadership mentoring programme was launched in May 2023. It supports existing and aspiring college leaders with high potential to develop and progress in their careers, as well as assisting them in their current role. It also aims to create a stronger and more diverse pipeline to the most senior roles in the further education sector.

The programme has 26 mentors who are highly skilled previous chief executives, principals and finance directors at FE colleges and therefore have extensive experience of the FE sector.

During the third round of the mentoring programme in the 2024 to 2025 academic year, 42 mentees were matched with a mentor. Since the programme started, over 180 people have been mentored. The programme encourages applications from staff with protected characteristics who are underrepresented in college leadership positions. 15% of places on the programme are prioritised for applicants who have a disability or come from ethnic minorities. The fourth round of the programme was launched in September 2025. More information is available on [GOV.UK](#).

Curriculum efficiency and financial sustainability support

Curriculum efficiency and financial sustainability support (CEFSS) aims to help FE colleges with costed curriculum and financial planning. Demand for CEFSS remained high last year with 36 FE colleges engaging with the various stages of CEFSS between August 2024 and July 2025. Of this number, 50% were colleges who decided to engage beyond the initial Stage 1 support and were in receipt of the more in-depth support by accessing stages 2 and 3, and a further 5% had received a follow up visit.

This year we undertook an evaluation to gain more insight of the impact of CEFSS by conducting structured interviews with 10 colleges who had received this type of support.

The feedback indicated that CEFSS enabled college leaders to gain confidence in their understanding of the rationale and decision making behind curriculum planning, with the suggested actions from the FEC team providing a clear focus on what needed to be done to achieve greater efficiency in the short and longer term. Several colleges were able to demonstrate areas where they had made efficiencies and had optimised what was being delivered. There is also a [guide to effective practice in curriculum planning](#) which provides an exploration of the principal stages involved in effective curriculum planning

Case study: Petroc

Petroc has been on a recent journey of change and improvement in both financial health and quality, led by an enthusiastic leadership team. When the FEC team were first invited to deliver a CEFSS programme in early 2024, the college was facing financial challenges, with a financial health grade of Requires Improvement. The college team were keen to explore ways to improve financial efficiency and look at planning processes. Following the initial CEFSS programme, which was delivered in February 2024, the FEC team left the college with 13 suggestions for potential improvement. It is a principle of CEFSS that college leaders are free to decide whether to take suggestions forward and so we are always interested to return later to find out if the suggestions have resulted in benefit for the college and its learners.

In the case of Petroc, we had been in contact with the college in the intervening period, together with colleagues in the Place Based Team. This was because of the potential for planned organisational change, as set out in the recent public announcement of its intention in principle to merge with Exeter College. We knew that significant activity on positive change management and clear leadership direction had occurred in the intervening period since the CEFSS visit. When we returned for a CEFSS follow-up visit in October 2024, we had no prior knowledge of actual outcomes against the specific suggestions made in the original CEFSS programme. We were therefore very pleased to find that the college had realised a c.£2.2 million financial benefit because of activities directly related to suggestions in the CEFSS report, including:

- undertaking a structured study on teaching staff deployment
- formalising internal policies so that they were consistently applied year on year
- undertaking a full review of overhead costs, which had been found to be high compared with sector benchmarks in the original review and systematically benchmarked each of these to “right-size” the cost base
- improving the progression rate of learners over two years, resulting in improved income

The college had also improved several of its internal planning processes. These included implementing an earlier curriculum planning timetable to allow more time for decision-making, scenario planning linked to the financial budget, and a full review of apprenticeship management planning. In addition, as part of this focus on potential planning efficiencies, the college team had identified its own financial benefit from specific improvements in planning programmes, which had yielded an additional c.£0.25 million and were able to share these with the FEC team. The process was therefore truly collaborative, as CEFSS is intended to be. These positive efficiency initiatives are part of the range of actions taken by the team which have led to the college being back in Good financial health in quick time. This means they are to be able to approach the upcoming potential for merger from a position of financial stability.

Annual strategic conversations

During the 2024 and 2025 academic year, the FEC team supported 210 Annual Strategic Conversations (ASCs) between colleges and the Department for Education.

ASCs provide colleges a platform to highlight their accomplishments, strengths, and best practices, as well as the opportunity to discuss their long-term strategies and vision and raise any concerns and/or challenges they are facing. The ASCs also provided an opportunity to discuss the range of support available to colleges, such as Health Checks, CEFSS, mentoring programmes and access to NLFEs and NLGs.

Just One Thing and Just One More Thing

The ‘Just One Thing’ (JoT) strand of active support, now in its fourth year, continues to be valued by participants. The programme aims to support those newly appointed to principal, governance professional and chair roles, sharing the ‘Just One Thing’ that others in those roles wished they had known in the early days of their careers. It also emphasises the importance of these three roles working well together. JoT supports individuals over three years, so the summer conference in 2025, which over 80 delegates attended, was also the ‘graduation’ of the very first group – the ‘Class of 2022 to 2023’, our pilot cohort. We were delighted that Minister Jaqui Smith joined us for this conference.

My thanks to those in the FEC team who developed ‘Just One Thing’ – Deputy FEC Frances Wadsworth and FEC Adviser Esme Winch, and to NLFEs Mark Malcomson and Sam Parrett, and NLGs Rob Lawson and Wendy Stanger who have worked with them to shape and deliver this programme, which has been so warmly received and valued by attendees. My particular thanks to Mark Malcomson CEO of City Lit for hosting the JoT events at his college, which has now become known as the home of JoT.

As one ‘graduating’ delegate said, “It has been a pleasure to attend these sessions and be part of this fabulous initiative’ and another delegate said, ‘I don’t want to graduate!’ Hopefully these positive comments will encourage future new appointees to engage with this programme, supporting them in their leadership journey.

FE leaders’ wellbeing – professional supervision service

Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of FE leaders remains our priority. Building on previous success, the professional supervision for FE leaders has continued throughout 2025, offering six fully funded one-to-one online sessions with a qualified supervisor. These sessions provide a confidential space for leaders to reflect, process challenges, and develop strategies to manage the pressures of leadership.

Since the start of 2025, 68 FE leaders have started accessing professional supervision delivered by Education Support, the UK charity dedicated to education staff wellbeing. Impact data shows clear benefits. Average wellbeing scores (WEMWBS) improved by +5 points and 94% of participants reported feeling better able to manage stress and anxiety. Nearly all participants rated the service helpful (97%) and would recommend it to a colleague (97%). For those needing additional support, referrals to BACP-accredited counselling were available.

Feedback highlights the value of supervision in building resilience, confidence, and clarity of thought. Leaders reported improved coping strategies, stronger relationships with staff, and better work-life balance. One participant shared “Supervision gave me the opportunity to discuss challenges in a new role, explore strategies, and reflect. The whole experience gave me more confidence to approach difficult situations.”

Since the service began in 2023, a total of 195 FE leaders have benefited. We encourage all leaders, especially those new to post, to make use of this support. For more information, visit the [Education Support](#) website.

Effective practice guides

The FEC offers a suite of guides designed to support effective practice across key FE processes, such as financial management, curriculum planning, pedagogy, estates, and pre-census retention. These resources are tailored to various roles within the FE sector and are accessible via the [help and support for colleges webpage](#) on GOV.UK.

Two new guides are currently in development to address emerging needs – one on strategic planning and another on post-16 English and maths. Scheduled for publication in early 2026, the following articles outline their purpose and content.

Strategic Planning in Further Education: A Guide to Effective Practice

Strategic planning is fundamental to the success of Further Education (FE) colleges. Whether you're new to the role or seeking to refine existing approaches, this forthcoming guide provides senior leaders with a practical and adaptable framework to enhance strategic planning processes.

Drawing on contemporary research and insights from experienced FE leaders, the guide emphasises that strategic planning should be tailored to each college's unique culture, context, and aspirations. It promotes an iterative approach through a dynamic cycle comprising four key stages: planning, presentation, implementation, and monitoring. This cyclical model supports continuous improvement and responsiveness to evolving challenges and opportunities.

The guide introduces a comprehensive planning framework that includes:

- internal and external environmental scanning
- market analysis

- ideas generation
- enabling

The guide describes how strategic plans are often operationalised through operating statements containing annual objectives and SMART targets aligned with strategic aims. It recognises the importance of aligning the strategic plan's objectives with subsidiary strategies e.g. curriculum, estates, finance, people, digital, all of which should detail performance criteria, implementation pathways and resource requirements.

This guide aims to be a valuable resource for FE leaders committed to delivering high-quality provision and navigating sector complexities with clarity and confidence.

Post-16 English and Maths in Further Education: A Guide to Effective Practice

In recent years, the number of 16–19-year-olds resitting English and maths in FE has grown significantly. Re-engaging learners who have previously struggled in school presents well-documented challenges. This guide explores effective delivery models for post-16 English and maths across the FE sector, showcasing practices that support achievement and progression.

Developed through extensive research, including performance data analysis and over twenty case studies of colleges with high levels of progression and/or achievement in English and maths. The guide is structured around three core themes:

- **student engagement and support** – focuses on transition planning, learner profiling, assessment, and holistic support strategies to improve attendance, motivation, and wellbeing
- **pedagogical innovation and technology-enhanced learning** – highlights evidence-based approaches that support progress for learners with SEND, low prior attainment, or those at risk of becoming NEET as well as examining qualification choices, exam timing, and the use of technology to boost outcomes
- **whole-college integration and strategic leadership** – investigates how strategic planning, staffing, CPD, resource management, and cross-departmental collaboration can embed English and maths across the institution

This guide aims to help colleges improve learner outcomes in English and maths by increasing the number of students who either improve their existing grade or achieve a Level 2 qualification.

Governance recruitment service

The Government Recruitment Service remains a key element of the Department for Education's support offer to the sector. The service plays a vital role in strengthening governance across FE colleges by supporting the appointment of governors with the right blend of skills, experience and perspectives to governing boards. The appointment of even one or two strong governors can significantly enhance board effectiveness, improve college performance, and ultimately lead to better outcomes for learners.

Following the relaunch of the new contract in June 2025, demand has been strong with 23 colleges accessing the service, many for the first time. The demand for nearly 50 governor roles has demonstrated that specific skills are still proving challenging to find in some locations especially for finance/audit, FE curriculum/quality and those who have the expertise to chair committees. The professional expertise and focussed search support is proving most helpful for colleges to fill skills gaps and assist succession planning.

The service is open to all statutory FE providers. Information can be found on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

Intervention support

The FEC and her team reviewed the provision and finances of FE corporations (colleges), designated institutions and sixth form colleges corporations subject to intervention during the year, in line with the published oversight policy. These reviews help to identify and agree the specific steps a college needs to take to improve. The FEC undertook 6 capability and capacity assessments during the 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025 reporting period. These assessments followed institutions entering intervention, 5 of which entered intervention because of financial health, one because of quality.

As of 31 July 2025, a total of 11 colleges remained subject to intervention. Neither the FE Commissioner nor DfE want colleges to remain in intervention for longer than is necessary. During the year, 4 colleges have been removed from intervention. When a college exits intervention, the FE Commissioner and their team work with the DfE Place-Based Team to agree a post-intervention monitoring and support (PIMS) plan. Of the 4 colleges removed from intervention, 3 moved into PIMS, in addition one college moved into PIMS following a merger.

Where we fund local authorities to deliver further education and Ofsted judge that provision to be inadequate, the FE Commissioner can undertake a capability assessment and make recommendation. During the period 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025, 0 local authority was placed in intervention following an inadequate Ofsted. 1 local authority was removed from intervention.

The summaries of FE Commissioner intervention reports are published on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

Case study: Croydon College

Croydon College's story is one of resilience, ambition, and transformation. Serving London's largest and one of the most diverse and disadvantaged boroughs, the college has long been a vital anchor for its community. With campuses in Croydon and Coulsdon, it provides a safe haven for learners in an area often marked by social challenges, including high levels of crime and deprivation. Croydon has the highest proportion of Looked After Children (LAC) of all local authorities. Against this backdrop, the college has consistently sought to raise aspirations and create opportunities for all.

The journey has not been without its challenges. In March 2019, Croydon College merged with Coulsdon Sixth Form College, a strategic move to strengthen provision and broaden opportunities. Yet, just as the newly merged organisation began to embed shared values and systems, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, halting progress and forcing leaders to focus on the immediate needs of learners during lockdown. Post-merger ambitions stalled, and performance declined, particularly at Coulsdon.

In February 2023, the college faced its biggest challenge – an Ofsted inspection graded it as 'inadequate'. Whilst this judgement was unexpected, significant weaknesses at the Coulsdon campus had increased the risk of an inadequate grade.

Governors and senior leaders responded decisively, embracing external support from the Department for Education and the Further Education Commissioner. A single, robust improvement plan was launched, targeting areas with the greatest impact on learners. Difficult decisions were made, but the focus remained unwavering, restoring quality and confidence.

The turnaround was remarkable. By November 2023, the first monitoring visit reported early signs of progress; by March 2024, improvement was accelerating. In October 2024, just 20 months after the inadequate grade, Ofsted reinspected and judged the College as 'Good' in every category. Intervention was lifted the following month, testament to the determination and collaboration of staff, leaders, governors, and partners.

This renewed strength is reflected in the college's performance during 2024–25. Achievement rates improved significantly to 88%, exceeding both the college's target and national averages. Retention improved to 94%, and high grades in key vocational areas rose dramatically, Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy achievement leapt from 45.8% to 90.5%, Engineering from 70.8% to 90.9%, and Motor Vehicle pass rates from 69% to 94%. English and maths high grade results placed the college in the second quartile nationally for both subjects, together with impressive positive progress scores for those learners with the lowest grades on entry.

Beyond academic success, the college has grown significantly whilst maintaining a positive, inclusive culture. Learners describe the campuses as safe and welcoming, and enrichment programmes have expanded to build resilience, confidence, and employability. Employer engagement has deepened through eight Skills Forums and partnerships with organisations such as the NHS, Morgan Sindall, and Southern Rail, ensuring curriculum relevance and creating pathways to work. A majority of learners benefit from external work placements, and 89% progressed to sustained positive destinations in 2024/25.

Leadership and governance have been pivotal. A clear strategic vision, rigorous quality assurance, and investment in staff development and resources have driven improvement. 90% of teachers now meet or exceed standards, supported by coaching and professional qualifications at levels 3–5. Safeguarding remains robust, with innovative systems like "Report and Support" reinforcing the college's commitment to learner welfare and safety.

While challenges remain, such as improving apprenticeship achievement and raising A-level outcomes, the college stands on a strong platform. From merger and pandemic disruption to rapid improvement and renewed confidence, Croydon College has demonstrated what is possible when ambition drives action. Today, it is not only a provider of education but a beacon of hope and opportunity for the Croydon community, a college its students, its staff, and its borough can depend on and be proud of.

Leading and advocating for the sector

Principal Reference Group



The Principals Reference Group (PRG) is currently made up of 8 serving college principals/CEOs. The group supports, challenges, and advises the FEC in her role of improving performance and sharing best practice in FE colleges. It also contributes to the implementation of policy for colleges in the further education sector.

The PRG met formally 4 times during the 2024 to 2025 reporting period and has discussed a range of topics including qualification reform, green skills and special educational needs.

FE Commissioner roadshow – powerful pedagogy

The [powerful pedagogy effective practice guide](#) was launched across the sector in March 2025 with a webinar repeated in April because of the level of interest. Over 200 people joined the sessions, with wide sector representation.

The content drew from the case studies featured in the guide, with each of the 4 sessions presented by teachers and curriculum leaders from one of the contributing colleges. This mirrored the approach in the guide where the voices of practitioners can clearly be heard.

Participants joined one of the four sessions to learn more about ways to bring learning theory alive in the classroom, workshop, studio and other learning settings. Presenters shared approaches informed by evidence around feedback, oracy, building knowledge in the long-term memory and establishing routines and habits to strengthen self-discipline and learning behaviour.

In their feedback, participants commented on some inspirational approaches which they would apply in their own practice. The “Spotify Model” in T level to strengthen problem solving through oracy, the “Scrum and Huddle” for dialogic planning and evaluation, and the practical ideas for building knowledge, applying it and testing it under specific conditions including in the workplace. Key takeaways from those who joined the breakouts on GCSE English and maths were around the importance of building trusting relationships with teachers who were life-influencers, role models and a source of stability in many students’ lives. Participants identified the potential of metacognitive approaches as transferable to all provision types and across all learner needs, particularly in scaffolding towards independence. They appreciated the insights from

college presenters on developing metacognitive frameworks and both teachers and leaders confirmed that they would use this learning to support their own practice.

Following the webinars, a number of the colleges presenting decided to apply to work with the EEF in its post-16 evidence partnership, with some of these accepted onto the project. It is good to see a growing awareness of and deployment of evidence-based pedagogy across the sector.

Qualifications reform

Over the past two years, qualifications reform has reshaped the further education landscape and has been a central theme in policy discussions, college boardrooms, senior leadership meetings, and curriculum planning sessions. Whilst the rapid evolution of qualifications has sparked debate, raised concerns, and highlighted differing perspectives across the sector, it has also opened the door to one of the most exciting opportunities for technical skills provision in recent memory. The reforms are intended to align with the government's broader agenda for growth and opportunity, positioning further education (FE) at the heart of delivering national prosperity.

From the launch of T Levels in 2020 to the wider qualifications reform between 2022 and 2024, the sector has experienced significant transformation. Key milestones include:

- introduction of T Levels in 2020
- broad qualifications reform from 2022 to 2024
- pause and review of reform strategy in Autumn 2024
- curriculum and assessment review, and the release of the Education and Skills White Paper in 2025

Throughout this period, members of my team have worked closely with policy teams to guide and support implementation.

While the FE sector is no stranger to change, the pace and scale of these reforms have raised concerns. The focus on simplifying skills provision at Levels 2 and 3 has had wide-reaching effects, particularly as demand grows for Level 1 and 2 places and for more personalised learner support. Some institutions and learners have undoubtedly felt the impact more acutely than others, underscoring the need for tailored, responsive support mechanisms.

To meet these evolving needs, the FEC has developed a portfolio of active support strategies including sharing effective practices and techniques, responding to individual challenges as they arise, and facilitating collaboration across the sector. This support is designed to be multi-faceted, recognising the diversity of learners, institutions, and regional contexts.

The FEC continues to work alongside other FE stakeholders and policy teams to ensure colleges are effectively engaged in the reform process. Central to this effort is the commitment to two-way communication across all levels of the system, partnership-

based problem solving, grounded in sector expertise, and consultation and feedback, through events, roundtables, and policy reviews. I strongly encourage the sector to participate in the [current consultation process](#) that is due to close on 12 January 2026.

As qualifications reform continues to evolve, we remain committed to advocating for, supporting, and empowering the further education sector. By working in partnership with central government and stakeholder agencies, we aim to ensure that FE institutions are equipped to deliver high-quality, future-focused technical education. Through this partnership, we can turn reform into opportunity and shape a skills system that works for learners, employers, and communities across the country.

Recent feedback on the FEC team and their work

Evaluation and feedback

We collate feedback about the work of the FEC and her wider team through surveys, structured interviews, and other evaluation methods to understand the usefulness and impact of the support provided and to inform further developments or improvements. We have included examples of feedback in other parts of this report.

One of our feedback routes is through the DfE Skills Engagement Surveys. In July 2025 we asked some general questions and also some focussed questions about our apprenticeships support and effective practice guides and over 60% of statutory FE colleges responded.

General questions

When asked about FEC support in general, over 80% of respondents rated the FEC team support experience as 'very positive', and over 72% rated the impact of this support as 'very positive'.

Effective practice guides

Over 82% of respondents had used one or more of the FEC effective practice guides and 58% of these found them to be 'very helpful' whilst 39% of these found them to be 'somewhat helpful'. The most utilised guide according to respondents was the Curriculum Planning Guide, followed in second place by the Benchmarking Tool, and three other guides coming in joint third place were the College Management Accounts, Powerful Pedagogy and Senior Postholder and Chair Appraisals Guides.

Apprenticeship support

We recruited a specialist apprenticeships FE Adviser last year and wanted to see how this newer area of support was going. 25% of respondents had received apprenticeship support, and 89% of these recipients found the support 'very helpful'. Apprenticeship

support requests are quite varied but were mainly about quality matters, financial health checks, and support for growing apprenticeship numbers.

Thank you!

I would like to thank you and your colleagues on behalf of my team and DfE officials for responding to our surveys and evaluation requests to help us continue to improve, we are most appreciative.



Department for Education

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