Department for Education

FE Commissioner Intervention Summary Assessment Report: Boston College

May 2026

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Background

Name of College	Boston College
UKPRN	10000812
Name of College Principal /CEO	Lynette Leith
Name of College Chair	David Earnshaw
Type of provision	General Further Education (GFE) college
Date of visit	12-13 May 2026
Type of visit	Intervention Assessment Visit
Trigger for formal intervention	Financial health and financial management and other controls
Further Education Commissioner (FEC) Team members	FE Commissioner – Ellen Thinnesen Deputy FEC – Esme Winch (lead) FE Adviser – Lynn Forrester Walker FE Adviser – Martin Sim FE Adviser – Lisa Wilson (Day 2)
Location	Boston
Apprenticeship training provider	Yes
Latest Ofsted inspection grade	Good (December 2023)

Conclusion/Executive summary

Boston College is a multi-site General Further Education (GFE) college serving a largely rural and economically disadvantaged area of Lincolnshire. It mainly serves the borough of Boston and the districts of South Holland and East Lindsey, although its reach extends beyond these areas. It serves 3,900 learners overall, including 2,139 16-18 year olds. The college provides a broad range of provision from pre-entry to level 6, with a significant proportion of learners studying at lower levels. The curriculum includes academic, vocational and technical provision including T levels and apprenticeships, higher education, and community learning activities.

The college is facing significant challenges in governance and financial management and although improvements to operational control have moved at pace, the full scope and sustained impact of these are still emerging. A material deterioration in financial performance was not identified or fully understood by the board in a timely way, indicating serious weaknesses in financial oversight, reporting and assurance. This resulted in a fragile cash position, reliance on restricted funds to support operational activity, and a financial health grade that had declined to ‘requires improvement’.

Governance is currently weak and unstable. There is an absence of an effective and cohesive relationship between the board, executive leadership and governance professional, alongside gaps in capability, capacity and attendance. The board has not provided sufficiently robust challenge or scrutiny, particularly in relation to financial performance and risk management.

A new principal/ chief executive officer (principal/CEO), appointed in November 2025, has taken decisive action to stabilise the financial position and initiate improvements in planning, financial control and curriculum efficiency. While these actions are appropriate and have begun to improve organisational oversight, they remain at an early stage and are not yet embedded or delivering proven sustained impact.

The quality of provision is variable. Although the college was judged ‘good’ by Ofsted in December 2023, performance data (2024/2025) shows outcomes are below national averages in several key areas, including apprenticeships, with risks around attendance, and English and mathematics. Leaders have strengthened quality processes and curriculum planning, but it is too early to evidence sustained improvement in outcomes.

Overall, the college currently has limited capacity to secure rapid and sustainable improvement without significant support. Immediate and sustained action is required to stabilise governance, strengthen financial management, and ensure consistent improvement in the quality of provision.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Future chairing of the Board of Corporation must be reviewed directly with the Deputy Further Education Commissioner, and steps for improvement agreed and implemented. This may include support from a National Leader of Governance (NLG), if appropriate

When: By July 2026
Action owner: Chair of the Board

Recommendation 2: Search and Governance (S&G) committee must immediately step up and take responsibility for facilitating the recruitment of a new board chair, a S&G chair, governors and a qualified governance professional, and refresh the composition and impact of all committees.

When: By October 2026
Action owner: Chair, governance professional and principal/CEO

Recommendation 3: The board should commission an External Board Review (EBR). The resulting governance improvement plan must include succession planning, attendance, governor participation and visibility. The plan needs to include adequate induction for new governors and include improved Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and external networking opportunities for all members.

When: By December 2026
Action owner: Chair, governance professional and principal/CEO

Recommendation 4: The board of governors must review and take steps to strengthen the scope and expertise of the current senior postholder structure. They must ensure job descriptions are clear regarding who is accountable to governors for statutory safeguards and the decisions that affect for example funding, estates, safety, quality and compliance. Personal targets which should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART), should align with this.

When: By October 2026
Action owner: Chair of the Board

Recommendation 5: An effective and purposeful triumvirate between the CEO/principal, chair and governance professional should be established, with the support of an FEC appointed NLG.

When: By October 2026
Action owner: Chair, governance professional and principal/CEO

Recommendation 6: Governors should scrutinise and challenge the process of curriculum planning and self-assessment and ensure that the college's annual accountability statement includes qualitative targets linked to LMI.

When: By November 2026
Action owner: Chair of the board

Recommendation 7: The College must continue to implement at pace the recommendations contained within the 2026 Curriculum Efficiency Financial Stability Support (CEFSS) report and deliver the current financial strategy.

When: By November 2026
Action owner: Principal/chief executive

Recommendation 8: The college is escalated into supervised college status.

Action Owner: FE Commissioner

Recommendation 9: Consider a future Structure and Prospects Appraisal (SPA) including a review of wider area provision and to assess longer term viability.

Action owner: The Regional Performance Team and FE Commissioner

The FEC team will support the development of the college's Single Improvement Plan (SIP) within the next two months and conduct an intervention assessment stocktake no later than November 2026 to review progress.

Governance and leadership

Governance

Governance at Boston College lacks stability, with significant shortcomings in effectiveness, capacity and oversight. There have been multiple recent resignations from key governance roles, including committee chairs, contributing to instability and limiting the board's ability to discharge its responsibilities effectively.

Between 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 board attendance dropped. In the current year it is reported that some governor attendance and participation has improved, but a high volume of governor vacancies remain a significant challenge.

The role of governance professional is under resourced. This has impacted the quality and consistency of clerking, the organisation of governance processes, and the maintenance of effective governance standards.

The absence of an effective working relationship between the chair, principal/CEO and governance professional (the "triumvirate") has further limited the effectiveness of governance and the alignment between strategic oversight and operational delivery.

The board's use of management information is underdeveloped and does not consistently support effective and timely challenge, robust scrutiny or improvement.

A significant deterioration in financial performance and cashflow was not identified or challenged effectively in a timely manner. At the end of 2024/2025 and early into 2025/2026, governors state they were shocked to discover the true extent of the college's financial position having previously believed financial health to be good. Added to this was the impact of estates decisions over previous years, approved by the governors, which further impacted on the cash position. This indicates weaknesses in financial reporting, risk management, and assurance processes.

Leadership

The newly appointed principal/CEO and Chief Accounting Officer joined the college in November 2025 inheriting serious finance and estates challenges, which were subsequently reported to the Department for Education (DfE).

She has instigated an organisational wide strategic development programme. Although in its infancy, this is beginning to make a positive difference upon how engaged leaders and managers are, their clarity of direction, and strengthened approaches to planning. A new integrated curriculum planning process has been established; leaders state access to new data dashboards are in development and embedding of new systems and data reports are in progress. A new short term financial strategy has also been established. It

is too soon to determine the longer-term, sustainable impact and outcomes of this change programme and concurrently, governance and the senior post holder structure need urgent and rapid transformation.

There has been recent absence of key senior leaders. Permanent recruitment should be considered within a review of the senior leadership and senior postholder structures with a view to strengthening them.

Curriculum and quality improvement

Curriculum and provision overview

This is a small general further education college, with three sites across south and east Lincolnshire, which delivers a broad classroom based, all-age, curriculum from pre-entry level to level 6 across multiple sites. The college currently delivers a limited range of apprenticeship standards aligned to Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) priorities and national skills strategies. The college works collaboratively with other Greater Lincolnshire based colleges.

Boston remains one of the most educationally deprived areas in England, with high numbers of residents lacking qualifications at Level 4 and above. With 27.6% of Boston residents having no formal qualifications (compared to the national average of 18.2%) and only 19% having qualifications at level 4 or above (versus the national average of 33.9%), there remains a high proportion of residents for whom language is a barrier to attaining the skills required to undertake higher paying jobs.

The college's current Accountability Statement has been developed alongside a new strategic plan and reinforces the college's five-pillar strategic aims (People, Performance, Productivity, Partnerships, and Personality) and communicates clear rationale based on labour market intelligence, stakeholder contribution and local/regional priorities. For 2025/2026, areas prioritised for expansion are Health and Social Care, Creative and Cultural Industries, Internet of Things & Construction, T Levels & Apprenticeships, Adult Education and Upskilling. The College has committed to expanding its provision across Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), apprenticeships, and vocational training in response to employer needs and regional economic demands.

SMART targets have been set to measure impact; however, the current financial challenges may provide a handicap and slow implementation. For 2025/2026 the college has increased the volume of non-regulated learning aims.

Curriculum planning and development

Curriculum planning continues to evolve with a greater presence of finance influence. Professional services teams now provide scrutiny and challenge throughout the planning process. For 2027/2028, the planning cycle will be spread over the preceding twelve months ensuring sufficient time to facilitate stronger links between strategic intent and operational planning. A greater emphasis on data and trends has been implemented by the new principal/CEO with the express aim of cost reduction and increasing accountability of managers for all aspects of provision.

Historically, the college has not been financially efficient. A detailed CEFSS review was completed in May 2023 with progress reviewed in January 2026. Leadership had implemented only six of the thirteen recommendations. From a pace perspective progress was tardy until the new principal/CEO arrived and immediately put in place urgent measures to improve the speed of implementation, including urgent work on overheads/contribution, staff utilisation, class size, remission, programme hours and supporting processes. Several changes in the development of management information have been put in place that will have a positive impact on 2025/2026 data onwards and should start to bring the college broadly into line with the sector. It is too early to assess if the changes implemented are sustainable or limit quality improvement; however, it is clear there remains further distance to travel.

The structure of apprenticeship provision is fragmented, with delivery shared between curriculum staff, apprenticeship trainers and assessors, and cross-college support teams. Oversight of performance, compliance and quality processes sits with an operations manager. A future review of this structure would support clearer accountability and ensure sufficient capacity to drive sustained improvement.

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

College data provides a view of the significant change in regulated and unregulated qualification aims (16-18) over the past 3 academic years.

The college reports that the increase in unregulated aims is to ensure all curriculum delivery aspects such as level 3 maths option, learner “catch up” hours etc. are formalised and fundable. This change is highly significant; it will impact on future published achievement rates. The college has invested resource to ensure recorded student programmes are accurate and improve teaching and learning through enhanced CPD and is confident the 2026 data will show improvement. This will be a key quality improvement indicator for the college.

The impact of this revised programme design can also be seen in the 16-18 learner FT/PT ratios.

Apprenticeship starts increased significantly in 2024/2025, reflecting a pattern of triennial cyclical recruitment. However, the proposed growth plan for 2025/2026 has not been achieved. While curriculum planning arrangements have been strengthened, there is scope to improve the use of market intelligence, including demand trends and market share, to better inform future planning.

Attrition rate is for 25-26 shows a small increase on the previous year and above a benchmark. Learner attendance across the whole college remains consistent; however, attendance at both mathematics and English is low. High needs attendance is slightly higher but taken over 3 years has dropped. Key Performance Indicators for quality outputs (retention and achievement) have been historically on, or below, national average. There is a degree of internal confidence that staff development coupled with improvements in data accuracy will result in improved, above national average, outcomes. Learner retention is forecast to be above national average. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities provision achievement rates are predicted to rise above national average. English and mathematics achievements are currently predicted to be above national average; high grade performance needs to improve.

In Apprenticeships, processes to monitor progress, attendance, retention and achievement have been strengthened through the introduction of monthly ‘Support to Improve’ meetings. The level of scrutiny and challenge aligns with best practice; however, the impact of these changes is not yet evident. In 2024/2025, apprenticeship retention was low, with achievement also below national rates. Although in-year achievement is forecast to improve, this is likely to include late achievers from 2024/2025. As a result, current performance and the effectiveness of achievement management are not yet fully clear. Further analysis would support a clearer understanding of the impact of quality improvement activity.

The college is Ofsted Good (December 2023); The new principal/CEO has instigated a thorough self-assessment process which sets the baseline for improvement. The Self-Assessment Report (SAR) uses the new Further Education and Skills Inspection Toolkit criteria as a basis for judgements and the Ofsted five-point scale to grade each aspect.

The new SAR document is thorough and evidenced based, making use of college performance data. It clearly identifies areas for improvement, and these are summarised into the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP).

There is an internal recognition that urgent improvement is needed in key aspects and progress has been made.

Student and staff views

Staff who were met during the intervention assessment were highly positive about change, including the pace. They recognised in December the need to change and were

complimentary about the openness and transparency of the new principal/CEO. They reported that the use of data was improving and felt supported by the regular Continuing Professional Development (CPD) on offer to both classroom-based staff and professional services staff.

Students were positive about their experience and the level of support and care exercised by staff particularly around the start of year. Students commented that opportunities to meet students from other departments were limited; building and timetable structure were floated as barriers.

Finance and audit

Financial performance 2024/2025

In June 2025, the Finance and Resources Committee received the April management accounts with a quarter 3 reforecast. This forecast indicated a higher deficit compared to the budgeted deficit. The downturn in financial performance was attributed to increased pay costs, particularly agency pay. At this point Apprenticeship income was tracking below target.

At the July 2025 Corporation meeting, a forecast deficit was reported. By September 2025, at the Finance and Resources Committee the Chief Finance Officer reported a deficit out turn, which had deteriorated. This significant deterioration was attributed to apprenticeship, loan and project income being deferred into 2025/2026, and the impact of a pay award. At no point in the reporting was the issue of reliance on restricted cash flagged as a risk. Governors expressed shock and concern in this deterioration in the financial position but took no decisive action.

It was reported that the apprenticeship issue was due to many apprentices who were unable to complete an End Point Assessment (EPA) by 31 July as the EPA third party could not accommodate them. Steps were being taken to improve tracking and reporting of apprenticeship progress and EPAs to ensure financial projections were more prudent.

Forecasting and monitoring of financial outturn was deficient in the latter part of 2024/2025. Challenge of the predicted income in areas like apprenticeships was lacking with the senior leadership team and the impact of expenditure decisions were not fully understood. Governors did not challenge sufficiently to ensure that forecasts were robust and triangulated with other information available to them.

Financial performance 2025/2026

The 2025/2026 budget was approved at Corporation in July 2025, after review by the Finance Committee earlier in June. Members of Finance and Resources Committee questioned some of the assumptions for growth and questioned the ambition of the level of planned income. At Corporation there was recognition that the budget had been challenging to set but maintained a ‘good’ financial health rating and ensured strong operational cash generation.

The budget approved by Corporation planned an Earnings Before Interest Taxes Depreciation Amortization (EBITDA) and an operating deficit, which is slightly different to the budget included in the 2025/2026 management accounts. In the management accounts for 2025/2026 the income budget is higher than the approved budget (due to the late increase to the 16-18 allocation which was not included in the original budget plan), staff costs and non-pay costs are higher than the approved budget. There is no clear audit trail through Finance and Resources Committee of the agreement of these changes.

Underlying the budget was an assumed growth in apprenticeship income when compared to forecast out turn for 2024/2025 (as of April 2025). As noted above, this forecast proved to be optimistic. The budget also included efficiencies, the detail of which was yet to be determined, plus a vacancy factor. Governors did not challenge these assumptions or seek assurance on the pipeline and demand for a significant growth in apprenticeship starts.

When the new principal/CEO took up post in November 2025, she requested an urgent reforecast of the year-end financial position and review of the cashflow forecast, due to emerging concerns regarding levels of actual income, rising staff costs and declining cash position. After a critical review of the re-forecast, a more accurate picture was shared with the corporation in December. This indicated that the college was forecasting a reduced EBITDA deficit when compared to budget. The report to corporation indicated that cash was constrained but no indication was given of the use of restricted cash to support operational cashflows, which was the reality.

To address the declining financial position, manage cash and ensure that use of restricted cash was minimised, a cost savings programme was put in place. This will accrue savings by July 2026. Elements of resulting new processes have been slow to be adopted consistently across the college, and staff costs have continued to increase although at a slower rate.

As at March 2026, the college is forecasting a higher EBITDA compared to the budget. This forecast has a prudent assumption around 16-18 growth funding but also assumes that further apprenticeship income will be secured in the final 4 months.

Financial plan 2026/2027

The college has prepared a draft budget for 2026/2027 and 2027/2028. This is subject to further review through the executive and governing body but provides a good indication of the college's likely out turn in terms of EBITDA over the next two years.

The budget for 2026/2027 is more prudent than previously. It reflects the positive impact of the actions taken in 2025/2026 to control costs and improve reporting of income in key areas like apprenticeships and adults. The budget reflects the 16-18 allocation. Apprenticeship income is based upon the curriculum plan with a 1/3 reduction given recent patterns of recruitment. A prudent approach for adult funding has also been taken.

Non pay budgets have been reviewed on a line-by-line basis, with inflation added depending on the type of spend.

Cashflow/liquidity

Due to the decline in financial performance in 2024/2025 and growing costs for capital development cash reserves have been significantly depleted.

As the financial operating position unfolded in 2025/2026, cash balances became more constrained. To manage this position the college utilised restricted cash balances to support operational cashflows in the period January - March 2026. The impact of the cost reduction plan has positively impacted cashflows and this, combined with daily management of cashflow and creditors, has improved the overall cash position

For 2026/2027 and 2027/2028, the accompanying balance sheet and cashflow are still to be developed, however the projected EBITDA would indicate a strengthening cash position and positive impact on balance sheet ratios.

Financial liabilities/loans

The college has two commercial bank loans which were renegotiated in June 2021, both have repayment dates of June 2031.

Audit and risk

At the time of signing the financial statements for 2024/2025, the external auditors were content with the representations that the college was a going concern and signed the accounts on this basis with no material uncertainties.

The college internal auditors annual report for 2024/2025 provide reasonable assurance that the college's risk management and systems of internal control were operating adequately and effectively and that there were no instances where any breakdown of control resulted in a material discrepancy.

Long term sustainability

The long-term sustainability of the college is in the control of the board and senior leaders. Steps taken to date by the new principal/CEO have arrested a significant in-year financial issue and enabled cash balances to be controlled and slowly improved. The board has been supportive of these measures but needs to continue to strengthen risk management, assurance and triangulation.

The College has grown its 16-18 numbers this year which has provided a much needed cash injection both in this year and next to enable a more sustainable medium term financial plan to be developed. The college is relatively small with a finite and challenging market, significant curriculum reform and a declining demographic for 16-18 year olds in the future. Further steps to maximise efficiency and ensure that any capital investment is appropriately planned, with clarity on impact and financial pay back, will be key.

Development of a longer-term financial plan beyond 2027/2028 will provide clarity on the steps needed to assure longer term financial sustainability.

Estates and capital plans

The college operates from 5 sites across Lincolnshire. Three of these sites are within Boston, with the largest being the Rochford Campus. The college also has smaller campuses in Spalding and Horncastle to meet local community needs.

DfE Capital and improvement grant funding received over the last few years has been utilised to address areas of category C buildings, replace boilers to improve sustainability and deal with capacity issues.

The newly appointed Director of Estates and Health and Safety has a long history with the college and is clear on the short-term plans to improve the current estate utilising grant funding.

The level of room utilisation across the college sites needs to improve in some areas - regular reviews of timetables and room audits assist in this.

Property management and investment

The college has had a strategy to grow its estate to support the regeneration of Boston town centre through access of grant funding, combined with investment in existing assets to improve facilities for students and accommodate growth in some curriculum areas.

However, aspects of this strategy have diverted attention and limited cash reserves away from the needs of the current estate and did not fully consider the underutilisation levels

of current facilities. Governors play a key role in determining the direction of estate planning and investment and should expect appropriate reporting to enable them to challenge and question before making informed decisions.

The College needs to develop a long-term estates strategy and masterplan to ensure it is utilising its estate most efficiently.

Appendix A – Interviewees

Chair

Principal/CEO

Governance professional

Senior leaders

Chairs of committees

Executive Director of People

Apprenticeship Operations Manager

Director of Estates

Head of Finance

Director MIS/Data

Assistant Principal Quality

Apprenticeship leads

Curriculum managers

Staff group

Student group

Trade Union representatives

Apprenticeship staff

Appendix B – Documents reviewed

Last twelve months minutes, papers and terms of reference from board and all committee meetings including any task and finish groups.

Latest college strategic plan

Whole college risk register and board assurance framework

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

Organisational chart

Senior Leadership Team membership with CVs and CPD record (12 months)

Appraisal policy and documents for senior post holders

Scheme of delegation if not included above

Completed pre-visit Provider Quality Performance Table

Updated College Self-Assessment Report or position statement

College Quality improvement plan and progress

Staff and student surveys and allied action plans

Completed pre-visit financial information request template

Costed curriculum plan including contribution analysis by department/curriculum area where available

Latest management accounts, including cashflow forecast

Last annual report from the internal auditors

Details of bank loans and covenant compliance

Details of recent or planned staff restructuring events

Estates strategy

Department for Education

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