

Inspection of The Bedford College Group

Inspection dates:

8 to 11 October 2024 and 26 to 27
November 2024**Overall effectiveness** **Good**

The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Education programmes for young people	Good
Adult learning programmes	Good
Apprenticeships	Good
Provision for learners with high needs	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Information about this provider

The Bedford College Group is a large general further education provider with seven colleges across Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire. The group includes Bedford College, Tresham College, Central Bedfordshire College and two sixth-form colleges in Bedford and Corby. There is also specialist land-based provision at Shuttleworth College and a specialist motor sport college located next to Silverstone racetrack. The group has additional adult learning centres allocated in a range of community settings. Overall, the group provides a wide range of academic, professional, vocational and technical courses for learners aged 16 and over.

At the time of the inspection, there were 9,275 learners on education programmes for young people, including T levels and the T-level foundation year. There were 4,752 learners on adult learning programmes, 1,179 apprentices and 559 learners with high needs on specialist and vocational pathways.

The provider works with four subcontractors.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Learners and apprentices study in environments that are safe and welcoming. Staff are supportive and caring, and they maintain calm classrooms, where learners and apprentices focus well on their studies. Learners on level 1 motor vehicle courses act professionally and responsibly, demonstrating maturity in practical workshops. On Prince's Trust programmes, learners set their own rules about what constitutes acceptable behaviour, abide by these rules and behave well.

Learners and apprentices feel safe. They appreciate the positive safeguarding culture at each college or group site. Staff know their learners and apprentices very well and help them to manage their individual circumstances. Learners and apprentices appreciate the safeguarding measures that are in place at each site, such as security officers at entrances who check lanyards, and the well-lit pedestrian areas. They know how to report concerns and are confident that concerns will be acted on swiftly.

Learners and apprentices benefit from an age-appropriate personal development programme that enables them to develop their interests and talents and maintain their health and well-being. Learners with high needs participate fully in the enrichment aspects of the programme and run lunch clubs, an in-house library and a pickleball event. Personal development coaches provide learners and apprentices with access to appropriate resources to support their mental health, including sessions that are delivered by qualified mental health first-aiders.

On education programmes for young people, learners carry out meaningful and relevant work experience placements and other work-related activity. Work-placement coordinators support learners to apply for and attend these activities. Most learners make good use of their placements and other work-related activity to develop the professional behaviours and attitudes that they need to make progress in their chosen subjects and gain valuable job-related skills.

Learners and apprentices display positive attitudes to their learning. However, attendance does not yet meet leaders' high expectations for learners. Leaders have introduced strategies to improve this but it is too early to judge the impact of these actions. Too many younger learners were unable to join GCSE mathematics lessons at the start of the academic year because of the increase in the number of learners needing to study this subject. Leaders have acted quickly to recruit additional staff, but it is too early to see the impact of this.

Most learners and apprentices benefit from effective careers guidance and support to help them make decisions about their next steps. On the level 2 technical certificate in equine care, learners hear from guest speakers from the British Horse Society, who talk about the employment opportunities available in this specialist sector. However, in too many instances, adult learners on distance learning programmes and younger learners on A-level and T-level programmes do not receive sufficient careers advice and guidance to help them to understand their career

options. The decisions that they make about their next steps are based solely on their own research.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The college makes a reasonable contribution to meeting skills needs.

Senior staff engage effectively with local, regional and national employers and stakeholders to identify priority skills needs. They have recently reviewed the curriculum offer across the group to align priorities to meeting skills needs in construction, digital technology and green energies. Leaders have also collaborated with stakeholders to understand the need to develop routes into employment for learners who are the furthest away from education and training. For example, learners on English for speakers of other languages courses are supported to move on to the level 2 supporting teaching and learning in schools course, which enables them to apply for and often secure teaching assistant roles.

Civic stakeholders are highly appreciative of the leaders' and managers' approach to working collaboratively with local and regional businesses to understand skills needs. They view the college as a trusted organisation, which is keen to respond to the needs of its communities. For example, leaders have worked closely with North Northamptonshire Council on the 'BIG50 Future Vision', which is an overarching plan for the next 25 years with the objective of making the area 'proud, prosperous and proactive'.

Leaders and managers involve employers and stakeholders in the design of most of the curriculum. For example, employers in the robotics sector have suggested pertinent content, such as programming and electrical wiring of control systems for the T-level course in design and development for engineering and manufacturing. However, on a few courses, the involvement of employers and stakeholders in the design and implementation of the curriculum is still in development.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Senior leaders and managers have a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the quality of education. Newly appointed leaders and a recent restructure of management roles demonstrate a sincere commitment to improving the quality of provision by bringing quality to the forefront of all performance-related meetings and activities. The previously declining achievement in apprenticeships has been halted and the achievement of apprentices has improved considerably.

Leaders work closely with subcontractors to recruit learners who have significant barriers to accessing education. Senior staff monitor closely the performance of subcontracted provision to understand how well learners perform on distance learning programmes and specialist performing arts, warehousing and facilities management courses. Learners on subcontracted provision make good progress towards achieving the qualifications that they need to move on to their next steps.

Leaders and managers recruit teaching staff who are well qualified and have suitable industry experience that they use well to enhance curriculum content. Adult learners on the level 3 diploma in accounting are taught by experienced teaching staff, who are up to date with current financial practices and use examples from their own practice to illustrate key principles of taxation. This provides learners with valuable and contemporary real-world examples.

Most teachers sequence the curriculum well so that learners and apprentices build their learning in a logical order. For example, on the level 2 technical certificate in equine care, staff first teach learners about the equipment that they will use to tack, before moving on to teaching horse handling and grooming. They then cover more challenging subjects, such as lunging, horse behaviour and the principles of nutrition. As a result, learners complete their programmes with the strong foundation that they need to help them care for horses according to the British Horse Society standard.

Teachers use initial assessment effectively to identify and deal with the gaps that learners and apprentices have in their subject knowledge and wider academic skills. For example, on the level 3 access to higher education (health professions), teachers use information from initial assessment to understand the different support needs that learners have. They then direct learners to useful services that can provide help with, for example, academic writing and study skills.

Most staff use effective teaching strategies and techniques. On level 1 motor vehicle, teachers use demonstrations well to show younger learners the principals and practices of brake removal and assembly before learners practise these skills independently on a range of vehicles. On level 3 uniform public services, teachers use quizzes and reflection to ensure that learning is secure in relation to the daily dietary requirements that a person needs to maintain health.

Most teachers skilfully use a range of assessment methods to check how well learners and apprentices understand key concepts. In A-level biology, learners complete mock examinations, and teachers analyse the results of these in detail to identify gaps or misconceptions in learners' knowledge. Learners then use feedback following their examinations to create their own study guides and to correct and improve their work. However, in a few sessions, the use of assessment to check if new learning has been retained is less successful. For a few apprentices and learners, gaps in learning are not filled well enough because teachers move on swiftly to new content without identifying or correcting misconceptions first.

Leaders and managers effectively coordinate a range of specialist support for learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Speech and language therapists provide effective support for learners and provide training for staff across the college group to help staff understand communication strategies used to support learners. Teaching staff and assistants have a secure understanding of learners' education and health care plans and use these plans to promote effective learning. As a result, learners with SEND and learners with high needs

achieve well and gain the knowledge, skills and attributes that they need to progress to their next steps.

Learners and apprentices develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours that they need to be successful in their future careers. They enjoy their learning and produce work of a good standard. For example, on the level 3 engineering technician apprenticeship, apprentices consistently produce high-quality work and demonstrate precision when conducting practical tasks. Their assignments are well structured, and they successfully link theory to practice, such as applying health and safety legislation to their workplaces. Apprentices quickly develop the skills they need for their workplaces and are valuable employees.

Leaders and managers provide staff with a wide range of training opportunities. Staff participate in industry days where they spend time engaging with current sector developments. Teaching staff attend an annual teaching, learning and assessment conference, where they benefit from training on assistive technologies to help them develop their teaching skills. Staff have recently carried out training on trauma-informed practice, which enables them to consider the individual needs of learners and apprentices and barriers that they may have to attending their studies or work.

Staff benefit from well-being services that help them to maintain a positive work-life balance. They can use an employee assistance programme that includes counselling and mental health support, such as bereavement care. Leaders are conscious of staff workload and work well with line managers to identify areas of concern, such as assessment pressure points that may increase workloads.

Governors are committed to their roles and have a realistic understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the college group. Over the past 12 months, governance has been strengthened because governors now receive important and useful information about the quality of education and training. This helps them to hold leaders to account for the success of actions taken and those planned.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

During the first part of this inspection, leaders took action to deal with significant concerns about safeguarding procedures and practices, in particular in relation to how they monitor actions taken to ensure that learners and apprentices at risk remain safe. Leaders rightly recognise that these actions and procedures need to be fully embedded and their effectiveness reviewed frequently. During the additional evidence gathering visit inspectors were assured that leaders had significantly focused on this. New processes were effectively being embedded to ensure learners and apprentices remain safe.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Ensure that all learners receive useful careers information and guidance to understand how to achieve their long-term career goals.
- Ensure that learners who need to gain a GCSE mathematics qualification are swiftly able to join courses.
- Ensure that all staff receive sufficient training on effective assessment methods so that they can check accurately how well learners and apprentices retain new learning and transfer this to their long-term memory.
- Improve the attendance of learners so that they attend their courses well.

Provider details

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Principal, CEO or equivalent	Yiannis Koursis
Provider type	General further education college
Date of previous inspection	23 to 26 September 2019
Main subcontractors	Learning Curve Group Limited Ssg Training and Consultancy Limited Arts1 Diverse FM

Information about this inspection

The original inspection took place 8 to 11 October 2024. An additional visit was conducted in line with the gathering additional evidence procedures 26 to 27 November 2024. The inspection team was assisted on both visits by the deputy chief executive officer, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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