

Inspection of NCG

Inspection dates: 17–21 January 2022

Overall effectiveness	Good
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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	Requires improvement
Provision for learners with high needs	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Information about this provider

NCG is one of the largest providers of further education and skills in England. The group is made up of seven colleges which are Newcastle College, Newcastle Sixth Form College, Carlisle College, West Lancashire College, Kidderminster College, Lewisham College and Southwark College. The group has an executive team, which reports to the corporation board. Each college has a dedicated principal and a locally appointed senior leadership team. Principals are accountable to both their own local boards and to the corporation board.

Since the previous inspection, the group has ceased subcontracting to its subsidiaries Intraining and Rathbone Training and has since closed both training providers. Lewisham College and Southwark College became separate colleges within the group in 2019.

Apart from Newcastle Sixth Form College, where most learners are on academic study programmes, all the colleges deliver vocational programmes for young people, adult learning programmes, apprenticeships and provision for learners with high needs. Newcastle College has the highest proportion of learners and apprentices, with 40% of the total.

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

Across all colleges in the group, most learners on education programmes for young people, adult learning programmes and provision for learners with high needs achieve their qualifications and progress onto higher education, further training or employment.

Most learners are highly motivated to learn and to develop their skills and knowledge. They work diligently in and outside the classroom. At Newcastle Sixth Form College, learners are often heard debating topics after classes have ended.

Learners on education programmes for young people appreciate the way that staff treat them like adults. They understand that this comes with attendant rights and responsibilities, and they behave accordingly.

Most learners are highly respectful of each other and their teachers. They participate enthusiastically in classroom discussions and wait patiently for others to finish speaking before contributing themselves. At Kidderminster College, learners in dance provide constructive critiques of their peers' performances which motivates them to do better.

Learners gain useful information from their tutorial programmes about how to stay physically healthy and mentally well. At Newcastle College and West Lancashire College, learners explore how to improve their nutrition through plant-based diets. Learners across all the colleges in the group regularly use an app on their phones to improve their mental well-being.

Learners and apprentices benefit from being taught in modern facilities with up-to-date technical equipment that meets industry standards. Construction and engineering learners at Carlisle College enjoy the state-of-the-art resources available to them in the newly opened advanced manufacturing centre. Learners with high needs on construction programmes at Lewisham College have their own specially designed 'chill out' room where they can relax between lessons.

Learners are starting to develop their work-ready skills through good quality work experience and work placements after these had been seriously curtailed during the pandemic restrictions. For example, learners at West Lancashire College school of medicine all have relevant work experience in NHS facilities.

Learners with high needs say that they are being taken seriously for the first time as young adults. Staff provide them with the education that they need to get them to where they want to be in their careers.

Learners state that they feel safe from sexual abuse and harassment while at colleges in the group, although they acknowledge that they experience these issues in the wider community. They are confident that staff, particularly their personal tutors, would act swiftly to deal with their concerns and would challenge the very small number of learners who indulge in derogatory banter or make discriminatory remarks.

Too many apprentices do not receive a consistently good quality of education. As a result, they do not develop quickly enough the skills that they need for the industries in which they work.

Most learners attend their vocational and academic subjects and arrive on time ready to learn. However, learners' attendance at English and mathematics classes is too low.

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

Since the previous inspection, senior leaders have successfully transformed the organisational culture of the group and its constituent colleges so that they work more effectively together to pursue their mission to enable social mobility and economic prosperity through high-quality education.

Colleges within the group now share a set of strong policy frameworks for quality, teaching, equality and diversity, and safeguarding. They implement these policies effectively to provide learners on education programmes for young people, adult learning programmes and provision for learners with high needs with a consistently good quality of education; this removes the wide variations in learner experience and outcomes that were present at the time of the previous inspection.

Senior leadership teams at group and college level have been strengthened as part of the strategy to address most of the key weaknesses that were identified at the previous inspection. The appointment of a new chief executive officer and executive principals for the northern and southern colleges within the group, plus new appointments to leadership roles within colleges, has provided extra impetus to the drive to improve the quality of education. This is most evident in the sustained improvement in the quality of education that learners aged 16 to 18, the largest group of learners within the group, now enjoy.

Leaders and managers rightly acknowledge that the quality of education for apprentices needs further improvement. They have taken a range of actions to address the weaknesses in this provision, such as reducing the number of subcontractors. Although these actions are beginning to bring about sustainable improvements, too many of the current apprentices on programmes are making slow progress.

Leaders and managers at all colleges across the group develop and design curricula that respond well to the demands of employers and to the needs of learners and the communities where they live. College senior leadership teams and their staff work effectively with strategic partners, such as local enterprise partnerships and combined mayoral authorities, to identify skills gaps and growth areas within local economies and to inform curriculum planning. In Newcastle, the college uses its employer advisory boards effectively to inform new curriculum developments in growth areas such as offshore energy and renewables at the Port of Blyth.

Leaders and managers took a sensible strategic decision to reduce the number of subcontractors that they work with following the previous inspection, with the aim of removing weaker quality provision. The subcontracted provision that remains enables learners to access specialist skills and facilities, such as those at the West Midlands Safari Park and professional football clubs in the north west. Learning Curve, the largest current subcontractor, delivers effective online courses that help adults to re-enter the job market after being on furlough during pandemic restrictions.

Teachers feel well supported by managers. They appreciate the continuous professional development that is made available to them, particularly the communities of practice that allow them to share their teaching and learning approaches across the different colleges. Teachers are encouraged to keep their vocational expertise up to date with professional and industry standards. For example, motor vehicle teachers at Carlisle College work with the DVLA to update their knowledge of MOTs for hybrid and electric vehicles.

Managers and teachers plan and teach curricula that meet the needs of learners and employers in the different localities covered by the colleges in the group. The large programmes of English for speakers of other languages at Newcastle College, Lewisham College and Southwark College are planned effectively to enable growing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers to gain access to courses that enable them to integrate more quickly into their local communities. The access to higher education courses, particularly in health-related subjects such as nursing and midwifery, at Carlisle College, Newcastle College and Southwark College prepare learners well for careers in the health service.

Most teachers establish the starting points of learners accurately. They use this information effectively to plan their teaching. At Kidderminster College, learners on the level 3 dance programme take auditions at the start of the course so that their teachers can assess their prior skills before assigning them to a group at the same level. As a result, these learners can work at an appropriate pace to gain competence and confidence in their development as dancers.

Most teachers build the knowledge and skills of learners effectively over time through teaching a properly sequenced curriculum. In A level English literature at Newcastle Sixth Form College, the first set text is Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as learners find the language in the play easy to understand. Learners then apply the knowledge and skills they develop through analysing more complex texts, such as *Othello* and *Frankenstein*.

Teachers develop learners' fluency and retention of their knowledge and skills through effective recall activities and by checking continually learners' understanding of what they have been taught. Learners on engineering programmes at Carlisle College must demonstrate several times that they can competently use basic tools, such as files and hammers, before moving onto more advanced machinery like lathes.

A few teachers and learning support assistants do not demonstrate secure knowledge of the subjects that they teach. For example, in some mathematics lessons, learners are not correctly taught the units of measurement for the surface area of a cube. Learning

assistants attempt to teach a method to find the missing value of a mean without understanding how. As a result, the learners in these lessons are often left confused or record information incorrectly in their notes.

Staff provide most learners with useful careers advice and guidance. Teachers and personal tutors use tutorials effectively to help prepare learners for their next steps. Learners on education programmes for young people benefit from visits to universities and prospective employers. Speakers from the local NHS Trust attend the health and social care courses at Newcastle College so that adult learners are aware of the different roles available within the trust and what they expect of its workforce. As a result, progression into higher education and employment is high.

Learners with high needs receive a very good quality of education, particularly at Newcastle College. Learners' transition into colleges is well planned so that they settle into college life quickly and understand what is expected of them. Staff work effectively with local authorities to ensure that education and health care plans enable learners to access an ambitious curriculum through which they can develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours to live an independent life or gain employment. Most learners with high needs progress onto full-time further education courses, with a small minority going into higher education or employment.

On too many apprenticeship programmes, particularly across the large construction programmes at Newcastle College, West Lancashire College and Carlisle College, skills trainers do not plan learning based on the starting points of apprentices. They do not take sufficient account of what apprentices can and cannot do before setting them tasks. As a result, too often, apprentices do not develop substantial new knowledge, skills and behaviours.

Skills trainers do not involve employers enough in the planning of activities on these apprenticeship programmes. Consequently, employers do not understand what tasks they should set apprentices at work to improve the development of apprentices' skills. Managers of some apprenticeship programmes, such as at Carlisle College, do not have sufficient oversight over the progress that apprentices make in the development of their knowledge, skills and behaviours. Not enough apprentices receive advice on the next steps they can take in their careers or further training.

Governors at all colleges in the group have extensive experience across the fields of education, industry and finance, which enables them to hold senior managers to account for their actions and to challenge them to improve the quality of education. For example, governors on the group's corporate board have continually challenged executive directors to improve the quality of data for apprenticeship programmes so they can get a more accurate picture on the progress that apprentices are making.

Governors at all colleges have a close understanding of the strengths of the provision at their college and what needs to improve. They provide active oversight of progress against areas of improvement identified through the colleges' self-assessment processes.

Governors on the corporate board of the group and those on local college boards have

worked effectively together to build trust between each other since the previous inspection. As a result, actions to improve the quality of education have been implemented more quickly to the benefit of learners.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders and managers have developed a rigorous set of safeguarding policies and procedures that are implemented effectively across all colleges in the group. They ensure that these policies and procedures are updated regularly to take account of new guidance on how to keep learners safe, such as that on sexual harassment and abuse, and that staff are briefed on these updates in a timely way.

Leaders and managers ensure that all staff, including those employed through agencies, are recruited safely. Leaders at the highest level of each college monitor the completion of employment checks and mandatory staff training.

Designated safeguarding leads have a very good understanding of when to refer students onto external agencies for help and protection. Safeguarding and pastoral staff work well with students who have been subject to referrals to keep them engaged in learning by close contact with parents and carers and providers of specialist help, such as counselling and personal mentors.

Designated safeguarding leads at different colleges in the group ensure that staff are trained to identify and protect learners who are at risk from threats specific to their own communities. For example, in the two London colleges, work with community safety officers and the police has resulted in various preventative actions to counter knife crime. In Newcastle, staff are alert to online right-wing extremists attempting to radicalise students.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Improve the quality of education for apprentices by:
 - identifying the starting points of apprentices more accurately, so that skills trainers can plan and teach programmes that enable apprentices to develop substantial new knowledge, skills and behaviours
 - developing more effective links with employers so that they are fully involved in the planning of on-the-job training
 - ensuring that managers provide more rigorous scrutiny of the progress that apprentices make in the development of their knowledge, skills and behaviours
 - providing all apprentices with the opportunity to receive careers advice.
- Ensure that all teachers and learning support assistants have secure knowledge in the subjects they teach and in which they provide support.
- Increase the attendance of learners at English and mathematics lessons.

Provider details

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Website	http://www.ncgrp.co.uk
Principal/CEO	Liz Bromley
Provider type	General further education college
Date of previous inspection	14–21 May 2018

Main subcontractors

Learning Curve Group
The Skills Network
West Midland Safari Park
Blackpool FC Community Trust
Blackburn Rovers Community Trust
Newcastle United Foundation
Ken Bate Associates
Discover Consultancy and Training
System People
PHX Training

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the executive director quality, 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.

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