

St Helens College

Inspection report

Unique reference number: 130488

Name of lead inspector: Sheila Willis HMI

Last day of inspection: 11 February 2011

Type of provider: General Further Education College

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Information about the provider

1. St Helens College is located in the borough of St Helens, Merseyside. The college has three campuses: one in the centre of St Helens, a technology centre two miles away and a centre in the town of Newton-le-Willows. It provides courses at several other centres throughout the borough. The first phase of the college redevelopment of its town centre campus was completed in August 2009. The second phase of the redevelopment is on schedule for completion this year and will provide new facilities for hairdressing and beauty therapy, sports studies, sixth-form provision, health and care, and professional studies.
2. The total number of enrolments in 2009/10 was 11,408, of which 24% were aged 16 to 18 years. Full-time learners account for 42% of enrolments. The number of learners following work-based programmes was 338 on apprenticeship programmes and 2,432 adults on Train to Gain programmes. The proportion of learners from minority ethnic groups is 4% compared with a local population of 1.2%. Forty-seven per cent of learners are male.
3. The college offers education and training in 14 subject areas but numbers are small in humanities. The largest curriculum areas, by enrolments and learner numbers, are in: health, public services and care; engineering; Skills for Life; and business, administration and law. The college is in Merseyside's Skills Funding Agency region and receives 83% of its income through government funded provision.
4. St Helens has a population of approximately 175,000. Although some areas of the borough are comparatively affluent, others have high levels of social and economic deprivation. The number of residents who are economically inactive is several percentage points higher than the national average. The proportion of adults without any formal qualifications is higher than the national average. At 48%, the proportion of school leavers in 2010 achieving five GCSEs A* to C grades, including English and mathematics, is three percentage points lower than the average for England.
5. The college provides training on behalf of the following providers:
 - C Skills
 - JTL
 - Mersey Maritime
 - North West Training Council
 - Prescott Oasis
 - Proco
 - Saints Rugby League Football Club
 - Skills Solutions
 - Total people
 - Waterside Training

6. The following organisation provides training on behalf of the college:

- Central Sports
- Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service
- Instant Training
- Merseyside Fire Service
- St Helens Chamber of Commerce
- St Helens Rugby League Football Club
- Tamcos
- Waterside Training

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2009/10
<p>Provision for young learners: 14 to 16</p> <p>Further education (16 to 18)</p> <p>Foundation learning, including</p> <p>Entry to Employment</p>	<p>506 part-time learners</p> <p>2,193 full-time learners 585 part-time learners</p> <p>607 full-time learners 531 part-time learners 460 learners</p>
<p>Provision for adult learners: Further education (19+)</p>	<p>541 full-time learners 3,215 part-time learners</p>
<p>Employer provision: Train to Gain Apprenticeships</p>	<p>2,432 learners 338 apprentices</p>

Summary report

Grades: 1 is outstanding; 2 is good; 3 is satisfactory; 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness of provision	Grade 3
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Capacity to improve	Grade 3
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Aspect	Grade
Outcomes for learners	3
Quality of provision	2
Leadership and management	3
Safeguarding	2
Equality and diversity	2

Subject Areas	
Health, public services and care	3
Engineering and manufacturing technologies	3
Construction, planning and the built environment	3
Information and communication technology	2
Service enterprises	2

Overall effectiveness

7. St Helens College is satisfactory with some good and outstanding aspects. Learners enjoy college and most make satisfactory or better progress in lessons. Most lessons are suitably paced and maintain learners' interest. However, teachers do not plan activities sufficiently well to ensure that the different ability levels of learners are met. The college has been successful in establishing a safe and respectful community. Learners feel safe and adopt safe working practices at college and in the workplace.
8. Senior managers and governors set a clear strategic vision for the college that focuses appropriately on opportunities for learners. The response to local, regional and national priorities is strong. The curriculum is thoughtfully designed to provide progression opportunities from foundation level to higher education to meet the needs of learners aged 14 and upwards. Partnership working is outstanding. The college has strong links with regional employer groups, key strategic partners and community organisations.

9. Outcomes for learners are satisfactory but the rate of improvement has been slow. Outcomes are in line with national averages for learners aged 16 to 18, but despite a modest improvement trend over three years, outcomes for adults remain below national averages. On apprenticeship programmes success rates have improved year-on-year but still remain below national averages. On Train to Gain programmes outcomes are good. Learners benefit from a wide range of good support. However, this has yet to bring about a significant improvement in learner outcomes.
10. The college demonstrates satisfactory capacity to improve. Quality improvement initiatives have recently been strengthened and now provide stringent course review arrangements to identify underperformance and effect improvements more rapidly. Data collection and use of data reports have improved. Improved arrangements are in place to monitor the quality of teaching and learning with a stronger focus on the quality of learning, the monitoring of outcomes from lesson observations and a more rigorous moderation process.

Main findings

- Outcomes for learners are satisfactory. Performance for 16 to 18-year-olds is satisfactory but for adults success rates are below national averages. Key skills success rates are low. Outcomes on apprenticeship programmes have improved over four years but remain below national averages. Outcomes on Train to Gain programmes and for learners aged 14 to 16 are good.
- Retention rates declined in 2009/10 to below national averages and are low. Attendance rates are broadly satisfactory overall but vary significantly in subject areas. In some subject areas, such as construction and engineering, learners' attendance is low with examples of poor punctuality.
- Learners enjoy college. Most make satisfactory or better progress in lessons. They develop good knowledge and skills that aid their employability options or progression opportunities to higher-level courses. Learners make a good contribution to the college and to the community through a range of voluntary activities.
- Teaching, learning and assessment are good. Teachers make very good use of their occupational skills and knowledge to make teaching relevant and interesting. Not all teachers plan a range of different activities to ensure that all learners are challenged to achieve highly. Information and learning technology (ILT) is used well in some lessons but this is not consistent across the college.
- The college successfully meets the needs of learners and other users. It provides a broad curriculum ranging from foundation to degree level. It works very effectively with local schools and higher education institutions to provide good career pathways. The college consults closely with employers to ensure that programmes meet their needs. The availability of work experience is inconsistent across subject areas.
- Partnership working is outstanding. The college has developed strong links with regional employer groups, key strategic partners and community organisations that benefit learners. The college has a well-earned reputation for flexibility and a highly developed sense of social responsibility. It makes a significant contribution to both the social well-being and the economic regeneration of the area.
- The care, guidance and support learners receive are good. They benefit from a wide range of support services, including counselling, guidance, and pastoral, academic and specialist support. Learners receive excellent advice and career guidance about the next steps in education, training or employment. Learners with additional learning support needs receive timely and effective help.
- The Principal, senior managers and governors set a clear strategic vision for the college that focuses on providing opportunities for learners and responds effectively to local, regional and national priorities. The accountability of curriculum managers is clearly defined but their evaluation of progress is underdeveloped and improvement has been too slow.
- Arrangements for safeguarding young people and adults are good. Learners feel safe and adopt safe working practices. Learners say they feel safe and are free from bullying. The college provides a safe and respectful community. Safe

working practices are successfully promoted in lessons and in the workplace. The college encourages staff and learners to be safety aware.

- A number of effective equality and diversity promotional events occur annually and are fully supported by the college's multi-faith chaplaincy. Learners' outcomes and complaints are analysed thoroughly to identify and address any variations in the outcomes of different groups. Learners from minority ethnic groups perform at least as well as their peers.
- The college's self-assessment and quality assurance processes are satisfactory. The monitoring of courses has improved since September 2010 and provides information to enable the college to support underperforming areas. The college has identified clear priorities and processes to improve further the quality of teaching and learning.
- The college uses its resources appropriately to secure good value for money. Staff are well qualified and receive good training. Financial management is very good. A major capital building project is on time and on budget. The campus buildings include many sustainable features, such as improved energy efficiency, and the resources available for learners will improve significantly.

What does St Helens College need to do to improve further?

- Improve retention and success rates on all programmes by evaluating and refining current improvement processes that are starting to impact positively on learners' performance.
- Monitor attendance better and take decisive action to bring about improvement in some subject areas.
- Support teachers to improve teaching and learning to ensure all learners achieve their full potential.
- Support teachers to develop effective and interactive learning resources that utilise the good ILT available in classrooms.
- Better evaluate support initiatives to ensure they are targeted appropriately and are effective in improving learners' attendance and outcomes.
- Improve implementation planning and evaluation processes to secure continuous improvement.
- Strengthen quality improvement processes and rigorously monitor their impact on learner outcomes.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- the good resources and facilities that help learning
- the experienced, knowledgeable, friendly, approachable and genuinely interested tutors
- interesting lectures and classes
- tutorial support to help meet assignment deadlines
- the good personal support that helps learners stay on programme

- the safe college environment
- free car parking in the evening
- the wide choice of snacks and meals in the food court.

What learners would like to see improved:

- number of car parking spaces
- the number of trips and other activities to enhance programmes
- links with industry to help gain employment at the end of the course
- availability of seating and space to be able to sit and eat at break times.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors**What employers like:**

- the flexibility of the assessment process that fits around employer schedules
- the frequent and responsive communication by the college
- the use of questionnaires to allow employers to give feedback
- the employer forum that helps to develop links with other companies
- learners' successful outcomes that have encouraged other employees to undertake training
- good links between the training provided by schools and that carried out by the college.

What employers would like to see improved:

- no improvements were identified.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 3

11. The college's capacity to improve is satisfactory. Its previous inspection judged overall effectiveness to be good but this level of performance has not been maintained. Outcomes for learners are satisfactory overall but vary across age groups and levels of programmes. The rate of improvement has been too slow, although more challenging targets for learners' outcomes have been set for the current year. Key strengths in strategic leadership, partnerships and responsiveness of provision have been consolidated since the last inspection while others have not been maintained at the same high level. The quality of teaching and learning has improved while progress to address areas for improvement show moderate improvement.
12. The self-assessment report is over-generous in its judgements of some aspects and curriculum grades. Inspectors identified areas for improvement that are not included and they judged some strengths to be overstated. Quality assurance arrangements are satisfactory. A very recent improvement is the introduction of more frequent and stringent course review arrangements. Too few developments and initiatives are formally evaluated for impact. Governors appraise the college's performance appropriately. However, areas of underperformance are not identified soon enough, delaying timely corrective action. The collection and use of data have improved. The stronger focus on different learner groups and the sharing of good practice within the new structure, the availability of new campus buildings and the college's inclusive learner-centred culture are strong assets for staff in their commitment to improve.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 3

13. Outcomes for learners are satisfactory. The college's overall performance was static over two years. While success rates improved in 2009/10, they remain below sector averages. On long programmes, success rates show a three-year improvement trend that reflects the performance and pace of improvement in line with national averages. Success rates on short courses have declined over three years and are significantly below sector averages. Outcomes for learners aged 14 to 16 are good. Improvement trends and success rates vary significantly between subject areas. Pass rates are high; when learners are retained they mostly achieve.
14. Key skills success rates have declined and are poor at foundation and intermediate levels. In contrast, key skills success rates are very high across most engineering courses.
15. Retention rates declined in 2009/10 to below the national averages and are low. For 16 to 18-year-olds, retention rates have remained static over two years. They are below national rates and are low. For adult learners, retention rates declined in 2009/10 and are also below national rates. Attendance rates are broadly satisfactory. However, in some subject areas, such as construction and

- engineering, learners' attendance is low. The college has taken decisive action through a range of strategies to improve both attendance and retention rates. Early indications show a good in-year improvement in retention rates. However, it is too soon to judge how effective these initiatives will be in the long term.
16. Value-added rates are low. The college has recently introduced a new system to measure learners' progress based on their attainment at entry and to manage their performance as they progress through their programme.
 17. On employer responsive provision, apprenticeship programmes show a four-year improvement trend. However, overall success rates remain below national rates. Outcomes on Train to Gain programmes are good overall.
 18. Different groups of learners perform at similar levels. Outcomes by gender are broadly similar. Those learners with an identified learning difficulty and/or disability are performing at least as well as their peers.
 19. Learners enjoy college. Most make satisfactory or better progress in lessons. They develop good knowledge and skills that aid their employability options or progression opportunities to higher-level courses.
 20. Good emphasis is placed on learner safety. Learners say they feel safe and are free from bullying. The college has been successful in establishing a safe and respectful community. Safe working practices are effectively promoted and the college is successfully establishing a culture where staff and learners are safety aware. This is particularly evident in the college's work with the most vulnerable learners.
 21. Good attention is paid to ensure learners can make informed choices about their health and well-being. Opportunities for learners to participate in sporting and other health-related activities are good and action to promote healthy lifestyles is effective. The college offers healthy food options that are sold at a discounted rate in the food court. The college nursery has won an award for its healthy menu. Good links with external agencies support and promote health issues for learners. Learners and staff have good access through the college's virtual learning environment (VLE), to health improvement information and resources, although the VLE is not used consistently throughout the curriculum for obtaining information on health and well-being.
 22. Learners make a good contribution to the college and to the wider communities it serves. They are involved in a wide range of voluntary, community and charitable activities both within and outside the college. For example, horticulture learners maintain all the college's outside areas. Participation in community activities is not routine across all curriculum areas. Learners contribute well to college decision-making through their representation on college committees and learner-feedback forums. However, not all learners are clear about the role or purpose of their student representative.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

23. The quality of provision is good. Teaching, learning and assessment are good overall. Most lessons are well-paced, challenging and have a good range of activities that engage and motivate learners. Learners value their highly supportive teachers. Teachers make very good use of their vocational and occupational skills and knowledge to make teaching relevant and interesting. In the best lessons, peer review is used very effectively to develop the communication skills of learners and to help them gain confidence in giving and receiving feedback. However, the quality of teaching and learning varies across curriculum areas. There are good examples of the innovative use of ILT in the classroom but this is not applied consistently across the college.
24. In the less effective lessons, planning does not always ensure that the learning needs of all learners are sufficiently met. In particular, the range of different activities to ensure that all learners are challenged to achieve highly is insufficient. In a minority of lessons the pace of learning is slow and some learners lose interest and occasionally become disruptive. In others, teachers' questioning techniques provide insufficient challenge to learners. Many teachers promote equality and diversity successfully but this is not consistent across the curriculum.
25. Teachers and assessors organise and manage assessment particularly effectively. Learners' work is carefully marked and returned promptly. Learners benefit greatly from detailed and useful written feedback from teachers, with careful attention paid to improving their spelling and punctuation. Assessment is thoroughly planned and practices meet awarding body standards. Workplace assessments are thoughtfully planned, flexible and frequent to meet employers' and learners' needs. Internal verification is thorough and maintains standards commendably.
26. Initial assessment processes are very effective in identifying and meeting learners' additional support needs. Learning support workers strongly encourage learners' progress and development. During individual tutorials, personal tutors use information from learners' initial assessments to plan learning effectively and to monitor performance. However, for many learners target-setting and the monitoring of progress in individual learning plans lacks sufficient detail to ensure they know the extent to which they have developed their skills.
27. The college meets the needs of learners and other users very successfully. It has developed a coherent and broad curriculum ranging from foundation to degree level that meets local, regional and national priorities. It works creatively with local schools and higher education institutions to provide access and career pathways. Young people aged 14 to 16 from local schools enjoy a wide variety of vocational options at the college. Good and long-established relationships exist with employers. The college consults closely with employers to ensure that programmes meet their needs. Feedback through employer and student surveys identifies the college as a responsive and flexible organisation. The provision for work experience and work-preparedness training is inconsistent across subject areas.

28. The college provides good and well-established enrichment provision through whole college and subject-area initiatives. These initiatives support learners' personal development and enhance their studies in addition to encouraging them to explore new progression options.
29. Partnership working is outstanding. The college has forged strong and mutually beneficial links with regional employer groups, key strategic partners and community organisations. It has also been successful in working with some of the most disadvantaged and demanding client groups in the area. The college's partnership with the local authority has contributed to a significant reduction in the number of Year 11 school pupils who drop out of education in the area. The college has a well-earned reputation for flexibility and a highly developed sense of social responsibility. It makes a significant contribution to both the social well-being and the economic regeneration of the area.
30. Learners receive good care, guidance and support. They benefit from a wide range of support services, including counselling, guidance, and pastoral, academic and specialist support. Learners with highly specialised support needs are particularly well supported. A variety of approaches ensure learners receive excellent advice and careers guidance about the next steps in education, training or employment. The college offers a personalised service to learners and schools, coordinating events and activities for learners at all stages and levels of their decision making.
31. Learners with additional literacy and numeracy learning needs receive timely and effective support from specialist support workers and teachers. Support staff in the job role of learning-progress coaches are increasingly effective at working with learners and tutors to identify and support underperformance. However, despite good support mechanisms, the college is not sufficiently effective in resolving issues of poor attendance and retention on all programmes.

Leadership and management

Grade 3

32. Leadership and management are satisfactory. The Principal, senior leadership team and governors set a clear strategic vision for the college that focuses appropriately on providing opportunities for learners. The response to local, regional and national priorities is strong. The Principal and senior leadership team engage effectively with strategic partners. A recent, complex college restructure provides a clear focus on the needs of different groups of learners. The accountability and authority of curriculum managers is now clearly defined. Managers and staff value the increased opportunities to share good practice and developments across curriculum areas. However, the college has not yet developed implementation plans with specific milestones for all aspects of the new structure or for the longer-term development plan of the college to measure impact. Managers' evaluation of progress is underdeveloped and improvement has been too slow. More challenging course success rate targets have been set for 2010/11. However, targets set for learners' retention or for their progress in relation to their prior attainment are insufficient.

33. Governance is good. Governors have a broad range of skills and experience and they are highly committed to the development and improvement of the college. Although governors provide a high degree of challenge to managers they have not had sufficient timely information to drive up standards consistently. Governors receive good training and briefings for their role. They receive good support through very effective clerking.
34. Arrangements for safeguarding young people and adults are good. Staff and learners are well informed about safeguarding matters and procedures. The college has clear policies and procedures relating to Criminal Records Bureau checks for staff, volunteers, governors and subcontractors. Regular risk assessments carefully review all aspects of the college's work. Governors rigorously scrutinise the college's safeguarding processes and procedures. An appropriate staff development strategy includes regular in-house training for all staff. Tutorials and inductions are effectively used to raise learners' awareness and understanding of safeguarding. Learners clearly understand who to approach if they need to discuss safeguarding concerns and they are confident that the college listens and responds to any concerns they raise. Staff respond quickly to concerns raised and are clear about disclosure arrangements. Links with the local Safeguarding Children Board and other agencies are strong and used appropriately to seek guidance and support.
35. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The equality and diversity committee is chaired by the Principal, supported by a member of the governing body. Reporting mechanisms to the governing body are strong. Managers and governors analyse learners' outcomes and complaints thoroughly to identify and address any discrepancies in terms of ethnicity, gender and disability. Thematic groups lead four remits of race and culture, gender and sexuality, disability, and faith and religion. A number of related, innovative, large-scale events take place during the year, supported by the college's multi-faith chaplaincy. The promotion and understanding of equality and diversity in group tutorial sessions are good and learners are clear about what constitutes discrimination and its effects. The college has identified inconsistency in the promotion of equality and diversity through the curriculum and is monitoring this effectively and planning for improvement. Support for learners is good. Accessibility for learners with restricted mobility is also good.
36. Engagement with users to support and promote improvement is good overall. The college is responsive to the views of learners, parents and employers. It works closely with external partners to develop new initiatives which benefit learners, employers and the local community. The views of learners are collected through regular surveys and their level of satisfaction is high. Learner representatives are elected for all courses and in some, but not all, areas they attend meetings to discuss quality issues. The student forum meets regularly. Staff are responsive to issues raised by learners on their courses. Learners are not always aware of the outcomes of questionnaires or the suggestions they have made for improvement.

37. The college's self-assessment and quality assurance arrangements are satisfactory. Following the college restructure, the performance of individual courses is being monitored more rigorously by a peer-review team. The review has identified a number of compliance issues and the scrutiny of learners' attendance, retention and achievement rates has highlighted poor performance. Corrective action is being implemented although it is too early to judge the impact on learners' outcomes or the quality of provision. Managers' access to performance data has improved since the restructure. The college's lesson observation process appropriately identifies the key strengths and areas for improvement in teaching and learning. However, inspectors found that in 2009/10 a few lessons were over-graded. The college has recently improved arrangements for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning, with a clearer focus on the quality of learning, the monitoring of outcomes from lesson observations and a more rigorous moderation process. The college has identified clear priorities and processes to improve further the quality of teaching and learning. The new professional observation process team is providing good support for staff needing to improve their teaching skills. The college is increasingly making good use of peer observers from partner colleges to ensure the consistency, rigour and challenge of the observation process. Staff are fully involved in the self-assessment process. The college's self-assessment report is accurate and self-critical for some curriculum areas but inspectors identified a number of areas for improvement that were not identified by the college. The grades for some aspects and curriculum areas were overstated.
38. The college uses its resources well to secure good value for money. Staff are well qualified and benefit from specifically targeted training. Financial controls and budgeting processes are very good. A complex major capital building project, which is due to finish this year, is on time and on budget. This new building has many sustainable features, including much improved energy rating to provide better value for money. Specialist equipment and resources are satisfactory overall but the new campus will significantly improve the resources available for learners.

Subject areas

Health, public services and care

Grade 3

Context

39. The subject area offers courses from foundation to degree level in early years and uniformed services. In health and social care, courses are offered from foundation to advanced level. In youth services, courses are offered from intermediate to degree level. Of the 508 learners, 396 learners are aged 16 to 18 and 112 are adults. Approximately 162 learners are on full-time courses and 346 learners are on part-time courses. The college offers employer responsive provision through Train to Gain and apprenticeship programmes. Currently, 182 learners are enrolled on Train to Gain programmes and 45 on apprenticeship programmes.

Key findings

- Overall success rates on college based long programmes are broadly in line with the national averages and are satisfactory. However, retention and success rates on short courses, the level 3 certificate in childcare and education and the national award in health and social care fall significantly below the national average. Success rates on Train to Gain and apprenticeship programmes are high.
- Learners make good progress at college. They are able to apply confidently their learning to the workplace, increasing their opportunities for employability. Those on Train to Gain and apprenticeship programmes are highly motivated. Learners' improved confidence and skill levels have resulted in increased levels of responsibility and, for some, promotion at work.
- Learners adopt safe working practices and feel safe at college. The college places a high priority on ensuring that learners are safe in work placements and in the workplace. Risk assessments for the workplace are rigorously applied and regularly reviewed.
- Teaching and learning are satisfactory. In the better lessons, teachers effectively plan a range of activities that integrate units of the qualification. This consolidates and extends learning, helping learners to develop skills, knowledge and understanding of complex topics. Good links between college work and work placements support learners to develop good professional skills.
- In less successful lessons, teachers do not plan sufficiently differentiated activities to engage, challenge and support all learners in the group. Functional skills lessons are not always well planned. Although access to ILT resources is good, teachers do not use the available technology sufficiently to enhance learning.
- Teachers' assessment of learners' work is good. They plan assignments and assessment tasks carefully to assess learning fully across all units of study.

Teachers' feedback ensures that learners clearly understand how to improve their work, which helps most to produce good standards of work. Internal verification processes are rigorous.

- Partnerships are used particularly well to extend and improve opportunities for learners. For example, close working with the North West Skills Academy for Health has been effective in developing cadetships in health-related programmes at intermediate and advanced levels. Work placements in National Health Service clinical practice settings successfully prepare learners for health-related careers.
- Support for learners is effective. Learning-progress coaches provide learners with good support. They monitor their attendance, identify barriers that prevent them from attending college and work with college staff and external agencies to provide support. Learners value the high levels of support that are available and carefully coordinated by college staff.
- Leadership and management are satisfactory. Following amalgamation with another department, improvement actions are beginning to have a positive impact. The newly-implemented management structure is effective in identifying and sharing good practice. Staff receive good support from managers and feel they now have shared responsibility and accountability for improving the quality of learners' experiences.
- All staff are involved in self-assessing the quality of the provision. However, many judgements in the self-assessment report identified as strengths are normal practice, and grades for some aspects of the provision are overstated. The area's quality improvement plan accurately identifies the improvements and actions needed to raise standards.

What does St Helens College need to do to improve further?

- Improve success rates on underperforming courses through the setting, and more rigorous monitoring of, ambitious improvement targets.
- Improve teaching and learning by supporting staff to use a wider range of teaching and learning activities that interest and motivate learners of all abilities.
- Develop teachers' skills and confidence in using ILT to enhance teaching and learning.
- Improve the rigour and accuracy of the self-assessment process to ensure that grading and judgements accurately reflect the quality of the provision.

Engineering and manufacturing technologies

Grade 3

Context

40. The college offers vocational courses from foundation to advanced level in motor vehicle, mechanical, electrical and electronic engineering, and fabrication and welding. Forty-four full-time and 63 part-time learners aged 16 to 18 and 11 full-time and 27 part-time adult learners are studying on engineering courses. On motor vehicle courses, 65 full-time and 71 part-time learners are aged 16 to 18 and nine are adults. A collaborative schools' programme has 25 engineering and 70 motor vehicle learners aged 14 to 16. Employer responsive provision has 168 apprentices and 46 Train to Gain learners.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are satisfactory overall. Success rates on college-based long programmes are broadly in line with national averages. Success rates on short courses have improved significantly over the last three years. They are now above the national average and are good. Key skills success rates are very high across most engineering courses. Learners aged 16 to 18 perform better than adults.
- Outcomes on work-based learning programmes are unsatisfactory. Although success rates on apprenticeships have improved over the three-year period to 2009, they declined significantly in 2010 to below national averages. On Train to Gain programmes, overall success rates have declined and are now significantly below the national average. Timely success rates have improved consistently but remain below the national average.
- Learners enjoy their courses and their knowledge and skills improve significantly. They are more confident in their ability to handle tools, read drawings and interpret information. Their increased confidence improves their communication skills. The training and qualifications they gain enhance their employability. Learners' written work and the standard of their portfolios meet awarding body requirements.
- Learners generally make good progress towards their learning goals and show good levels of attainment. Learners' practical work on engineering programmes is good. Completed test pieces demonstrate the wide range of practical skills learners have developed.
- Learners demonstrate good compliance with health and safety procedures in college and in the workplace. In practical sessions learners work safely. Teachers reinforce health and safety throughout learners' programmes. Learners state they feel safe both in college and in the workplace. Learners' behaviour is good.
- Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Staff have a good rapport with learners. However, some lessons lack pace as teachers do not plan activities that provide

learners with sufficient challenge to develop their skills fully. Teachers insufficiently exploit the good classroom ILT resources to enhance learning. Learners' attendance in some lessons is poor.

- Assessment is good. Assessors use a good range of evidence to satisfy awarding body requirements and use question and answer techniques skilfully during assessments to ensure learners understand the topic. Discussion prior to and following assessment is clear and helps learners understand what they need to do to progress.
- The range of provision is extensive. Learners aged 14 to 16 benefit from a range of foundation- and intermediate-level programmes. The enrichment programme is varied and adds value to college courses. Opportunities to progress further into higher education are good.
- The college engineering department has developed productive partnerships. A specialist diploma, collaboratively taught with local schools, has good links with local employers. Staff work effectively with a young offenders' institution and have developed a project for ex-offenders. Employers are positive about the quality of service the college provides.
- Support for learners is satisfactory overall. Learners benefit from effective pastoral support that identifies and supports those with additional social needs such as homelessness and pregnancy. Staff work collaboratively to modify the curriculum to meet the individual needs of vulnerable learners, supporting them to stay at college. Tutors monitor learners' additional support activities thoroughly.
- Curriculum management of college provision is satisfactory. However, the management of work-based learning is inadequate. Systems to manage and monitor learners' performance on these programmes are poor. The college has recently restructured the management of work-based learning and there are early signs that this is having a positive impact on the progress learners are making.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Staff training is good and tutors use their improved knowledge to inform their teaching. Marketing materials promote courses to women and under-represented groups. The multi-faith chaplaincy team at the college does much to promote different cultures and reduce discrimination. The VLE successfully promotes cultural activities to learners.
- The self-assessment report is broadly accurate but it does not adequately identify the areas for improvement in work-based learning. The resulting quality improvement plan is not wholly effective in identifying the actions needed to raise standards.

What does St Helens College need to do to improve further?

- Carry out a thorough analysis of the underlying causes of the low success rates in work-based learning, and develop appropriate actions and monitor their impact to ensure that success rates improve.
- Improve the management and monitoring of apprentices and Train to Gain learners to ensure that their timely achievement of qualifications increases.
- Improve arrangements for self-assessment and improvement planning to include work-based learning provision.
- Support teachers' lesson planning to improve the pace of learning and increase the range of teaching methods used so that all learners are more actively engaged in lessons.

Construction, planning and the built environment

Grade 3

Context

41. The college offers construction craft courses in bricklaying, carpentry and joinery, painting and decorating, plumbing, and electrical installation. It also offers specialist occupational courses in wall and floor tiling, floor covering, and plastering. The technician-extended diploma in construction is also offered. Of the 520 learners, 209 are full time, 126 are adults and 117 are aged 14 to 16. A further 58 learners are apprentices and 93 are advanced apprentices. The number of learners on Train to Gain programmes is 128.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are broadly satisfactory. Success rates on long courses for learners aged 16 to 18 are in line with the national average and are satisfactory. For adult learners, success rates are low. They have declined steadily over the last three years to below the national average.
- Overall and timely success rates for apprentices have improved over the last three years and are now high. Success rates on advanced apprenticeships have declined and are below the national average. Although timely success rates on Train to Gain programmes improved in 2010, they remain below national averages and are low.
- Learners' attendance at lessons is low and their punctuality is often poor. During the inspection, learners' attendance in observed lessons was very poor and in several lessons some learners arrived very late.
- Learners produce good standards of work. They develop good vocational skills and make good progress in lessons. Their practical work undertaken in the college mirrors industry standards. For example, learners in painting and decorating produce high-quality specialist decorative effects. In the workplace, learners develop a good range of skills.
- Teachers place good emphasis on health and safety in the college and in the workplace. As a result learners use safe working practices and feel safe in the college and at work. They adhere to health and safety regulations and carry out risk assessments prior to undertaking practical tasks. Learner safeguarding and protection by the college are good.
- Learners' involvement in community-based projects is good. For example, painting and decorating learners refurbished the reception area at a local community centre. Carpentry and joinery learners constructed a timber-frame chicken coop to house rescued battery hens. Learners on bricklaying courses constructed a memorial brick wall for a local school using reclaimed bricks.
- Teaching and learning are good overall. In the best lessons, teachers use a range of challenging activities, with good linking of theory and practice to

sustain learners' interest. However, too many teachers do not plan sufficiently differentiated tasks to challenge the more able learners and to support those experiencing difficulty. Learning is insufficiently enriched through effective use of the VLE and interactive technology.

- Assessment of learners' work and internal verification are good. Assessment is consistent, accurate and supported by teachers' constructive feedback, helping learners to improve the quality of their work. Internal verification is timely and it results in improvements to assignments and teachers' feedback to learners. Assessments of learners' work are appropriately robust. However, reviews lack specific targets to monitor learners' progress effectively.
- Partnerships with schools and employers are productive. Staff have developed collaborative links with local schools to develop a good range of programmes for learners aged 14 to 16. Learners benefit from well developed links with employers. For example, employers have donated up-to-date equipment and organise industrial visits for learners to observe manufacturing processes.
- Leadership and management are satisfactory. The management of the construction department has recently been restructured. New managers are committed to improving the quality of the provision but currently there are no realistic strategies or targets for improving underperforming programmes.
- Strategies to address the declining success rates on some programmes, which are outlined in the curriculum self-assessment report, are not specific enough to bring about the intended improvements. The report does not recognise a number of areas for improvement that inspectors identified.
- The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. However, there are few examples of active promotion of equality and diversity in lessons.

What does St Helens College need to do to improve further?

- Plan clear improvement strategies for courses and programmes that are underperforming, including the advanced certificate in electro-technical technology, the extended national diploma in construction, advanced apprenticeships and Train to Gain provision.
- Establish reasons for learners' poor attendance and punctuality. Develop an action plan to monitor rigorously and improve attendance, punctuality and learners' attitudes.
- Support teachers to develop the skills to use the available interactive whiteboards and the VLE effectively to enrich learners' experiences.
- Ensure that teachers incorporate in their lesson plans clear strategies for extending the knowledge of the more-able learners and for supporting those experiencing difficulty so that all learners achieve as highly as possible.
- Ensure that managers and teachers rigorously scrutinise the evidence put forward to support judgements in the self-assessment report. Make sure that evaluations are based on sound evidence and that all areas for improvement are identified.

Information and communication technology

Grade 2

Context

42. Approximately 499 learners are enrolled on information and communication technology (ICT) programmes. Of these, over two thirds are aged 16 to 18. The college offers full-time and part-time ICT courses from foundation to advanced level. Full-time courses include the first diploma, advanced national award, certificate and diploma, and User of IT (ITQ) courses at foundation and advanced level. Qualifications for part-time learners include ITQ at foundation and advanced level.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are good. Overall success rates for learners aged 16 to 18 and adults are high and above national averages. On ITQ at foundation and advanced level and national diploma courses success rates are very high. On the first diploma success rates have declined for three years and are only satisfactory.
- Learners successfully develop their ICT skills and most make good progress. They are able to apply previously gained skills, knowledge and understanding effectively. For example, learners produced video footage as part of an assignment that provides evidence of their attainment. Learners are enthusiastic and confident when applying their ICT skills.
- Learners feel safe at college and demonstrate good safety awareness when using ICT equipment. They are able to raise any concerns confidently with staff, who are friendly and readily available. Staff address any inappropriate comments and behaviour from learners in a firm but non-confrontational manner. Learners treat each other and staff respectfully.
- Learners use electronic portfolios effectively. Their course materials and assessed work are available through the college's VLE. This minimises the use of paper, contributes to sustainable development and allows learners to submit work when away from the college.
- Teaching and learning are good overall. The challenging pace in most lessons maintains learners' focus and interest. Most lessons are thoroughly planned and structured, but some lack sufficiently differentiated learning activities to ensure all learners are fully challenged to achieve highly.
- Staff share current news of software and technological advances with learners. Their expertise and enthusiasm for their subject generates and maintains learners' interest, helping them to make good progress.
- The availability and reliability of ICT resources are good. The number of interactive whiteboards at the new town centre campus has increased significantly. However, teachers do not utilise them fully to enhance teaching and learning.

- A wide range of enrichment activities contributes to developing learners' personal and social awareness. These include trips abroad, visiting speakers, an e-magazine project and local field trips, in addition to pastoral topics such as alcohol awareness. However, learners do not participate in any work experience as part of their course.
- Learners receive good support. Tutors are responsive to the needs of learners that encounter personal difficulties and arrange a flexible pattern of attendance to minimise disruption to their learning. The learning-progress coach provides good support for learners who are underperforming. Links with external agencies are effectively used to refer learners who need specialist support.
- Departmental management is good. Staff are suitably qualified and knowledgeable. The clear rationale for the range of provision has resulted in a flexible and broad curriculum.
- The self-assessment report is mostly accurate. Staff at all levels within the department contribute to the development of the report. Data are used effectively to highlight underperforming courses, with corrective action identified in the quality improvement plan.

What does St Helens College need to do to improve further?

- Identify the reasons for the decline in the success rates on the first diploma, then plan, implement and evaluate actions for improvement.
- Ensure that lessons are planned to accommodate learners' different abilities so that all are challenged to develop to their full potential.
- Ensure that interactive whiteboards are fully utilised to enhance learning in all lessons.
- Increase employer liaison and ensure that full-time learners have work experience on employers' premises to improve their chances of gaining employment when they complete their courses.

Hairdressing and beauty therapy

Grade 2

Context

43. The college offers hairdressing and beauty therapy courses from foundation to advanced level. The area also offers a foundation degree in complementary therapies. Currently there are 225 full- and part-time learners of which 128 are aged 16 to 18 and 97 are adults. A further 96 learners aged 14 to 16 attend school links courses; 19 of these learners are enrolled on the young apprenticeship programme.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are satisfactory overall. Success rates are very high on foundation-level courses. On intermediate courses, success rates have improved steadily over three years and are satisfactory in hairdressing; however, in beauty therapy they are low. On advanced-level hairdressing and beauty therapy courses, success rates have improved over three years and are high.
- Retention rates are high on most short courses at foundation and advanced level. On intermediate level hairdressing, retention is satisfactory. On beauty therapy at intermediate level, retention rates have declined to below the national average and are low. During inspection, learners' attendance was also low.
- Learners make good progress and demonstrate good practical skills. Health and safety procedures are observed consistently and risk assessments are robust. Learners display good levels of professionalism in practical classes. They develop good industrial skills which successfully prepares them for employment. Learners develop good skills in client care which they use effectively in practical sessions.
- Teaching and learning are good overall. Teachers employ a variety of strategies to encourage learners to develop their skills and knowledge in carefully structured, progressive steps. Learners enjoy their lessons and have high regard for each other and for their teachers. In most lessons, learners participate fully. However, in a minority of lessons the lack of differentiated learning activities and the slow pace of learning inhibit some learners' progress.
- Good use of learning resources supports learning. In some lessons good use of ILT reinforces learners' knowledge and understanding. The department is about to move into newly-built premises which will provide outstanding facilities and an excellent learning environment.
- A good range of provision gives learners the opportunity to progress from foundation to advanced level and to foundation degree studies. Flexible timetabling provides learners with the opportunity to increase the pace of their own learning by attending additional sessions that are offered on a drop-in

basis. Staff have developed good links with local schools to provide an extensive programme for learners aged 14 to 16.

- Learners participate fully in a broad range of enrichment activities that enhance the curriculum and raise their aspirations. These include opportunities to take part in internal and external competitions, attend short courses and visit reputable hair and beauty industry organisations.
- Teachers closely monitor learners' progress using a very effective, recently implemented system. The monitoring system is easily accessible to learners and staff on the college's VLE. Learners are clear about what they have to do to achieve and the timescales for doing so.
- Support for learners is good. Pastoral and learning support are effective in helping learners achieve. In-class support for learners with specific learning needs is also good. A learning-progress coach follows up learners who are absent and develops an action plan that keeps them on track. Learners can also request additional help and support. Staff respond swiftly to accommodate their requests.
- Leadership and management are good. Managers implement effective improvement measures. To improve retention rates, the curriculum offer has been reviewed and modified. Weekly staff meetings identify learners who are at risk of underperformance and staff take immediate action to support learners to achieve.
- Staff are appropriately skilled and participate in a wide range of professional development activities to update their skills. Effective systems are in place to raise standards in teaching and learning that are starting to impact positively. Safeguarding, and equality and diversity are actively promoted.

What does St Helens College need to do to improve further?

- Continue to implement existing strategies to improve retention and success rates particularly on intermediate-level programmes.
- Closely monitor learners' attendance and the effect the modified curriculum is having on improving attendance, retention and the progress of individual learners to ensure highly successful outcomes.
- Support teachers to develop and use a wider range of learning activities to ensure that session planning meets the needs of learners with differing levels of ability.

Information about the inspection

44. Four of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and eight additional inspectors, assisted by the provider's assistant principal for excellence in learner engagement, as nominee, carried out the inspection. Inspectors took account of the college's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, comments from the funding bodies, the previous inspection report, reports from the inspectorate's quality monitoring inspection, and data on learners and their achievement over the period since the previous inspection.
45. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and emails to gain the views of learners and employers. They also looked at questionnaires learners and employers had recently completed for the provider. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. Inspectors collected evidence from programmes in each of the subject areas the college offers.

Record of Main Findings (RMF)

St Helens College

Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; **16-18 Leamer responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses, Foundation learning tier, including Entry to Employment; **19+ responsive:** FE full- and part-time courses; **Employer responsive:** Train to Gain, apprenticeships

Grades using the 4 point scale 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate	Overall	14-16	16-18 Learner responsive	19+ Learner responsive	Employer responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners					
Full-time learners	3,142	397	2,297	448	0
Part-time learners	3,752	0	329	1,834	1,589
Overall effectiveness	3	2	3	3	3
Capacity to improve	3				
Outcomes for learners	3	2	3	3	3
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	3				
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	3				
How well do learners progress?	3				
How well do learners improve their economic and social well-being through learning and development?	2				
How safe do learners feel?	2				
<i>Are learners able to make informed choices about their own health and well being?*</i>	2				
<i>How well do learners make a positive contribution to the community?*</i>	2				
Quality of provision	2	2	2	2	2
How effectively do teaching, training and assessment support learning and development?	2				
How effectively does the provision meet the needs and interests of users?	2				
How well partnerships with schools, employers, community groups and others lead to benefits for learners?	1				
How effective are the care, guidance and support learners receive in helping them to achieve?	2				
Leadership and management	3				
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	3				
<i>How effectively do governors and supervisory bodies provide leadership, direction and challenge?*</i>	2				
How effectively does the provider promote the safeguarding of learners?	2				
How effectively does the provider actively promote equality and diversity, tackle discrimination and narrow the achievement gap?	2				
How effectively does the provider engage with users to support and promote improvement?	2				
How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?	3				
How efficiently and effectively does the provider use its available resources to secure value for money?	2				

*where applicable to the type of provision

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