

South Cheshire College

Inspection report

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Type of provider: General further education college

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Information about the provider

1. South Cheshire College is a general further education (GFE) college located in a modern campus development in Crewe. Funded by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), the college offers academic and vocational programmes from foundation to advanced level in all subject areas, apart from the landbased sector. It has developed apprenticeships and other provision designed to meet the needs of employers over the last two years. The college also offers foundation degrees, adult and community learning, and courses for students aged 14 to 18 from local schools.
2. The college attracts students from throughout south and east Cheshire, notably Crewe, Nantwich, Alsager, Middlewich, Sandbach, and Congleton, and also from North Shropshire and North Staffordshire. Around one third of students are aged 16 to 18 and enrolled on AS- and A-level courses. In 2010/11, the college enrolled 2,662 students aged 16 to 18, and 3,722 adults. Just over half of all students are female. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups reflects that in the local community.
3. The proportion of pupils in Crewe schools achieving at least five GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, is below the national average. The prior attainment of students aged 16 to 18 enrolling at the college is above the average for GFE colleges. Although the college recruits most of its students from areas that are not disadvantaged, Crewe and Nantwich have five wards in the highest quartile of deprived wards nationally.
4. The inspection took account of all of the provision offered by the college that is funded by the SFA. Provision in health and social care and childcare, leisure, travel and tourism, visual and performing arts, and social sciences and humanities, was inspected in depth.
5. The following organisations provide training on behalf of the college:
 - Petty Pool Trust (Preparation for life and work)
 - Sandbach Boys School (Part-time courses for adults)
 - Eaton Bank High School (Part-time courses for adults)
 - Brine Leas High School (Part-time courses for adults)
 - Middlewich High School (Part-time courses for adults)
 - Cheshire Fire Service (Prince's Trust qualifications).

Type of provision	Number of enrolled learners in 2010/11
Provision for young learners: 14 to 16 Further education (16 to 18) Foundation learning	94 part-time learners 2,546 full-time learners 116 part-time learners 278 full-time learners 28 part-time learners
Provision for adult learners: Further education (19+)	552 full-time learners 1,830 part-time learners
Employer provision: Train to Gain Apprenticeships	86 learners 37 apprentices
Informal adult learning	742 learners

Summary report

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

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

Subject Areas	Grade
Health and social care, and child care	2
Leisure, travel and tourism	3
Visual and performing arts	2
Social sciences and humanities	2

Overall effectiveness

- This is a good college that students enjoy attending. A-level students are very successful in their examinations. On other courses, very high numbers staying until the end of their courses achieve their qualifications, but in previous years, too many have left early. Over the last two years, the college has enhanced its arrangements for helping students to choose the right course and, as a consequence, high numbers are still at college this year and are making good progress. On some courses, such as A-level English literature and childcare programmes, students make excellent progress. Most students produce high quality work and develop the skills they need to achieve their ambition to go to university. Students and members of staff work in very modern accommodation with mostly very high quality learning resources. In health and social care, some vocational lessons are taught inappropriately in computer rooms. Students' personal and social development improves significantly at college. Their attendance at lessons is good and they arrive punctually and well prepared to work. Their behaviour is mature and they treat each other with respect.

7. Most teachers plan interesting and challenging activities that support students in learning the skills they need to make good progress. Assessment feedback is effective and helping most students to understand the progress they are making and what they need to do to improve. Students receive good support that helps them to be successful at college and to progress to higher education. Careers advice for those wishing to secure employment is not as well developed. Pastoral support for A-level students is outstanding.
8. Managers have developed outstanding partnerships which they use very well to provide students with a broad range of subjects that meet their needs well. The numbers of apprenticeship programmes and courses designed to meet the needs of employed learners have increased significantly over the last two years.
9. Governors and the principal have steered the college very well, overseeing its finances and estate developments very efficiently. Rigorous arrangements for monitoring the college's performance against its targets are underpinned by the analysis of comprehensive data on students' achievements. Self-assessment provides managers with an accurate appraisal of the college to inform quality improvement plans. The judgements made through some lesson observations are too generous, and as such, do not provide a robust agenda for improvement.

Main findings

- The proportions of students completing their courses successfully have improved steadily. However, rates of improvement vary between levels and types of qualification. At A-level, proportions of students completing successfully have been very high for a number of years. On some AS-level and vocational programmes, success rates dipped in 2010/11 as a result of declining retention rates. The college has implemented very effective strategies to improve retention, which is now high. Pass rates are very high.
- Students make good progress at college. They produce high standards of work and those who complete their courses successfully achieve the grades expected from their prior qualifications. Their personal and social development improves significantly during their time at college. They attend well and most arrive punctually. Their behaviour in lessons and other areas of the college is excellent.
- Students feel safe and enjoy their time at college. They treat each other, and members of staff, with respect and courtesy. Staff deal with incidents of inappropriate behaviour swiftly. Students adopt safe working practices that help them to stay safe in practical lessons and prepare them well for employment.
- Teaching and learning are good. The majority of teachers use a variety of activities that reflect the different ways students learn and the pace of lessons is brisk. Students benefit from opportunities to develop and apply their literacy skills by engaging in challenging discussions and evaluations which extend their understanding. In the less effective lessons, objectives are unclear and teachers

do not provide enough opportunities to increase students' motivation and to develop their literacy skills.

- Most teachers provide students with assessment feedback that helps them to understand what they need to do to improve. In a minority of lessons, assessment is not linked to the assignment criteria. Teachers provide useful additional sessions that support students in their learning.
- Students are able to choose from a broad range of academic and vocational courses which provide them with pathways that help them to progress from foundation to advanced level. Extensive enrichment activities enhance their courses, helping them to achieve their ambitions and to enjoy college. However, some students are not aware of the extra opportunities available. The numbers of apprenticeships and other courses for employers are increasing rapidly.
- Managers have developed outstanding partnerships with key strategic groups that they use very well to inform the development of the curriculum ensuring that the courses offered meet local needs. Very well established and extensive arrangements for liaising with local schools are highly effective in raising the aspirations of young people and in easing their transition to college. Working with the Prince's Trust, the college is planning to deliver provision for young people not currently in education.
- Good arrangements for guidance and support help students to choose the right course, to settle quickly into college, and to achieve their potential. Pastoral support for students on A-level courses is outstanding. On some vocational programmes, the quality of pastoral support is inconsistent. Students in need of extra help are identified and supported quickly with additional support that helps them to do as well as their peers.
- Governors and senior managers steer the college well. Staff understand their roles in helping the college to meet its strategic aims. Sound financial management and strong oversight of the college's estate developments have ensured that students' learning is supported by mostly very good learning resources. Staff and students work in a safe and welcoming environment where equality has a high priority.
- Arrangements for quality improvement are effective in improving standards. Managers use data very well to hold staff to account for their performance against challenging targets. Although observation of teaching and learning identifies teachers who underperform, some of the judgements made and grades awarded are too generous and do not provide a realistic agenda for improvement.

What does South Cheshire College need to do to improve further?

- Evaluate the impact of strategies to increase retention and introduce new actions where needed to ensure that improvements seen during the inspection are sustained. At the same time, take action to maintain very high pass rates and to ensure that a higher proportion of students achieve the highest grades.

- Embed the development of literacy and oracy skills on all courses so that all students' writing, oral comprehension and their discursive skills are improved.
- Building on the highly effective arrangements for pastoral support on A-level and some vocational courses, extend this across all courses to ensure a consistently high-quality experience for all students.
- Sustain the current pace of development of apprenticeship programmes and other courses designed to meet the needs of employers. Implement plans to extend the curriculum for young people who are not engaged currently in learning.
- Increase the rigour of the lesson observation system so that the college has an accurate view of the quality of teaching of learning. Tackle teaching that is just satisfactory so that all learners have the opportunity to extend their skills and knowledge through effective learning that stimulates their curiosity and desire to succeed.

Summary of the views of users as confirmed by inspectors

What learners like:

- lessons with a variety of learning activities
- the support they receive from friendly, accessible and understanding personal tutors
- teachers with good subject knowledge who set high standards
- the new building and learning facilities
- that computers are up to date and any that breakdowns are repaired quickly
- the friendly atmosphere that supports their learning
- being treated like an adult.

What learners would like to see improved:

- the lack of variety in some lessons and that some classrooms are dull
- access to quiet/silent places to study in the library and other areas
- gaps in their timetables, coming in for just one session, and some long days
- the warm temperature in the sports hall and other areas of the college
- the length of time it can take to find a free computer in the library at busy times
- that most cafes and eating facilities close early.

Summary of the views of employers as confirmed by inspectors

What employers like:

- the help and advice they receive from the college's professional staff
- that their apprentices are very positive about their experience at college
- the responsiveness and flexibility of college staff.

What employers would like to see improved:

- the opportunities available for them to observe apprentices in college
- the insufficient level of support from the college when apprentices are in the workplace.

Main inspection report

Capacity to make and sustain improvement

Grade 2

10. At the last inspection, all aspects of the college's provision were judged to be outstanding. Outcomes for students were very high at all levels. In subsequent years, while success rates improved, the pace of improvement has not been fast enough across all courses. Pass rates have been very high for a number of years. The retention rate has improved significantly over the last two years and is now high.
11. Governors have provided strong stewardship of the college's finances and estate developments and they have an accurate understanding of the experience provided for students from their validation of a realistic self-assessment report. Senior and middle managers hold staff robustly to account for their performance and have reduced the proportion of students who leave early without completing their qualifications successfully. Quality assurance arrangements are well established and effective. Managers have access to comprehensive data on students' performance which they use very well to inform quality improvement planning. Underperformance is tackled rigorously. Aspects of the observation of teaching and learning, and tutorial sessions are insufficiently rigorous. The college has comprehensive procedures in place to gather and act upon students' views. Teachers are well qualified and benefit from effective support for their professional development. Strong financial management secures good value for money.

Outcomes for learners

Grade 2

12. On A-level courses, success rates have improved consistently and have been very high for a number of years. On other types of courses, rates of improvement have varied. For example, on some AS-level and vocational courses success rates declined in 2010/11. These dips resulted from an increase in the proportion of students leaving college early without completing their programmes successfully. Pass rates have improved consistently over the last three years and are very high.
13. During 2011/12 retention improved significantly, particularly on previously underperforming courses. Over the last two years the college has rigorously analysed the underlying causes of declining retention and has implemented a range of very effective improvement strategies. On the first year of advanced level vocational courses, where the retention rate declined in 2009/10, it has improved significantly over the last two years, and is now high. Retention has also improved significantly on foundation and intermediate level programmes. The decline in the retention rate seen in 2010/11 on AS-level courses has been resolved and it is now very high on most subjects. The overall retention rate across all courses is now high.

14. Students make good progress at college. In most subject areas they produce high standards of work. At the end of their programmes most students have made the progress expected based upon their prior qualifications. In some subjects, such as A-level English literature and the CACHE diploma, students make very good progress. At the time of the inspection, a high proportion of students were making good progress against their target grades. At AS- and A-level a good proportion of students achieve high grades. On GCSE English and mathematics the proportion of students achieving grades A* to C is satisfactory; in science, it is high. In 2010/11, functional skills success rates were low but students on these courses are making satisfactory progress this year. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those on Skills for Life programmes make good progress. Differences in the attainment of female and male students are narrowing, but males continue to perform less well.
15. A good proportion of students progress between levels of study within the college. Students are also successful in progressing to university with good numbers securing places on highly selective courses at prestigious establishments.
16. Students enjoy college, most arrive punctually and are very well prepared for their lessons and practical workshops. Attendance is good overall, but varies between subjects and levels. For example, on AS-level and intermediate level courses the attendance rate is very high. In a small minority of lessons observed by inspectors, attendance and punctuality were poor. Students' behaviour in lessons and other areas of the college is excellent. They treat each other, their teachers and other members of staff with courtesy and respect.
17. Students benefit from being able to work and socialise in modern, very well maintained accommodation with mostly very good learning facilities. Students feel safe at college. Teachers embed health and safety into their lessons well which ensure that students adopt safe working practices in practical lessons such as in visual and performing arts, and in plumbing and motor vehicle workshops. Almost all students wear appropriate protective clothing in practical lessons and they develop an understanding of health and safety that prepares them well for employment. Arrangements to promote students' economic and social well-being are good.
18. The college offers a good range of services that support students in making informed choices about their health and well-being. For example, students make good use of the college's 'Well-being Centre' which provides them with on-site support for their sexual, emotional and physical health. These services are enhanced through well established links with external agencies. In many subject areas, students benefit from being able to take part in an extensive range of opportunities to work in the community, helping them to develop the skills needed to be an active citizen. Although the college has arrangements for course representatives and student ambassadors, not all learners were aware of how they could make their views about the college heard.

The quality of provision

Grade 2

19. Teachers are well qualified and have a strong focus on supporting learners to improve. In the majority of lessons, teachers use a variety of activities that reflect the different ways students learn. They ensure that the pace of lessons is brisk and use questions that help students to develop reflective skills and reinforce their knowledge. Learning resources, including information and communication technology, are well matched to the needs of students, promoting active learning that stimulates curiosity and the desire to succeed. In less effective lessons, learning objectives are unclear and teachers miss opportunities to increase students' motivation and develop their ownership of learning. In these lessons, teaching is primarily teacher-led and there are few opportunities for collaborative learning. Work is not sufficiently tailored to meet all students' needs and their progress is satisfactory. In some classrooms the lack of display of students' work and subject-specific materials limits opportunities for teachers to provide challenging and stimulating learning environments.
20. Teachers provide most students with assessment feedback which helps them to understand what they need to do to improve. Assessors are well qualified with relevant industrial and/or sector experience. In the better lessons, teachers provide good assessment feedback that helps students to develop their literacy skills. In one excellent motor vehicle workshop session, the teacher skilfully promoted the development of literacy and numeracy through discussion in practical workshops and by supporting students to complete their workbooks using the correct spelling and grammar. In a minority of lessons, assessment is not linked clearly to the assignment criteria and students do not understand what they need to do to improve.
21. Teachers provide additional workshop sessions that support students in their learning and specialist learning support is targeted to identify and help those in greatest need. Staff identify students in need of specialist support promptly and effective help is arranged quickly. Those receiving additional learning support do as well as their peers. Learning resources for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are extensive, including a dedicated learning space and a wide range of assistive technology and equipment. Recent changes have enabled better improvement in the delivery and outcomes for functional skills and GCSE English and mathematics. Teachers are adept at exploring opportunities to promote the understanding and development of equality and diversity within their lessons.
22. The college's curriculum is responsive to local needs and meets students' needs well. Students are able to choose from a broad range of academic and vocational courses that allow them to progress within the college from foundation to advanced level. These are enhanced by a wide range of enrichment activities including field trips, residential courses, visits and guest speakers. However, not all students are aware of the additional opportunities available. Advanced-level courses prepare students well for progression to

university, but there is insufficient promotion of workplace skills in vocational areas where a majority of students do not progress to higher education. Adults are able to study on the main site or choose from a small range of community-based courses including English for speakers of other languages and Skills for Life programmes. Apprenticeship programmes and other courses designed to meet the needs of employers have increased in number significantly over the last two years. Working with the Prince's Trust, the college is beginning to provide courses for young people who are not in education, training or employment.

23. The college has established highly effective partnerships that are extremely beneficial to students. It is a highly regarded member of key strategic groups, such as 'All Change for Crewe', which work to ensure that the curriculum responds to emerging needs. It uses very productive relationships with the local authority and schools to share expertise, to develop the curriculum so that young people are able to choose courses that support their ambitions and to ease their transition to college, including students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The college promotes social inclusion and meets community needs very well by enabling community and school groups to use its facilities.
24. Extensive and effective liaison activity is highly regarded by local schools. The college is actively involved in school-based activities, including parents' evenings and options events, which support students' progression to college. Students receive good information and advice that help them to make the right choice of programme and, as a result, the numbers changing courses or leaving early have declined significantly.
25. Students receive good personal support. For A-level students pastoral support is outstanding. Subject teachers and a team of specialist personal development tutors make highly effective use of data on students' attendance and progress to identify and support those at risk of underachieving. Students value highly the relationships they have with, and the support they receive from, their teachers and tutors. The quality of personal support for vocational students is inconsistent. Most students are aware of their targets and the progress they are making against these.
26. Advanced level students identified as high achievers benefit from a range of programmes which raise their aspirations successfully. They have the opportunity to follow university-level courses alongside their main programme. Support in applying to university helps good numbers of students to secure places at prestigious establishments on highly selective courses. Support for those not intending to progress to university is not as comprehensive.

Leadership and management

Grade 2

27. The principal and governors, supported by strong and effective senior managers, have established a strategic direction for the college that ensures that the curriculum meets local, regional and national priorities. They set high

- expectations for staff who understand their contribution to achieving the college's aims. Effective arrangements for performance management ensure high levels of accountability and have improved outcomes for students. Curriculum management is good. Managers take decisive action to review, evaluate and implement changes to the curriculum to improve students' performance. Strategies to raise students' aspirations and expectations in relation to their attendance, behaviour and progress are particularly effective.
28. Governors have the professional expertise and local knowledge needed to carry out their statutory duties effectively. They have overseen the college's finances and the development of the new accommodation very well. They monitor the quality of the experience provided for students well and have a good understanding of the areas of the curriculum that are strong and the challenges for the future.
 29. Arrangements to safeguard students meet national guidelines. Governors and senior managers place high priority on ensuring that staff and students work in a safe environment. The college carries out appropriate vetting checks on staff, governors and volunteers. Staff receive the training they need to implement the college's policies and procedures. Vulnerable students are supported well through the college's comprehensive services which are supplemented by links with external agencies. Reported incidents are logged centrally, but some records are insufficiently detailed. Students know how, and to whom, they should complain if they feel unsafe and are confident that their concerns are taken seriously. Arrangements for health and safety ensure that students learn in a well maintained environment.
 30. Policies and procedures to promote equality and diversity are good. The college carries out impact assessments on all aspects of its activity and takes action to resolve issues that arise. Governors and senior managers use data well to monitor the performance of different groups of students and have taken effective action to improve, for example, the outcomes for males. The college does not use data sufficiently well to monitor the performance of students from disadvantaged areas. Staff have been trained well and understand their responsibilities, as do students. Teachers promote equality and diversity well in the majority of lessons. Effective support ensures that students treat each other with respect and tolerance, which prepares them well for living and working in diverse societies.
 31. Students express their opinions about the quality of the learning experience through a range of mechanisms and managers use these to improve quality. These include surveys, focus groups and course representatives who attend meetings with staff. Systems for supporting course representatives to carry out their roles are not embedded across all subject areas. Arrangements for involving employers in reviewing the curriculum are developing in line with the rapid growth in this provision.

32. Arrangements for quality assurance and self-assessment provide an accurate assessment of the strengths and areas for improvement in the provision and are used well by managers to drive improvement. Managers use data very well to ensure that staff at all levels are held to account for their performance against challenging targets. Robust quality improvement planning and rigorous monitoring of actions taken have improved outcomes for students. Observation of teaching and learning accurately identifies teaching in need of improvement, but in some instances, the judgements are overgenerous and do not provide a clear enough agenda for teachers on what they need to do to improve.

33. Students learn in a high quality environment that supports the development of their academic, vocational and social skills very well. Teachers are well qualified and effective mechanisms exist to support their professional development. Outcomes for students are good. Strong financial management secures reduction in costs with minimal impact on the experience for students. Sustainability is embedded in the operation of the college. The college provides good value for money.

Subject areas

Health and social care, and childcare

Grade 2

Context

34. The department offers full- and part-time courses at intermediate and advanced level in health and social care, and childcare. At the time of the inspection there were 236 student enrolments on full-time programmes and 84 on part-time programmes. The majority of students are aged 16 to 18 and following full-time, advanced level programmes.

Key findings

- Outcomes for students are good. Success rates on childcare courses are outstanding. In health and social care, success rates are good overall, but vary significantly across courses. At intermediate level the success rate is high, at advanced level it is satisfactory and at foundation level the success rate was low in 2010/11 as a result of too many students leaving early. Since then, retention has improved significantly and is now high.
- Students make good progress. On childcare courses they make excellent progress and produce high standards of work. Although the proportion of students achieving high grades on health and social care courses was low in 2010/11, their current work is of a high standard. On advanced level courses they develop useful independent learning skills that help them to progress to higher education.
- Teaching and learning are good. However, the quality of lessons varies with not enough being of the highest quality. In the better lessons, teachers use a range of well planned activities that engage and challenge students to produce good standards of work. Teachers make good use of their industrial skills to link students' learning to the workplace. Teachers ensure that students develop a good understanding of health, safety and safeguarding.
- Too many lessons are taught inappropriately in computer rooms with fixed furniture that inhibits group work. In addition, teachers working in these rooms do not have easy access to course-specific learning resources which makes vocational practical work very difficult. In advanced level lessons teachers' use of directed questions is not sufficiently effective in ensuring that all students' learning is checked, that they are on task and making sufficient progress.
- Assessment is effective in helping most students to understand what they need to do to improve. In the best examples, teachers provide students with detailed written feedback on the vocational skills they need to develop. Weaker feedback is focused inappropriately on the demands of the qualification. On work-based courses, the recording and monitoring of students' progress is effective in helping them to achieve the qualification within the allotted time.

- A good range of courses is offered that allows students to progress between levels and prepares them for employment and higher education. Additional programmes, such as in drug awareness, first aid and understanding clients' special needs prepare students well for work placement. Teachers and learning support staff are well qualified and they utilise their industrial experience to help to ensure that students' employment prospects are maximised.
- Teachers have established strong partnerships with employers and external agencies. Students benefit from a very good range of work-placement opportunities in schools, nurseries and community organisations. Teachers use these effectively to develop students' understanding of how to apply theory to the workplace, to improve their knowledge about career options and to increase their confidence, teamwork and to ensure that they enjoy their studies.
- Support for students is good. Students who need additional help, particularly those studying at foundation level, are identified quickly and receive effective additional learning support. Personal tutors set students appropriate learning targets and monitor their progress closely. Not all teachers use the college's electronic system for recording students' progress. Teachers' monitoring of students' attendance varies. Attendance during the inspection was satisfactory.
- Curriculum management is good. Managers use regular team meetings effectively to monitor progress against action plan targets. Strategies to improve retention on health and social care courses have been effective. The self-assessment report and action plans do not place sufficient priority on identifying and resolving satisfactory teaching and learning.
- Teachers have been trained well in how to promote equality and diversity and to implement arrangements for safeguarding. Managers have taken effective action to resolve the gender imbalance of students enrolling on courses. Teachers plan activities that support students in discussing the importance of inclusion in the workplace which supports them to live and work in diverse communities.
- Students are able to express their views about the quality of the services provided for them through focus groups and surveys. The college listens and responds to their opinions. Most enjoy college and are satisfied with their courses. The college is extending its work for employers and recognises that they would like more opportunities to contribute their views and ideas.

What does South Cheshire College need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning by enhancing arrangements for identifying and sharing best practice. Provide teachers of advanced level courses with the support they need to improve their lesson planning and to be able to use questioning techniques that ensure that all students are challenged.
- Enhance students' occupational skills development by ensuring that all lessons are taught in an appropriate learning environment equipped with vocationally relevant learning resources for practical and group work.

- Improve the monitoring of students' progress by providing training for teachers in the use of the electronic target-setting system. Monitor the use of this system to ensure that it is used consistently well by teachers and students.
- Rigorously monitor and evaluate the impact of recent actions to improve retention, attendance and high grade achievement on health and social care courses. Introduce new strategies where needed to ensure that outcomes on these programmes are as high as for students on childcare courses.

Leisure, travel and tourism

Grade 3

Context

35. The college offers courses in sport, public services and travel and tourism at intermediate and advanced level. The vast majority of the 625 enrolments are of full-time students aged 16 to 18 following advanced level courses; some 30 students attend college on a part-time basis.

Key findings

- Outcomes for learners are satisfactory but vary significantly across courses. On A-level physical education, and intermediate and advanced level diplomas in travel and tourism, success rates are high. On the intermediate level diploma in sport success rates are satisfactory. In 2010/11, success rates were low on AS-level physical education and travel and tourism, and on diploma courses in sport and public services, as a result of too many students leaving early.
- Students make satisfactory progress. During 2011/12 the proportion of students leaving early has reduced significantly and the retention rate is now high. On A-level courses the results from January modular exams have improved and a high proportion of students are on target to complete their vocational assignments. Attendance at lessons during the inspection was good.
- Learners feel safe at the college. Teachers and other staff develop positive relationships with their students. They treat each other with respect. Teachers place a high priority on health and safety which ensures that students work safely in practical lessons in sport and public services. This prepares students well for progression to higher education and employment. Students understand how to adopt healthy lifestyles.
- Teaching and learning are satisfactory. In the better lessons, teachers use the very high quality facilities and learning resources effectively to develop students' vocational skills. They use a range of interesting and challenging activities which motivate and engage students throughout the lesson. Too many teachers do not provide sufficiently challenging extension work for the most-able. The use of information and learning technology (ILT) as part of lessons and to extend learning outside of college is inconsistent.
- Assessment, while satisfactory overall, varies significantly. At best, teachers use questions well to assess students' knowledge and understanding, and assessment in lessons and of assignments is linked closely to the demands of the qualification. Too often the opposite is the case, with the result that students do not always understand what they need to do to improve. In some lessons, students remain passive as they are not involved in answering questions.
- Students enjoy college. Their personal and social skills develop through taking part in discussions and by undertaking voluntary work in schools and with community groups. They develop useful vocational skills through completing additional courses successfully, such as for cabin crew and resort representatives, thereby enhancing their employment prospects.

- The curriculum is broad, providing choice and good opportunities for progression between levels of study. However, too few learners progress to higher-level courses, or from the first to the second year of advanced level courses. Established partnerships with local groups enhance the provision. Teachers use strong links with local schools, the local authority, service industries, and sports clubs to ensure that students understand how to apply theory in the workplace.
- Students are supported well by very approachable and accessible personal tutors. They value highly the additional compulsory assignment workshops that help them to meet assignment deadlines and improve the quality of their work. Teachers have access to a new electronic monitoring system that helps them to monitor students' attendance, progress and achievement closely.
- Leadership and management are satisfactory. New managers have implemented strategies that have improved outcomes for students successfully, particularly on underperforming courses. These have included appointing new teachers and changes to the structure of the curriculum that have increased students' motivation through providing shorter modules of accreditation.
- Arrangements for self-assessment are satisfactory. Although the process identifies the underlying causes of low performance, some of the strengths quoted in the report are overstated. Action plans clearly set out the systems and procedures that are successfully resolving weaknesses in the provision such as low retention rates. However, these actions have not had time to show their impact fully.
- Accommodation and resources are excellent. These include outstanding sports facilities, a fully operational travel shop and a mock aircraft cabin, which provide students with realistic working environments that support their learning very well. Teachers do not have sufficient access to ILT in classrooms, which restricts some aspects of learning.

What does South Cheshire College need to do to improve further?

- Monitor and evaluate the impact of strategies designed to improve students' attainment. Introduce new actions where needed to ensure that the improvements in retention seen during the inspection are sustained and the proportion of students achieving high grades improves, particularly on courses that have underperformed previously.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by providing teachers with support in planning and executing lessons that contain challenging activities and extension work for all students. Ensure that all teachers use questions effectively to check students' understanding.
- Improve students' progression between levels of courses, and from year one to the second year of advanced level programmes, by providing them with the support they need to achieve their ambitions.

Visual and performing arts

Grade 2

Context

36. The college offers courses at intermediate and advanced level in art and design, media, film, music and performing arts. At the time of the inspection there were 842 student enrolments. Of these, 795 were enrolments of students aged 16 to 18. The majority of students follow advanced level courses.

Key findings

- Success rates are high on most courses. However, in 2010/11, success rates on music and the foundation courses declined to low levels. This year, the retention rate is high. Students produce work of professional standards. They develop sound research and evaluation skills and a creative approach to problem solving. Students produce accomplished practical work; their critical skills are well developed and they demonstrate good independent learning skills.
- Most students make good progress. On A-level courses they achieve the grades predicted from their prior qualifications; however, this is not the case on all AS-level and vocational courses. Students progress well between levels of courses within the college and then secure places at university. Students arrive punctually to lessons, prepared to work. Attendance at lessons during the inspection was satisfactory.
- Students demonstrate good levels of skills, knowledge and understanding of community cohesion and sustainable development and they make a good contribution to the community. Performing arts students complete public performances, professional workshops and work experience. Visual arts students produced a marketing video with a local logistics company. Graphic design students worked with a local author to illustrate a children's book. Film students were commended on their work in a national film competition.
- Teachers embed safe working practices into lessons. For example, when textiles and fashion students produced quirky garments using experimental techniques, they evaluated potential hazards effectively. Students are able to articulate the importance of health and safety orally, in their notebooks and in assignment work, which prepares them well for progression. Students feel safe at college and enjoy their studies. They value the positive rapport that they have with members of staff.
- Teaching and learning are good with outstanding features. Teachers make effective use of their professional experience to bring theory to life in students' work. They place good emphasis on developing core vocational elements such as in adding colour to the voice in performing arts, and life drawing underpins visual arts. Much teaching is stimulating and challenging. For example, photography students created stunning and sophisticated images, influenced by the Dutch school of painters, using simple camera settings.
- Teachers plan a good balance of learning activities that allow students freedom of expression while offering appropriate support. Teaching resources are often

of high quality, for example, fine art assignments contain exquisite thumbnail historical and contextual images that inspire, motivate and guide students. Teachers' course files contain detailed analyses of students' learning needs, but not all schemes of work include a broad enough range of teaching strategies to ensure that these are met. Assessment is effective in helping students to improve.

- The curriculum is broad and enrichment activities are dynamic. The latter extend students' knowledge of the wider creative industries. Courses are enlivened by a plethora of activities resulting from established partnerships with community organisations, industry briefs designed with employers, competitions and educational visits. For example, students produced high quality landscape images on the theme of painting with light, during an innovative visit to Wasdale.
- Support for students is good. Learners benefit greatly from the support they receive and the commitment of staff in helping them to succeed. Teaching is sensitive to students' individual needs. Specialist technicians provide additional high quality support for teachers and students. Students in receipt of additional learning support achieve at higher levels. Students' progress is monitored carefully by their tutors; as a consequence, they understand their targets and what they need to do to achieve their ambitions.
- Leadership and management are good. Robust self-assessment ensures that staff have an accurate understanding of what they need to do to provide the highest quality provision for all learners. Quality files are a good repository for course information which is accessible for managers and teaching staff and aids the sharing of best practice. Teachers are well qualified, and targeted staff development helps them to enhance their teaching skills.
- Teachers and students benefit from working in excellent accommodation. They have access to an impressive range of specialist learning resources. For example, the theatre provides a high quality environment for students to showcase their skills in events which take place throughout the year. Students learn from each other, and their progress is celebrated through professional displays of their work in studios and other areas of the college.

What does South Cheshire College need to do to improve further?

- Monitor and evaluate the impact of current strategies to improve attainment on underperforming courses and introduce new actions where needed to ensure that improvements seen during the inspection are sustained.
- Improve success rates and the progress students make on AS-level courses by ensuring that they are set challenging targets based on their prior attainment and that their progress towards achieving these is monitored very closely.
- Share best practice to ensure that all teachers have the confidence to design and use innovative learning activities that inspire students to achieve their full potential.

Social sciences and humanities

Grade 2

Context

37. The department offers A- and AS-level courses in social sciences and humanities. Of over 1,000 students, almost all are aged 16 to 18. Psychology, law, history and sociology have the largest number of enrolments. Smaller numbers study economics, geography, archaeology, government and politics and philosophy. Some 93 learners study A-level critical thinking as part of the gifted and talented provision for the most-able learners.

Key findings

- Outcomes for students are good. Success rates are high on most courses. They are very high on A- and AS-level psychology, law and critical thinking. At A-level, success rates were sustained at high levels or improved in 2010/11; at AS-level most declined as a consequence of higher numbers of students leaving early, but success rates remained around the national average. This year, retention rates and the results from examinations taken in January are high across all subjects.
- Students make good progress on many courses. At A-level, students make the progress expected from their prior qualifications. On AS-level courses in psychology, law, history and economics, students make very good progress; in geography and sociology they make insufficient progress. Progression from AS- to A-level is good as is progression to higher education.
- Students' attendance is good and their behaviour is exemplary. They attend punctually and are equipped to learn. Relationships among students, and between students and members of staff, are mature and enable most teachers to make very good use of lesson time to facilitate learning. A minority of learners do not make sufficient progress in lessons. They are passive as a result of not engaging actively in discussions or practical activity.
- Students feel safe at the college. They appreciate being able to learn and socialise in a welcoming environment where students treat each other appropriately and any issues of poor behaviour are dealt with very quickly. Students are able to access a variety of learning spaces which promote their independence and ability to learn outside of lessons. Students enjoy college and are positive about all aspects of the services the college provides for them.
- Teaching and learning are good. Teachers are mostly enthusiastic and plan their lessons very well. Learning resources are of very high quality. In psychology, high quality booklets prepare students well for examinations. In history, archaeology and critical thinking teachers make excellent use of the virtual learning environment. Too frequently, teachers rely on volunteers to answer questions and do not provide enough opportunities to pair up students so that they can help or challenge each other. In weaker lessons, teachers' planning of learning activities lacks detail.

- Assessment of students' progress is very thorough. Regular academic tests help to ensure that students are making sufficient progress. Many teachers are external examiners and they use this experience to provide students with accurate and thorough feedback on their work, including detailed comments on how to improve the subject-specific elements. Teachers give insufficient attention to identifying weaknesses in spelling, punctuation and grammar.
- The college offers a good range of A- and AS-level subjects which provide students with pathways to higher education. The 'honours programme' is a good opportunity for the most-able learners to be stretched and challenged. Links with higher education institutions are comprehensive and help students to understand their career options. Teachers use partnerships with local schools and other colleges to share good practice.
- Support for students is outstanding. Specialist personal tutors monitor their students' progress closely and intervene quickly to provide the extra help needed for those at risk. Teachers and tutors take a keen interest in students, and are sensitive in the way they provide extra help. Students and parents/carers receive useful information via the electronic monitoring system, which tutors and teachers use effectively to monitor attendance and progress.
- Leadership and management are good. Managers have good access to accurate management information which they use well to promote improvement. Recently appointed managers have implemented strategies that are beginning to have a positive impact. Staff development ensures that teachers are up to date in relation to examination board requirements. Staff appreciate the support given to them by the head of the curriculum area.
- Arrangements for quality assurance are satisfactory. The self-assessment of the area evaluates the strengths in the provision well; staff have placed insufficient priority on identifying areas to improve it further. The observation of teaching and learning is not focused sufficiently on evaluating students' progress. For example, observers do not identify weaknesses in seating arrangements, over-reliance on volunteers answering questions and learners not contributing sufficiently.
- Actions to promote equality and diversity are effective. Managers use data to analyse the achievement of different groups and take action where needed. For example, in history lessons laptops are being used to engage male students better and psychology teachers have developed workbooks in response to feedback from female students. Teachers take effective action to avoid gender bias in their lessons.

What does South Cheshire College need to do to improve further?

- Monitor and evaluate the impact of improvement strategies. Implement new actions where needed, to ensure that improvements seen during the inspection are sustained and that success rates and the progress students make on underperforming courses improve, providing all students with equal chances to achieve.

- Review and revise the way that lessons are observed to ensure that sufficient attention is given to what students are doing and the progress they are making. Provide training for observers in evaluating all aspects of the management of learning including the layout of classrooms and strategies used to check the participation and learning of all students.
- Make sure that the self-assessment report identifies the areas to be improved in the quality of provision, and in the leadership and management of the area. Use these to inform quality improvement targets and associated actions. Monitor progress against quality improvement actions rigorously.

Information about the inspection

38. Three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and five additional inspectors, assisted by the provider's Vice-Principal, 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 body, 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.
39. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, 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)
South Cheshire College
Learning types: 14 – 16: Young apprenticeships; Diplomas; **16-18 Learner 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	16-18 Learner responsive	19+ Learner responsive
Approximate number of enrolled learners			
Full-time learners	2,844	2,378	466
Part-time learners	1,235	153	1,082
Overall effectiveness	2	2	2
Capacity to improve	2		
Outcomes for learners	2	2	2
How well do learners achieve and enjoy their learning?	2		
How well do learners attain their learning goals?	2		
How well do learners progress?	2		
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
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	2	2	2
How effectively do leaders and managers raise expectations and promote ambition throughout the organisation?	2		
<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?	2		
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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