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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mr Jasbir Dhesi
Principal
South Cheshire College
Danebank Avenue
Crewe
Cheshire
CW2 8AB

Dear Mr Dhesi

Short inspection of South Cheshire College

Following the short inspection on 10–11 February 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the provider was judged to be good in May 2012.

This provider continues to be good.

You, your senior management team and governors have worked tirelessly to improve the quality of provision at South Cheshire College. Although most members of the senior management team are new to the college, their determination and commitment have ensured that you have maintained the good quality of education and training in the college since the last inspection.

You and your team have placed a strong focus on improving teaching, learning and assessment. Through your accurate identification of strengths and areas for improvement, you have also demonstrated a relentless drive for improving provision in all areas. Wide-ranging and highly effective actions including rigorous performance management and skilful training and development have enhanced the performance of staff and, as a result, the large majority of learners now make good progress towards achieving their qualifications.

You, your senior leaders and governors have set a clear and ambitious strategic direction for the college. Your close working relationships with employers, partners, the chamber of commerce and the local enterprise partnership (LEP) ensures that the college is responsive to local, regional and national priorities. The 'career ready' initiative, in partnership with employers, results in a high proportion of learners progressing to further study, apprenticeships, higher education or employment.

Governors, half of whom are new to the governing body in the last, or current, academic year, have a wide range of relevant experience and skills, and are an integral part of the college. Governors take an active role in the college and learners and staff know them well. They, like you and your team, have a relentless drive for providing the highest quality of education and training. Governors are adept at interrogating the accurate information they receive on all aspects of the college's performance and provide high levels of support and challenge to you and your team.

The implementation of 16 to 19 study programmes has been highly effective and these meet the needs of your learners well. You and your team act with integrity in entering learners for mathematics and English qualifications that are at least one level higher than learners' attainment level on entry to the college. Meaningful external work experience placements are arranged well and almost all learners have opportunities to attend external work experience. Good-quality teaching, learning and assessment in both classroom and practical sessions enable most learners to develop good personal and social skills and make good progress in their vocational and academic skills.

At the previous inspection, inspectors identified areas for improvement in the retention of learners; introduction of actions to ensure sustainability; extension of the curriculum for young people not engaged in learning; development of apprenticeship programmes to meet the needs of employers; embedding of literacy and oracy skills; and providing greater detail on reported incidents on safeguarding. You, your team and governors have taken swift and effective action across all these aspects for improvement.

Retention of learners has improved significantly, particularly on level 1 and level 2 provision. Learners now attend lessons regularly and those identified as being at risk of falling behind are provided with high levels of support and challenge to ensure that they successfully complete their programmes.

Improvement actions introduced by you and your team are evaluated regularly to ensure impact and sustainability. Accurate and detailed reports to governors enable them to provide high levels of challenge to ensure actions have sufficient impact in improving the quality of provision across all areas of the college.

Under your leadership, the curriculum has been reviewed and refined to ensure that it meets the needs of all learners, the local community and local, regional and national skills.

You accurately identified, in your self-assessment report, that the quality of apprenticeship programmes requires improvement. In order to improve the quality of apprenticeships, you limited the number of new starts to programmes and in many areas suspended starting learners on to apprenticeships until the quality improved. The appointment of a new apprenticeship manager, following a strategic

review, has resulted in greater confidence in the quality of apprenticeships. You will shortly be recruiting new learners to apprenticeship programmes.

Teachers identify and use naturally occurring opportunities to develop learners' English skills very well. For example, the development of complex vocational terminology such as the term 'effleurage' in beauty therapy. However, attendance at discrete English and mathematics lessons is too low.

Safeguarding is effective.

Detailed logs for the recording of reported incidents relating to safeguarding are in place and are thorough. The highly trained 'Be Safe' team, led by senior managers and supported by governors, is committed to keeping learners and staff safe. Safeguarding concerns, including those of radicalisation and extremism, are thoroughly investigated and draw on the expertise of a range of external agencies, such as the local authority, where necessary. All staff and governors receive regular training and updates on all aspects of safeguarding. Learners feel safe and know who to refer to for any issues they have. Very strong support, such as counsellors and personal development tutors, ensures that learners' well-being is good.

Staff, governors and learners are aware of the risks of radicalisation and extremism. Staff and governors have received high levels of training on the 'Prevent' duty. You are supported well by partners such as the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the police, and local authority 'Prevent' coordinators, and you and your team have a good understanding of the threshold for referral to Channel.

Standards of behaviour in the college are good. Learners are respectful and have a good understanding of being active citizens in modern Britain. The number of recorded incidents of bullying and harassment is low; any incidents that do occur are handled appropriately by staff.

Inspection findings

- The newly formed senior management team is committed to improving quality and consistency across all areas of the college. As a result of swift and decisive actions, such as robust performance management of underperforming staff, teaching, learning and assessment have improved and are now good. Although the decline in success rates at level 1 and level 2 have halted and retention and attendance compared to last year have improved significantly, leaders and managers recognise that success rates require further improvement at level 1 and level 2.
- Leaders, managers and governors provide high levels of challenge across the whole college, ensuring a detailed and accurate evaluation of the provision. Very effective continuous improvement plans for underperforming curriculum areas enable leaders and managers to monitor improvements closely. Robust and inclusive self-assessment processes have led to an honest self-assessment report that accurately identifies key strengths and weaknesses.
- As a result of good teaching, learning and assessment, the large majority of learners make good progress compared to their starting points. The majority of learners meet or exceed their target grades. However, on a small minority of courses, particularly AS-level science and humanities programmes, too many learners do not achieve the high grades they are capable of. Most teachers use a wide range of interesting and innovative activities, including the very good use of technology, to challenge learners and help them to develop their personal development and employability skills. Teachers generally use focused questioning well to check on and extend learning; however, this is not consistently the case.
- Teachers' feedback following assessment is good. Teachers provide thorough feedback that helps learners to improve their work. Teachers monitor learners' progress well, and those who fall behind in their work receive good additional support and attend study skills workshops to help them quickly catch up. However, target setting for learners is not consistently good across all areas of the college; a minority of teachers set targets for learners that are not specific enough, which hinders progress for a small number of learners.
- Learners on 16 to 19 study programmes make very good progress, particularly at level 3. Leaders and managers have implemented all requirements of the 16 to 19 study programmes exceptionally well. Learners participate in high-quality, meaningful external work experience and enrichment activities. They also undertake additional qualifications to enhance the skills they need for work. Personal skills, self-confidence and skills for active citizenship in modern Britain are developed well as learners prepare for further study, higher education, apprenticeships or employment.
- Learners make good progress in developing their English and mathematics skills. In the vast majority of vocational and academic lessons, teachers successfully develop the skills learners need for the workplace. For example, in hairdressing learners use shape and angle when cutting hair and in hospitality and catering, learners work out costings for menus in order to

calculate profit margins. Leaders and managers have acted with integrity in the planning and delivery of English and mathematics. In 2014/15, all learners entering with a GCSE grade D and a minority of learners entering with a GCSE grade E were enrolled on to GCSE English and mathematics programmes. All learners with GCSE grade E and a minority of learners with GCSE grade F were entered for level 2 functional skills in English and mathematics. Although the proportion of learners who successfully achieved GCSE English and mathematics at grade C or above and the proportion who achieved functional skills level 2 was low, current learners make good progress in developing English and mathematics skills. Attendance at English and mathematics, although improving, is lower than it is on vocational and academic courses.

- Leaders and managers provide a very small apprenticeship programme that meets the needs of local and national employers well. Partnerships with employers, stakeholders, the LEP and the chamber of commerce are excellent. The quality of apprenticeship provision, although improving, requires further improvement. The proportion of learners successfully completing their apprenticeship is too low.
- Following a strategic review, recruitment to the majority of apprenticeships was suspended. As a result, apprenticeship provision has been restructured and new managers, with proven experience and skills of apprenticeships, recruited to improve the quality of apprenticeship programmes. Apprenticeship recruitment is scheduled to start again in the summer term.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- leadership actions to improve the quality of provision across all areas of the college are monitored closely to ensure that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment across all subjects, including apprenticeships, is consistently good
- the proportion of learners successfully achieving their qualifications and apprenticeships across all areas of the college is high
- attendance at discrete GCSE and functional English and mathematics is improved swiftly to ensure that all learners develop the skills they need and successfully achieve their qualifications
- teachers improve how they set learners' targets so that there is a consistent process across all subjects and each learner has specific targets so that they make good progress
- all learners, particularly those on AS-level science and humanities programmes, achieve the high grades they are capable of.

I am copying this letter to the Skills Funding Agency and the Education Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Anita Pyrkotsch-Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, the vice principal, curriculum and learning support, as nominee, assisted the team. We held meetings with you, your senior leaders, representatives from the governing body, managers, teaching staff, partners, employers and learners. We observed teaching, learning and assessment with members of your staff. We reviewed key documents, including those relating to the college's strategy, self-assessment, performance and safeguarding. We considered the views of learners by reviewing the comments received on Ofsted's online questionnaires, from your own learner survey and by seeking the views of learners during on-site inspection activity.