



# St Helens College



ADULT LEARNING  
INSPECTORATE

Better  
education  
and care

## Inspection report

Audience  
Post-sixteen

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## Basic information about the college

Name of college:	St Helens College
Type of college:	General Further Education
Principal:	Pat Bacon
Address of college:	Brook Street St Helens Merseyside WA10 1PZ
Telephone number:	01744 733766
Fax number:	01744 623402
Chair of governors:	Roy Clark
Unique reference number:	130488
Name of lead inspector:	John Dunn, ALI
Dates of inspection:	30 October - 3 November 2006

## Background of the organisation

1. St Helens College is a general further education college serving the borough of St Helens, which lies to the south east of Merseyside and has a population of 176,700. Although some areas of the borough are comparatively affluent, others have high levels of social and economic deprivation. The college provides courses in 14 of the QCA sector/subject areas. In several of the college's areas it is possible to progress from entry level to degree level. The college has three campuses: one in the town centre; a technology centre about two miles away and another five miles away in the town of Newton-le-Willows. The college also offers courses at a number of other centres within the borough. The college employs 836 staff, 373 are academic staff and 463 are business support.
2. The total number of learners on roll in 2005/06 was 12,300, of which 2,615 were 16-18 year olds and 9,694 were adults. 3,104 learners were full-time. The number of learners following work-based learning programmes was 484 16-18 year olds and 129 adults. The overall gender profile showed 58% of learners were female and 2% were from minority ethnic backgrounds compared with a local population of 1.2%.
3. The college's mission is expressed in the statement: "It's All About You".  
Stated college values are:
  - working in partnership with others to meet learners' needs and to ensure appropriate progression routes are available
  - removing barriers to access to college programmes and services
  - equal opportunities and respect for the individual
  - providing value for money and maintaining a robust financial status
  - providing a healthy and safe environment and supported learning experience.
4. Strategic Themes:  
The college aims to function in the interests of the learner and to retain a vocational focus with the breadth and diversity of provision, which will contribute to both economic and social regeneration. The college plans to do this by emphasising key themes from the Strategic Model: customer focus; excellence; enterprise.

## Scope of the inspection

5. In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the college's previous inspection report ([www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)); the college's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC); reports from the inspectorate annual assessment visits and data on enrolments and learners' achievements over the period since the last inspection. This inspection focused on the following aspects:

- overall effectiveness of the college and its capacity to improve further
- achievements and standards
- quality of provision
- leadership and management.

## Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Good: Grade 2
Achievements and standards	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Quality of provision	Good: Grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: Grade 2

*Note: Where contributory grades have been awarded, they are shown in the relevant sections of the report. Contributory grades represent the judgement of the team that the quality of the aspect of provision indicated by the grade differs from the grade overall.*

## Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

6. This is a good college. Success rates have improved steadily since the last inspection and are now at or around national rates, although they are generally better for adults than for learners aged 16-18. Overall, success rates in work-based learning have improved substantially in the latter part of 2005/06, but timely success rates remain low. The standard of work produced by the learners is generally good.
7. Inspectors agreed with the college's self-assessment that teaching and learning is good. The use of information and learning technology (ILT) has increased since the last inspection and the effective use of new technology is contributing to overall improvements in teaching and learning. Assessment is generally good and all aspects of work-based learning have improved since the last inspection and are now good.
8. The college's approach to educational and social inclusion is outstanding. Strong links have been formed with community partners and employers and the college has been particularly successful in attracting learners from areas of social deprivation. Highly effective partnerships enable the college to meet the needs of vulnerable and excluded learners.
9. Most learners receive outstanding guidance and support. All learners benefit from exceptionally high quality advice and guidance on a diverse range of issues. Learning mentors and student support officers provide valuable and valued support to learners. The tutorial system is effective in its contribution to raising standards and monitoring learners' progress. Additional learning support is good and well managed with increased take-up of support since the last inspection.
10. Leadership and management are good. Governors and the principal set a clear strategic direction for the college. Most areas of the curriculum are well-managed. The quality improvement strategies adopted by the college have proved to be effective with significant improvements in headline success rates at all levels. Governance is very good. Strong financial and human resource management are ensuring efficient and effective use of resources. The college provides good value for money.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

11. The college's capacity to improve further is good. It has made good progress in addressing the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. Governors and managers have prioritised investment in improving facilities for key learner support services and in resources to support developments in teaching and learning. Variations in performance in curriculum management are being addressed by staff changes. Curriculum area self-assessment

reports are largely accurate and provide a good agenda for change. However, validation and moderation of judgements awarded through the self-assessment process are not consistently applied and some reports do not accurately identify the key strengths and weaknesses of the provision.

The effectiveness of the steps taken by the college to promote improvement since the last inspection

12. The college has taken sound strategic action to promote improvements since the last inspection. Good progress has been made in tackling areas for improvement. Actions to improve key aspects of work-based learning have been very effective. Well prioritised investment in accommodation and learning resources have supported improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. Success rates have improved over the last four years and areas of underperformance are being addressed. The curriculum has been extensively reviewed in response to changing local and national priorities.

Key strengths of the college

*Strengths*

- outstanding support and guidance
- outstanding range of responsive provision to meet the needs of the community
- effective strategies to improve the quality of work-based learning
- strong strategic leadership
- improvements in learning and teaching through the effective use of new technology
- responsive to learners' feedback
- strong and effective collaborative partnerships.

Areas for improvement

*The college should address*

- the need to achieve consistency in high quality teaching and learning across the college
- the need to continue to improve success rates on long courses
- the insufficient rigour of the validation of judgements made through the self-assessment process.



## Main findings

Achievements and standards

Satisfactory: Grade 3

*Contributory grades:*

*Work-based learning*

*Good: Grade 2*

13. In its three year development plan the college sets targets for achievements that are agreed with the local LSC. It is successful in achieving these targets at all levels. Success rates have improved steadily since the last inspection. In 2004/05, success rates for adults at all levels were above national rates, but success rates for 16-18 year olds at levels 2 and 3 were significantly below national rates. College data for 2005/06 shows significant improvements, particularly for 16-18 year olds which are now at or around the national rate. Success rates for GNVQ programmes have been consistently poor with value added measures showing that these learners do not achieve the grades predicted for them based on their prior GCSE achievements.
14. Retention rates at levels 2 and 3 have significantly improved since the last inspection and are currently at or around national rates. The retention rate for learners on level 1 programmes for 16-18 year olds has been maintained at or around the national rate since the previous inspection. Retention of adults on level 1 programmes has fluctuated since the previous inspection, but overall, has declined to slightly below the national rate.
15. The achievement of male and female learners overall, are similar. No groups of learners are significantly over or under achieving.
16. Work-based learning success rates for frameworks have improved substantially. In 2003/04, the overall achievement of the full framework was 41%, increasing to 59% in 2004/05. College data for 2005/06 indicates success rates in excess of 63%.
17. The standard of learners' written and practical work is generally good. Learners attend well and make good progress. The college celebrates the achievement of learners in a variety of ways and keeps parents well informed of learners' progress where appropriate. Young people at risk of leaving their programmes are identified early and appropriate action taken. There is a high level of participation in the enrichment programme and many learners take advantage of the additional qualifications on offer in most curriculum areas.
18. The self-assessment report lacked sufficient in depth analysis of the college's performance, by level, age groups and key programmes.

## Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

19. Inspectors agree with the college's own judgement that teaching and learning are good. The majority of lessons are well planned with a range of activities to generate interest and engage learners. Teachers are well qualified and demonstrate good subject knowledge. The very good workshop resources and highly skilled teachers support learners in developing good practical skills in many areas. In the best lessons, teachers use questioning techniques very effectively to reinforce and extend learners' knowledge. Many teachers use information learning technology (ILT) to good effect in their lessons, but in some parts of the college access to, and reliability of, ILT is restricted. In the few sessions where teaching is less effective, learners are not sufficiently challenged or involved in the lesson.
20. The college software for teaching and learning is being effectively used to support many aspects of teaching and learning and continues to develop and expand. Learner progress information is available on-line and is well used by staff and learners to monitor progress. All curriculum areas have information on college learning software and many have used the system to develop very high quality learning materials. Monitoring of the system shows high levels of usage.
21. Assessment practices are good. There are well-used and appropriate policies and procedures in place for assessment, standardisation, internal verification and moderation. Feedback to learners in most areas is good, indicating strengths and weaknesses and giving learners opportunities to resubmit and improve assignments. However, in some areas the quality and extent of written feedback is more limited.
22. A rigorous system of internal lesson observations is in place and both college staff and external partners are used to moderate grades. The electronic system used for the recording of observations allows detailed analysis to be carried out easily and is an effective means of sharing good practice on a college wide basis. Joint observations carried out by inspectors and internal observers showed close agreement about all aspects of the lessons observed.
23. The college's approach to social and educational inclusion is outstanding. Very effective strategies are employed to widen participation. Currently 61% of learners are from areas of high deprivation. An extensive range of resources is available to meet the needs of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Highly effective partnerships enable the college to meet the needs of vulnerable and excluded learners. The college has strong and effective collaborative partnerships. Managers and staff actively develop links with local schools and other providers and ensure that the college plays a key role in the developments in the area.
24. The college's approach to meeting the needs and interests of learners is outstanding. Learners have an excellent choice of courses. Opportunities to

progress are very good. There is a wide range of courses, from pre-entry to higher education, including a broad range of work-based learning. There are very strong links with a wide range of employers and external organisations and the college is very responsive to their needs. Senior managers work closely with employers, local communities and the LSC to meet the skills needs of the area. Carefully planned and well managed recent modifications to its resources, for example in its technology centre, have built the college's capacity to adapt to the changes in curriculum required to meet local needs. Learners have very good opportunities to participate in additional learning, leisure and recreation activities, all of which are also available in the evenings and at weekends. The college recognises the importance of healthy lifestyles and actively promotes this through the tutorial and enrichment programmes.

25. Learners, including those in community locations, receive outstanding information advice and guidance. All learners benefit from high quality information and welfare services including finance, health, travel and accommodation.
26. Learning mentors and student liaison officers are very effective in monitoring and improving learners' attendance and supporting them to remain on their course. This support contributes to the improving retention rates on many programmes. Tutorial support for most full-time learners is very good and particularly effective in enabling learners to understand the range of progression routes available to them. Literacy, numeracy and language support are very good. Support is provided promptly and its impact is monitored closely.

#### Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

27. Leadership and management are good overall. Some aspects of strategic leadership are outstanding. The principal provides very strong strategic leadership and is ably supported by the two recently appointed deputies. Effective action has been taken to address most areas for improvement identified at the last inspection.
28. Most areas of the curriculum are well-managed. The management of work-based learning is good. Overall, success rates on work-based provision, improved significantly in 2005/06. Overall, success rates have improved at all levels and in 2005/06, there were significant improvements in success rates for learners aged 16-18. Recent changes in curriculum management have been put in place where standards need to improve further.
29. Communications are very strong. Senior managers promote an open and consultative approach. Collaborative partnerships with a wide range of agencies and employers are well established and effective. The college has a strong culture of celebrating staff and learners' achievements. Arrangements for listening to and acting upon the views of learners and key partners are well established.

30. Procedures for self-assessment and quality improvement have been strengthened. However, arrangements for validating and challenging judgements made in programme area reports are not sufficiently robust. Some reports do not accurately identify the key strengths and weaknesses of the provision.
31. Recent innovative quality improvement strategies have been effective in bringing about rapid improvement. Systems for observing teaching and learning are rigorous. The access to, and use of, on-line management information, is good. Senior managers and governors receive detailed reports to monitor and challenge performance against targets.
32. Governors and managers have effectively prioritised investment in accommodation and learning resources to achieve the college's drive for excellence. The implementation of the college's accommodation strategy has been very well managed. Refurbishment and alterations to accommodation have provided high quality environments for student services and for the development of work related skills.
33. Staff are well-qualified and arrangements for the induction of new staff are thorough. Continuing professional development is well-planned to ensure that the college achieves its strategic objectives. Opportunities for vocational updating and industrial secondments are very good.
34. Governance is very good. Governors bring a wide range of skills and experience to the benefit of the college. Detailed reports presented by the principal and other managers ensure that governors are well-informed about the performance of the college and about changes to local and national priorities. They provide a good level of challenge to college managers and intervene appropriately.
35. The college has robust arrangements to support improvements in outcomes for children and young people as required by the Children Act. Appropriate health and safety policies and procedures are in place and implemented effectively. The promotion and practice of equal opportunity is very well-established across the college. The college complies with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act.
36. Strong financial and human resource management ensure efficient use of resources. The implications of changes in national funding priorities are well-managed. Good systems for business planning and central purchasing have been developed. The college provides good value for money.

## Learners' achievements

Table 1

Success rates on mainstream level 1 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2003 to 2005, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
1 Long	02/03	562	51	56	-5	2920	61	53	8
	03/04	591	59	59	0	2838	67	59	8
	04/05	843	62	62	0	1916	64	61	3
GNVQs and precursors	02/03	66	55	56	-1	1	N/A	N/A	N/A
	03/04	52	62	63	-1	1	N/A	N/A	N/A
	04/05	76	40	64	-24	3	N/A	N/A	N/A
NVQs	02/03	138	53	58	-5	260	27	60	-33
	03/04	85	62	61	1	321	67	66	1
	04/05	130	71	65	6	445	73	71	2
Other	02/03	358	49	55	-6	2659	64	53	11
	03/04	454	58	69	-11	2516	67	58	9
	04/05	637	62	61	1	1468	61	61	0

Table 2

Success rates on mainstream level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2003 to 2005, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
2 Long	02/03	1583	44	51	-7	4343	49	50	-1
	03/04	1132	51	56	-5	3302	57	54	3
	04/05	1103	50	60	-10	2617	66	59	7
GCSEs	02/03	226	46	58	-12	284	61	54	7
	03/04	161	53	64	-11	299	59	57	2
	04/05	91	51	65	-14	316	71	63	8
GNVQs and precursors	02/03	285	70	54	16	58	53	47	6
	03/04	142	61	60	1	102	79	56	23
	04/05	136	61	66	-5	52	52	62	-10
NVQs	02/03	525	35	42	-7	1630	38	50	-12
	03/04	383	42	51	-9	1133	45	54	-9
	04/05	440	40	56	-16	915	60	62	-2
Other	02/03	547	39	48	-9	2371	55	49	6
	03/04	446	55	53	2	1768	64	53	11
	04/05	436	56	58	-2	1334	70	57	13

Table 3

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2003 to 2005, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp Year	End Year	16-18				19+			
			Starts Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
3 Long	02/03		887	52	59	-7	2891	42	50	8
	03/04		799	49	61	-12	2838	53	53	0
	04/05		820	49	65	-16	1916	59	56	3
A/A2 Levels	02/03		18	61	81	-20	56	48	67	-19
	03/04		16	69	84	-15	57	68	69	-1
	04/05		4	75	85	-10	27	52	73	-21
AS Levels	02/03		54	41	58	-17	64	52	47	5
	03/04		40	48	60	-12	43	35	50	-15
	04/05		23	65	64	1	49	63	53	10
GNVQs and precursors	02/03		583	54	47	7	84	52	45	7
	03/04		239	47	50	-3	29	52	43	9
	04/05		181	45	59	-14	30	40	51	-11
NVQs	02/03		84	27	50	-23	880	28	43	-15
	03/04		37	60	51	9	540	43	48	-5
	04/05		75	37	53	-16	494	57	54	3
Other	02/03		148	61	52	9	1807	49	51	-2
	03/04		467	48	51	-3	1383	57	54	3
	04/05		537	51	56	-5	1168	60	56	4