

Inspection of City of Sunderland College

Inspection dates:

15 to 18 October 2024

Overall effectiveness**Outstanding**

The quality of education	Outstanding
Behaviour and attitudes	Outstanding
Personal development	Outstanding
Leadership and management	Outstanding
Education programmes for young people	Outstanding
Adult learning programmes	Outstanding
Apprenticeships	Outstanding
Provision for learners with high needs	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Information about this provider

City of Sunderland College is a large college group made up of three colleges: Sunderland College, Hartlepool Sixth Form College and Northumberland College. It trades as Education Partnership North East. Sunderland College has two campuses, Bede and City. Northumberland College has two campuses, Ashington and Kirkley Hall, which specialises in land-based, animal and outdoor courses. The group provides education and training for young people, adult students, apprentices and for students with high needs. Leaders offer academic, technical and vocational courses, including T levels, and apprenticeships at each of the colleges. Sunderland College and Northumberland College also provide courses in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and Skills Bootcamps. A levels are delivered at Sunderland College and Hartlepool Sixth Form College.

At the time of the inspection, there were 5,301 students studying on education programmes for young people, 2,221 adult students, 1,083 apprentices and 138 students with high needs. Sunderland College is the largest of the three colleges, accounting for almost two thirds of all students and apprentices. The college works with 10 main subcontractors.

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

Students and apprentices benefit from high-quality teaching. They swiftly develop substantial new knowledge, skills and behaviours, which prepares them very well for their next steps. Students and apprentices achieve extremely well. Students who have high needs complete work that is exceptionally demanding, and, as a result, they achieve the best possible outcomes. Young people are very ambitious for their future because of the support and high-quality teaching that they experience. Teachers support students and apprentices exceptionally well to achieve their ambitions, and a very high proportion move on to positive destinations.

Teachers set clear and consistent expectations of behaviour and conduct, and, as a result, students and apprentices demonstrate positive attitudes and commitment to their education and training. Adult students on ESOL courses are enthusiastic and eager to learn the English language and about the customs and institutions of the new society in which they have settled. At Kirkley Hall, students on animal management courses understand the need for positive behaviour in enclosures and indoor keeping environments. They know to act in sensible and mature ways so that the animals they handle and care for remain calm and unperturbed by the activities that they conduct. In social spaces in all three colleges, such as the canteens and outside areas, students' behaviour is exemplary.

Teachers have high expectations of students' and apprentices' attendance and punctuality. Teachers remind the very few students or apprentices who arrive after the start of sessions of the need to be punctual. As a result, apprentices and students attend very well, arrive on time and are well prepared for learning.

Leaders and staff have created an innovative 'enhanced curriculum' to help students become responsible and respectful citizens. Students and apprentices benefit from an extensive range of activities to develop their understanding of social responsibility and engage actively with their local community. Many students participate in activities to raise money for cancer charities. Students on the early years T level chose 'Love Amelia' as their charity of the year and created Christmas hampers for children who experience poverty and hardship. Students and apprentices in creative arts took part in Sunderland's 'thread of life', a social cohesion project celebrating diversity and the 'spirit of Sunderland'.

Students and apprentices have access to a wealth of enrichment activities to develop their personal skills and prepare them for the world of work. To develop their interests and talents, independence and self-confidence, they are provided with opportunities to go on a wide range of trips and visits, including overseas. Sports students accessed the Turing Scheme to travel to Miami, where they gained useful experience from visiting other colleges' sporting events. Veterinary nursing students from the Kirkley Hall campus travelled to South Africa to work with and extend their knowledge about treating large animals.

Students and apprentices benefit from high-quality resources and well-equipped classrooms and training environments. They value the dedicated immersive digital

suites where technologists create stimulating learning experiences to bring the curriculum to life. For example, students with high needs work in pairs to navigate a digital maze, giving instructions to a partner. This develops their recall of directions to prepare them to travel independently. T-level health students become immersed in hospital wards through 360-degree videos, which helps them to experience the realities of life in busy hospitals. Students from across the north east travel to the specialist facilities at Kirkley Hall, where they learn in a dedicated animal management centre and zoo.

Students and apprentices receive high-quality careers advice and guidance from teachers and experienced careers staff. Staff align carefully students' career aspirations to valuable work experience placements and advice about next steps into further learning, employment or apprenticeships. Adult students on ESOL courses benefit from careers events where they meet with staff from education providers and potential employers to discuss their next steps. Teachers and specialist staff from industry help apprentices to make decisions about pursuing career opportunities open to them when they complete their apprenticeship. Engineering technician apprentices have sound knowledge of the routes into higher level study and careers in engineering.

Teachers successfully develop students' and apprentices' understanding of radicalisation and extremism in relation, for example, to the recent riots in Sunderland. Students know how to prevent themselves and others from becoming involved in potential terrorist actions associated with activist groups, such as extremist animal rights groups.

Students and apprentices feel very safe. They know that there is a zero-tolerance culture towards bullying and harassment. They are confident to raise concerns with staff should they have any. Adult students on ESOL courses feel safe and cared for by the wider college community and their teachers, who checked that that they had not been adversely affected by the impact of the recent riots. Students with high needs in animal care workshops act in a safe way when accessing pens and cages, wear appropriate protective equipment and handle animals carefully when completing basic care routines.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The college makes a strong contribution to meeting skills needs.

Senior leaders have significantly transformed the college group's offer and curriculum over the past eight years to ensure that it very closely meets the needs of the north east region. They expertly align their curriculum to the skills needs in Sunderland, Northumberland and Hartlepool. The programmes that they provide enable students and apprentices to develop the knowledge required for emerging technologies and to progress to current employment opportunities. For example, senior leaders have been instrumental in the development of MADE NE (Manufacturing, Automation, Digitalisation, Electrification North East) and have

embedded this into their skills strategy to enable students and apprentices to learn sector-leading skills in electric vehicle and battery technology.

Leaders, managers and staff from all curriculum areas frequently meet with a wide range of stakeholders. They listen closely to stakeholders' needs and use the information that they receive to influence the curriculum. Leaders tailored their T level in health to include specialisms such as physiotherapy and audiology in response to the NHS Trust's need for allied health professionals. As a result, students have a much greater awareness of the different career opportunities open to them and the specialisms they could progress to at university.

Leaders and managers involve stakeholders and experts in the teaching of their subjects throughout their provision. There is relevant, meaningful and significant stakeholder involvement in every subject, at every campus and in every provision type. For example, level 3 animal management students worked with Northumberland Wildlife Trust to develop and design the first UK Rewilding Programme. Uniformed public service students completed stakeholder-led project-based learning with the fire, ambulance and police services and visited emergency services to role play emergency response simulations.

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

Leaders and governors have a very clear vision to provide high-quality training and education in the north east region. Senior leaders have dedicated time and effort to transform the college group. They have been on a relentless journey to improve all aspects of students' and apprentices' experience across all the college campuses. Through inspirational leadership, the culture of the organisation has become one of high aspiration and continuous improvement. Staff strive to achieve their best and are very proud to work for the organisation.

Leaders work productively with subcontractors to complement their education and training offer. For example, they subcontract a domestic appliance repair skills bootcamp to Zenith People because this organisation has highly skilled subject teachers to deliver training on employers' premises. Leaders and managers closely monitor subcontracted provision to make sure that the quality of teaching is of the same high quality provided at the college.

Leaders recruit teachers who have relevant sector experience and, in many instances, highly sought after subject expertise. Teachers bring with them a wealth of knowledge of their sector and subject specialism and use examples from their own practice to illustrate topics and make learning highly relevant for students and apprentices. In performing arts, staff have significant production skills and performance experience that they use very well to help students to skilfully perform from very early in their studies.

Leaders and managers plan ambitious learning programmes which develop the specific skills and knowledge that employers need. The level 2 dementia care

curriculum for adults has been specifically designed for a large care employer to equip their employees to work successfully with the growing number of clients with dementia. Students on the level 3 animal management course study a wide range of animals and develop their specialisms in exotics, aquatics, aviary and primates early in their programmes.

Teachers and assessors sequence the curriculum very successfully so that students and apprentices incrementally learn new knowledge and skills and transfer this to their long-term memory. For example, teachers on the level 2 bricklaying apprenticeship start by introducing apprentices to the basic skills that they need to lay and set half brick walls, before moving onto laying cavity walls to meet housing and building requirements. Apprentices develop and retain substantial new knowledge and skills that their employers require and that they need to complete their end-point assessment.

Teachers skilfully use a range of teaching methods and activities to check that students and apprentices have retained knowledge and developed their skills before moving on to teach new concepts and practical skills. This helps students and apprentices to make significant progress. Teachers on the level 2 performing arts course use probing questions to explore thoroughly students' understanding of key words and phrases associated with skills and qualities. On white goods Skills Bootcamps, teachers introduce students to high voltage diode testing through theoretical presentations and expert demonstrations, before students practise testing on industrial equipment.

Teachers and assessors use assessment incisively to check the progress that students and apprentices are making. The use of assessment and personalised feedback helps students and apprentices to understand clearly what they are doing well and what they need to improve. Students and apprentices use the feedback that they receive to improve their practical and written work, which, for many, reaches a very high standard.

Leaders value their staff and are committed to providing high-quality training to improve their skills further. They have a very strong focus on improving the craft of teaching to develop teachers' expertise. Leaders recognise the link between teachers' professional practice and students' and apprentices' achievement. They involved staff in the development of the 'principles of pedagogy' initiative which was introduced in September 2023 and identifies best practice in teaching and assessment. Teachers engage in a college-wide community of practice to share and hone their teaching skills. Staff new to teaching who come directly from industry are supported to complete a teaching qualification.

Staff provide very effective support for students and apprentices who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Students who struggle to attend in person due to physical mobility or mental health issues receive high-quality resources to use remotely. Students who have a visual impairment use electronic devices that allow them to zoom in on resources. Teachers and learning support assistants use pen portraits to plan effective activities and support in lessons. Staff ensure that laptop

computers for students with high needs are adjusted to meet their needs. Teachers upload teaching resources, including videos and bitesize tips, in advance of lessons. This ensures that students are fully prepared and able to participate in lessons.

Leaders and staff provide highly effective support for students who are care experienced, young carers and young parents, and those who are from areas of social economic deprivation. As a result, most of these students achieve their qualifications and progress to their intended next steps.

Leaders and managers have an exceptionally comprehensive overview of the quality of the education and training that they provide across all college campuses. Leaders use fortnightly quality and performance meetings with managers to challenge any matters causing concern. Where necessary, leaders put supportive interventions in place to implement rapidly the improvements required to bring curriculum areas back to the expected high level.

Governance is highly effective. Governors have the essential knowledge and experience that they need to carry out their roles proficiently. They have a clear oversight of the quality of the provision and hold leaders to account for the education and training that they provide. Governors carry out focused site visits to support and challenge staff about the training that they provide. GCSE English and mathematics have been subject to enhanced scrutiny, which has helped to improve retention and achievement.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Provider details

Unique reference number	131347
Address	Bede Centre Durham Road Sunderland SR3 4AH
Contact number	0191 511 6000
Website	www.sunderlandcollege.ac.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Ellen Thinnesen
Provider type	General further education college
Dates of previous inspection	10 to 13 May 2022
Main subcontractors	Sora Services Limited Foundation of Light Nc Group Limited Orangebox Training Solutions Limited Zenith People Limited Unipres (UK) Limited Invest People Group Limited Musical Theatre Studio Limited Gem Partnership Limited South Shields Football Club 1888 Limited

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the deputy chief executive officer, as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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