

## Recommendations agreed by the steering group

Ten recommendations were agreed by the steering group at their meeting in February 2017. These were:

- Chelmsford College and Writtle University College to establish a formal collaborative partnership to rationalise and improve the curriculum offer, drive up quality and share services to reduce costs. As stand-alone institutions, the colleges should continue to review provision and collaboration to ensure a sustainable local offer is available for employers and learners.
- Colchester Institute to remain as a stand-alone institution, focusing on developing greater financial resilience and continuing to develop provision aligned to local need
- Epping Forest College to focus on rapid quality improvement whilst seeking structural change following a Further Education Commissioner-led structure and prospects appraisal, to be completed by April 2017.
- Harlow College to remain as a stand-alone institution, with a focus on developing a campus at Stansted that will better meet employer and learner need.
- Palmer's College and Seevic College to merge, developing a coherent offer that will meet local learner and employer needs, provide a high quality academic offer in Thurrock and lead to rapid quality improvement across both campuses.
- Prospects College of Advanced Technology (PROCAT) to remain as a stand-alone institution, focusing on specialist provision to meet national employer demand as well as providing a local offer to learners.
- South Essex College to remain as a stand-alone institution, focusing on improving quality, developing its estate in Basildon and developing greater financial resilience
- The Sixth Form College Colchester to explore conversion to a single academy trust (SAT) or retain stand-alone sixth-form college status.
- Greater Essex colleges to review the potential for shared services, through scaling up the current shared services arrangement between South Essex College and Chelmsford College to provide cost savings.
- The Federation of Essex Colleges to work collaboratively to develop a mechanism to support quality improvement across the colleges in Greater Essex. This should result in an increase in the number of colleges in the area that have good or better Ofsted outcomes, better achievement rates and an improvement in the colleges' position in the national performance tables.

Each of these options is now outlined in more detail:

### Chelmsford College and Writtle University College

Chelmsford College and Writtle University College to establish a formal collaborative partnership to rationalise and improve the curriculum offer, drive up quality and share services to reduce costs. As stand-alone institutions, the colleges should continue to review

provision and collaboration to ensure a sustainable local offer is available for employers and learners. The two colleges will remain independent, with no merger planned in the future, but will work collaboratively on the curriculum areas where there are areas of synergy that will allow them to develop a more coherent offer to meet employer and learner need.

- in terms of meeting current and future needs, the collaborative approach will enable the mapping of provision and progression routes, including to higher education, enhancing delivery in mid-Essex. The colleges intend to expand provision to higher level skills, including apprenticeships, aligned to LEP priorities such as construction and engineering, which will meet the needs of learners and employers. This will also include growth in high needs places.
- with regard to financial sustainability, Chelmsford College is in a stable position and showing signs of improving. While it currently meets only the staff costs benchmark, the position is forecast to improve from 2018 with a move towards all other benchmarks. Writtle University College is in a relatively strong position meeting most of the benchmarks currently. The initial financial assessment and college accounts indicate that the partnership will place both institutions in a stronger position and they will meet all the financial benchmarks by 2018.
- in respect of quality of provision, the most recent Ofsted inspection judged Chelmsford College to be requires improvement. Writtle University College currently has a good Ofsted rating. The proposed partnership will provide an opportunity to further improve quality through the sharing of good practice across learning delivery teams and to develop aligned systems and processes.
- the colleges' joint specialisms include construction, engineering, land-based provision and med-tech, all of which are LEP priorities. Chelmsford College offers provision for learners with special educational needs and disabilities and plans to increase this. The partnership will enable opportunities to combine and co-ordinate expertise and facilities.

## Colchester Institute

Colchester Institute to remain as a stand-alone institution, focusing on developing greater financial resilience and continuing to develop provision aligned to local need.

- in terms of meeting current and future needs, the college offers a broad curriculum from entry level to level 6, closely aligned to LEP priorities, which meets the needs of learners and employers well. The college is planning to further develop provision in priority areas such as science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) to meet skills shortages.
- with regard to financial sustainability, the college is stable and taking action to improve its financial position and invest in the provision and estate. It is forecasting to meet 4 of the 5 benchmarks by 2018, with staff costs remaining above the benchmark. The assessment of 'stand-alone' college options resulting from an area review assumes both financial sustainability and that colleges achieve and maintain a

quality grade of 'good' or 'outstanding'. Where income projections are not realised by the college there will be a risk that the financial health and sustainability may decline

- in respect of quality of provision, the most recent Ofsted inspection judged the college to be good.
- the college's specialisms include advanced manufacturing, engineering, construction, computing, health and hospitality. The college has developed provision to meet the LEP priorities.

## Epping Forest College

Epping Forest College to focus on rapid quality improvement whilst seeking structural change following an Further Education Commissioner-led structure and prospects appraisal, to be completed by April 2017.

- in terms of meeting current and future needs, the college currently serves learners from London and Essex, offering a large proportion of students construction, business, sports and creative arts programmes. A structure and prospects appraisal (SPA) led by the Further Education Commissioner will look at long term structural change with a focus on ensuring that the offer meets local needs.
- with regard to financial sustainability, although not in financial difficulty currently, the college has experienced a fall in recruitment and this could continue following the recent Ofsted inspection outcome. The need to invest in quality improvement may also impact on the college's finances moving forward. The college will need to develop a revised financial plan which takes account of essential quality improvement work and the future direction agreed following the outcome from the SPA.
- in respect of quality of provision, the most recent Ofsted inspection judged the college to be inadequate. The college is working with the Further Education Commissioner and funding agencies on plans to address this and actions plans are already being put in place. A merger partner will be selected on the basis of being able to support the rapid quality improvement journey the college needs to take as well as other factors.
- the college's specialist facilities include motor vehicle, electrical installation and plumbing workshops, theatre and dance studio, HD TV studio, air cabin crew training room, music studios and open-plan art studios. The future direction of the college will shape the delivery specialisms and this will become clear following the structure and prospects appraisal, when a merger partner for the college will be identified.

## Harlow College

Harlow College to remain as a stand-alone institution, with a focus on developing a campus at Stansted that will better meet employer and learner need.

- in terms of meeting current and future needs, the college offers a broad curriculum from entry level to level 6 that meets the needs of learners and employers well. The college is proposing to develop a technical and professional skills centre at Stansted which will focus on LEP priorities, helping to meet skills gaps and provide learning where there is currently no further education provision. The college is also looking at how it can increase SEND provision to meet the needs of learners in the area.
- with regard to financial sustainability, the initial financial assessment and college accounts indicate that the college is in a strong position with the financial resilience needed to remain stand-alone. It is meeting most of the financial benchmarks currently and forecasts to meet the current ratio benchmark by 2020. The assessment of 'stand-alone' college options resulting from an area review assumes both financial sustainability and that colleges achieve and maintain a quality grade of 'good' or 'outstanding'. Where income projections are not realised by the college there will be a risk that the financial health and sustainability may decline.
- in respect of quality of provision, the most recent Ofsted inspection judged the college to be good.
- the college's specialisms include construction and the built environment, business and IT, engineering and manufacturing, journalism, media and digital technology, science, health and care and support for the unemployed. These reflect the LEP and local authority priority areas.

## Palmer's College and Seevic College

Palmer's College and Seevic College to merge, developing a coherent offer that will meet local learner and employer needs, provide a high quality academic offer in Thurrock and lead to rapid quality improvement across both campuses.

- in terms of meeting current and future needs, the merged college proposes to focus on LEP priorities including finance and health at the Seevic campus in Benfleet to address skill shortages and meet the needs of local learners and employers. The merged college will offer academic and technical pathways with progression routes to higher education. The Palmer's college campus in Thurrock will focus on the delivery of a high quality academic offer.
- with regard to financial sustainability, as stand-alone institutions, neither college currently meets either the staff costs or operating surplus ratios, although they meet all of the others. However, the merged college should be in a strong position and forecast to meet all financial benchmarks in 2017/18 following the merger.
- in respect of quality of provision, while both colleges are currently graded as requires improvement by Ofsted, Seevic College's most recent Ofsted inspection report identifies progress is being made by the new senior management team. The colleges are developing a robust quality improvement plan for implementation through the merger.

- the colleges' specialisms include sport and CILEX legal secretaries courses and the merged college will also focus on provision that supports the LEP priority around finance.

## **Prospects College of Advanced Technology (PROCAT)**

Prospects College of Advanced Technology (PROCAT) to remain as a stand-alone institution, focusing on specialist provision to meet national employer demand as well as providing a local offer to learners.

- in terms of meeting current and future needs the college will focus on specialist curriculum areas with pathways to advanced and higher level skills in engineering and robotics, construction and building technologies, and transportation. This is both a local LEP priority and an area of provision in demand nationally.
- with regard to financial sustainability, the initial financial assessment and college accounts indicate the college has the financial resilience needed to remain stand-alone. It is currently meeting all the financial benchmarks in 2017 and is forecasting this to continue. The assessment of 'stand-alone' college options resulting from an area review assumes both financial sustainability and an assumption that colleges achieve and maintain a quality grade of 'good' or 'outstanding'. Where income projections are not realised by the college there will be a risk that the financial health and sustainability may decline.
- in respect of quality of provision, the most recent Ofsted inspection judged the college to be good.
- the college's specialisms include provision to meet the needs of the rail industry, Aircraft MRO and the college is CAA licensed.

## **South Essex College of Further and Higher Education**

South Essex College to remain as a stand-alone institution, focusing on improving quality, developing its estate in Basildon and developing greater financial resilience.

- in terms of meeting current and future needs, the college offers provision in all 15 subject sector areas from entry level to level 3 and up to level 4, 5 and 6 in key sectors, meeting learner and employer needs well. The college proposes to expand provision, including apprenticeships and higher education, to further support local developments and LEP priorities.
- with regard to financial sustainability, the college is stable and taking action to improve its financial position and to invest in provision and the estate. The initial assessment of the current financial plan indicates that the college will meet 4 of the 5 benchmarks by 2020, but the operating surplus will remain just below the benchmark. The assessment of 'stand-alone' college options resulting from an area review assumes both financial sustainability and that colleges achieve and maintain a quality

grade of 'good' or 'outstanding'. Where income projections are not realised by the college there will be a risk that the financial health and sustainability may decline.

- in respect of quality of provision, the most recent Ofsted inspection at the time of the area review<sup>36</sup> judged the college to be requires improvement but the report identified that standards in teaching, learning and assessment, although improving due to strong leadership and effective management of staff.
- the college has identified specialisms across its campuses that are aligned to LEP priority sectors such as creative and cultural skills (levels1-6), health and care (levels1-6), construction, digital technology (level 3-6) and logistics.

## **The Sixth Form College, Colchester**

The Sixth Form College, Colchester to explore conversion to a single academy trust (SAT) or retain stand-alone sixth-form college status.

- in terms of meeting current and future needs, the college offers a broad general curriculum that supports national and local priorities, including STEM-related subjects, providing learners with a broad choice and it prepares students for higher education.
- with regard to financial sustainability, initial financial assessment and college accounts indicate that, although the financial plans do not currently meet the benchmarks for operating surplus or staff costs, the college has remained financially resilient and is working on a plan for cost reduction. The college will be required to submit a detailed financial plan as part of its application to convert to academy status. The assessment of 'stand-alone' college options resulting from an area review assumes both financial sustainability and that colleges achieve and maintain a quality grade of 'good' or 'outstanding'. Where income projections are not realised by the college there will be a risk that the financial health and sustainability may decline.
- in respect of quality of provision, the most recent Ofsted inspection judged the college to be good.
- the college works collaboratively with schools and is a member of the Colchester Teacher Training Consortium and North East Essex Teaching School Alliance, supporting teacher training and driving up quality improvements. The college plans to convert to academy status to enable the college to continue to play an active role within these groups. It will be required to submit a plan for how it will add value to the local schools' educational landscape in its academy application.

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<sup>36</sup> South Essex College was re-inspected in May 2017, after the closure of the area review, and was judged as good by Ofsted

## Shared Services

Greater Essex colleges to review the potential for shared services, through scaling up the current shared services arrangement between South Essex College and Chelmsford College to provide cost savings.

- further work is required by the colleges on describing what the wider shared services offer may be and whether a menu of options can be provided to extend the service to other colleges. There is some interest in this, especially for aspects such as shared procurement, but the plan will need to be more fully developed.

## Quality Improvement

The Federation of Essex Colleges to work collaboratively to develop a mechanism to support quality improvement across the colleges in Greater Essex. This should result in an increase in the number of colleges in the area that have good or better Ofsted outcomes, better achievement rates and an improvement in the colleges' position in the national performance tables.

- the colleges will work collaboratively through the Federation of Essex Colleges to extend and further develop the mechanisms that can support them in quality improvement in order to raise attainment and outcomes for learners across the area.

## Conclusions from this review

The purpose of area reviews is to put colleges on a stronger financial footing whilst also enabling them to better meet the economic and educational needs of students and employers for the long term.

Throughout the review, colleges have worked closely with their LEP, local authorities and the review team, sharing detailed information about their performance and processes. Each local steering group member has been in a position to offer ideas for change, and make comments and assessments about others' proposals and plans for their area. The review team is grateful for the positive approach taken by all the local stakeholders involved in the review.

The issues arising from the area review, summarised in 'The need for change', will be addressed through:

- colleges working collaboratively to map provision and develop progression routes to ensure that the local learning offer meets learner and employer needs and to provide routes to higher level technical and professional learning. This will include further developing provision for SEND and high needs learners
- developing progression routes beyond level 3 to increase the skills levels of local residents so that they can access higher level and better paid jobs
- increasing delivery of apprenticeships in key sectors, particularly at higher levels
- supporting better careers education, information, advice and guidance through collaborative working with colleges, the LEP and local authorities
- the collaboration between Chelmsford College and Writtle University College, which will provide a more coherent offer locally that will address LEP skills needs in priority areas
- the merger of Palmer's College and Seevic College, driving up quality and providing a more coherent local offer
- the development of greater financial resilience and continued responsiveness to skills needs in colleges that are to remain stand-alone
- colleges working collaboratively to drive up quality improvement through the Federation of Essex Colleges
- colleges exploring shared services to reduce costs to help ensure colleges are on a strong, sustainable financial footing
- colleges developing their estates to ensure facilities are suitable to support the delivery of provision in priority skills areas
- the development of greater specialisation in key areas where colleges have expertise in order to provide level 4+ provision in priority areas.



## Next steps

The agreed recommendations will now be taken forward through recognised structural change processes, including due diligence and consultation.

Proposals for merger, sixth-form college conversion to academies, or ministerial approval, for example of a change in name, will now need intensive work by all parties involved to realise the benefits identified. Colleges will want to give consideration to making timely applications for support from the [Restructuring Facility](#), where they can demonstrate that the changes cannot be funded through other sources. Colleges exploring academy conversion will be subject to the application process and agreement by the Sixth Form College Commissioner and the Regional Schools Commissioner.

Primary responsibility for implementation of recommendations relating to individual colleges rests with those institutions. However, it will be important to understand how progress is going in the round in each area and each set of area review recommendations will be formally monitored at both national and local levels. As the [guidance](#) produced for LEPs and local authorities sets out all those involved in the local steering group will be expected to play their full part in ensuring that changes happen within the timescale agreed. In this context, LEPs and local authorities are expected to retain their focus on driving changes, and assessing how implementation of recommendations is contributing to local economic performance. The EFA and SFA, with oversight from the Further Education Commissioner and Sixth Form College Commissioner, will also be monitoring progress across all areas.

A national evaluation of the area review process will be undertaken to assess the benefits brought about through implementation of options. It will include quantitative measures relating to the economy, to educational performance, to progression, to other measures of quality, and to financial sustainability. This analysis will also take account of the views of colleges, local authorities, LEPs, students and employers about how well colleges are responding to the challenges of helping address local skills gaps and shortages, and the education and training needs of individuals.



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