

NCG

General further education college

Inspection dates

14–21 May 2018

Overall effectiveness		Requires improvement	
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement	16 to 19 study programmes	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement	Adult learning programmes	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Requires improvement	Apprenticeships	Requires improvement
Outcomes for learners	Requires improvement	Provision for learners with high needs	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection			Good

Summary of key findings

This is a provider that requires improvement

- The NCG governance arrangements are being reformed, and currently governors do not always provide sufficiently effective support or challenge to senior leaders across the group.
- Leaders' and managers' actions do not bring about rapid enough improvement to rectify weaknesses in, for example, learners' attendance, the quality of training on apprenticeships and the quality of teaching, learning and assessment on too much of the study programme provision.
- Apprentices make slow progress, and the proportion who achieve their qualifications in the planned time is too low.
- Too often, teachers on study programmes have low expectations of what learners can achieve and they do not give learners sufficiently challenging work.
- The proportion of learners who achieve their qualifications in English and mathematics is low.
- Too few learners on study programmes at Newcastle College go on external work placements to apply their skills in real work settings.
- A minority of learners and apprentices do not have a secure enough understanding of how to keep themselves safe from the risks of radicalisation and extremism.

The provider has the following strengths

- Staff across the group are very clear about the governors' and senior leaders' vision for NCG and what this means for the division in which they work.
- Local board members and leaders at the divisions use their autonomy and their knowledge of their local areas well to ensure that the programmes offered are aligned to local employment priorities.
- Leaders have invested well in high-quality facilities so that most learners learn in industry-standard workshops.
- The quality of provision for learners with high needs is good; teachers are skilled at supporting learners to gain the skills and confidence to prepare them for their next steps.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment on adult learning programmes is good; unemployed adults gain the skills they need to find jobs, and most learners on access to higher education and vocational programmes go to university or on to employment.
- Safeguarding is effective; learners feel safe and know how to report concerns.

Full report

Information about the provider

- NCG (the group) is a very large further education provider that consists of five general further education colleges, one sixth-form college and two independent learning providers. This inspection was of all provision at Newcastle College, Newcastle Sixth Form College, West Lancashire College, Carlisle College, Kidderminster College and Lewisham Southwark College. It also covered 16 to 19 study programmes at Rathbone Training. With the exception of Newcastle Sixth Form College, where most learners are on academic study programmes, the colleges offer a broad vocational curriculum in a wide range of subjects from entry level to level 3. Rathbone Training offers study programmes to learners who may have become disengaged from education. Carlisle College and Lewisham Southwark College both merged with NCG in 2017.
- The largest college in the group is Newcastle College, which has the highest number of learners on study programmes and of apprentices, and accounts for just under 40% of all learners. Lewisham Southwark College is the next largest with around a quarter of all learners, while the remaining colleges are around half this size.

What does the provider need to do to improve further?

- Governors should finalise the reforms to the structure of governance and local boards and ensure that they provide more effective challenge and support to NCG and divisional leaders.
- Leaders should improve the quality of training on apprenticeship programmes and increase the proportion of apprentices who achieve their qualifications by:
 - ensuring that all apprentices receive an appropriate amount of off-the-job training
 - ensuring that all apprentices are on programmes where they will learn new skills
 - setting targets and actions for apprentices so that they are clear about what knowledge and skills they need to acquire.
- Leaders should take action to increase the proportion of learners who attend and are on time for lessons.
- Leaders should implement more precise actions to bring about improvements to learners' experiences and outcomes and ensure that they monitor the impact of these actions more closely.
- Teachers should provide more challenging learning activities to learners, particularly those on study programmes, so that a higher proportion make good progress relative to their prior attainment.
- Teachers should develop learners' skills in English and mathematics further so that a higher proportion of learners achieve GCSE and functional skills qualifications in these subjects.
- Staff should increase the proportion of learners who attend external work placements as part of their preparation for employment, particularly at Newcastle College.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Leaders and governors of NCG Corporation communicate a clear vision and ambition to be a high-performing organisation by 'unlocking potential through learning'. The culture at each of the divisions reflects the group values of ownership, valuing our people and being open and honest.
- In the last 18 months, executive leaders have spent a substantial amount of their time on due diligence for the mergers with Carlisle College and Lewisham Southwark College, as well as reviewing other merger requests. Governors are clear that there now needs to be a period of consolidation on what the group offers in order to reach their ambition of being a group of consistently high-performing divisions.
- In 2016, NCG governors and senior leaders identified the need to make substantial cost savings at Newcastle College. They implemented a major restructure of management and staffing, and the disruptions and instabilities that this caused resulted in poorer experiences and outcomes for learners in 2016/17.
- The data that NCG leaders use to monitor the performance of the divisions, and to hold leaders and managers to account across the divisions, is comprehensive. Too often, however, the interpretation of data and the resulting improvement actions that leaders identify are not sharp enough to provide leaders in each division with a clear focus and action plan to improve rapidly learners' and apprentices' experiences and outcomes.
- Leaders have brought about secure improvements at West Lancashire College and Kidderminster College, but have been less effective at Newcastle Sixth Form College and on study programmes and apprenticeships at Newcastle College. Leaders at Carlisle College have successfully maintained the good quality of provision since the merger.
- Leaders and managers have not been successful enough in rectifying many of the weaknesses in learners' outcomes. Across the group, learners' attendance is too low and punctuality to lessons is not good enough. These weaknesses impact negatively on learners' progress, and too many learners are not achieving their potential, particularly in English and mathematics.
- The management of adult learning programmes and provision for learners with high needs is strong. The management of study programmes and apprentices requires improvement.
- The management of subcontracting requires improvement. Leaders at NCG do not have sufficient oversight of the quality of subcontractors' provision, particularly for apprenticeships. NCG governors are not fully aware of the quality of subcontracted provision, although this is better for the local college boards. For example, the actions taken by managers at Kidderminster College have not led to a rapid enough improvement in the performance of subcontractors. The provision at Acorn Training Ltd and Training Event Safety Solutions Ltd is poor. The management of subcontracting at Carlisle College, West Lancashire College and of NCG's provision at Rathbones Training is effective.
- While leaders broadly evaluate accurately the quality of provision, they overestimate the quality of aspects of their programmes in their self-assessment report. They underplay some weaknesses, and too many of the reports at subject and department level are not

evaluative enough, with insufficiently robust evidence used to secure judgements. This is particularly the case at Rathbone Training. Leaders ensure that managers at all levels are involved in the evaluation of the quality of provision. Many of the underperforming subjects across the group have new managers and the in-year performance of these subjects is closely monitored by leaders. Consequently, the quality of the weakest subjects at Newcastle College is improving this year.

- Appropriate performance management arrangements are in place. Leaders and managers link these arrangements well to the observation of teaching and learning, but the targets that they set for staff to improve their performance are not sufficiently detailed or demanding. Where staff do not improve their performance quickly enough, they often leave. Staff training on using new management systems and processes are mostly effective, but there remain a few compliance issues in, for example, the use of the electronic tracking systems to monitor learners' progress.
- Senior leaders of the corporation and at each of the colleges cultivate highly effective partnerships with a range of key local and regional stakeholders that benefit learners. Leaders and managers have designed the curriculum at each college and for study programmes at Rathbone Training to meet needs in each locality, although this is less strong at Lewisham Southwark College. Where appropriate, they have developed specialist training, such as in health and logistics at West Lancashire College, music, performing arts and animal care at Kidderminster College, and aviation and rail track engineering at Newcastle College.
- Staff across the group provide learners with effective information, advice and guidance. They have made improvements to the quality of guidance and this has helped to ensure that more learners are on the right course. The proportion of learners who are still in learning this year is higher across most of the group compared with the same point last year.
- Governors, leaders, managers and staff successfully promote cultural diversity, and learners demonstrate mutual respect and tolerance towards each other. Staff and learners demonstrate the college values and behaviours well. Leaders and curriculum managers have worked successfully with staff to include a range of equality- and diversity-themed activities within courses and through the tutorial programme and enrichment events. These have a positive impact on learners' understanding and behaviours. NCG leaders have implemented mandatory training for all staff on equality and diversity. At the time of the inspection, a small proportion of staff had yet to complete this.
- Recently formed lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups at Lewisham Southwark College, Newcastle College, Newcastle Sixth Form College and Carlisle College have been effective in raising awareness and improving the support for this group of learners. Managers monitor the progress of, and provide effective support to, vulnerable learners such as care leavers. These learners achieve broadly in line with their peers, and the proportion remaining at college has improved this academic year.

The governance of the provider

- Governance of NCG is being reformed currently, and the new chair of the board is implementing a review. This process is not complete and at the time of the inspection, governance requires improvement. Governors have a range of skills and are committed to

the NCG Corporation and local boards; several are very experienced and bring a wealth of knowledge to their role.

- Governors of NCG have devolved accountability for quality and performance to local college boards and senior leaders, who value their autonomy. Governors, and the executive leaders, have not ensured that the impact of local governance and leadership is consistently effective across the group or that the pace of improvement, where needed, is rapid enough.
- The development of the structure of the boards at each division is not yet complete. Vacancies exist on the corporation and local college boards. The new chairs of local boards at Newcastle College, Newcastle Sixth Form College, Lewisham Southwark College and West Lancashire College are just starting to understand and clarify their roles. The very recent positive developments in establishing a Newcastle College board show enthusiasm and commitment, but the governors are not sufficiently clear about what management actions will lead to the targeted improvements required.
- Senior leaders provide governors with a range of detailed reports. Governors are aware of many of the strengths and key challenges facing each of the divisions. Too often, the challenge by governors to senior leaders on the information that they receive is cursory and not robust enough to lead to rapid enough improvements.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Managers ensure that appropriate safeguarding policies and procedures are in place at all divisions so that staff know how, and to whom, they should report any safeguarding concerns that they have about their learners. Leaders and managers have developed good-quality training packages that are used at all divisions, and which cover safeguarding and the 'Prevent' duty, and these are part of the mandatory training for all staff.
- Managers carry out appropriate checks on staff to ensure that they are suitable to work with their learners. They maintain accurate and up-to-date records in relation to all staff.
- Governors and senior leaders have a clear overview of safeguarding through a report at corporation level on a termly basis, and more frequently to local boards. Accountability for safeguarding rests with NCG, and the designated safeguarding officer is one of its senior leaders. Accountability has been devolved to good effect to each division, where local arrangements are made with the relevant agencies to enable staff to remain aware of new threats to learners' safety and to make onward referrals.
- Learners feel safe and have a good awareness of staying safe, including online. Learners know how to raise concerns with staff.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Across the group and provision types, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is not of a consistently high standard. It is uniformly good on adult learning programmes and on provision for learners with high needs at each college, but on 16 to 19 study programmes and apprenticeships it varies depending on where, and which subjects, learners study.

- Too often, across the divisions of NCG, teachers do not challenge learners on study programmes and apprentices sufficiently to develop and strengthen their subject knowledge, skills and understanding to a high level. At Newcastle College and Newcastle Sixth Form College, teachers do not challenge and motivate learners enough, particularly the most able and those who finish work early, to make swift progress. At Newcastle College, assessors do not challenge apprentices sufficiently to expand their knowledge or to apply their skills in workplace scenarios. As a result, too many apprentices make slow progress and do not complete their apprenticeship by the planned end date.
- Too few teachers and assessors have high enough aspirations for what their learners can achieve. At Newcastle Sixth Form College, Kidderminster College and Lewisham Southwark College, too many learners all complete the same tasks at the same pace. The most able learners wait for others to complete tasks before they move on with their learning and consequently make slower progress.
- Learners on study programmes produce work that meets, but too often does not exceed, the standard to achieve their qualification. Not enough teachers on GCSE English and mathematics courses teach effective lessons to ensure that learners make fast progress in their learning. A small minority of teachers on adult learning programmes across all divisions do not provide enough activities for the least and most able adult learners.
- A minority of teachers are not skilled enough at using strategies to check learning in lessons. For example, they do not question learners effectively enough to be sure about what they understand, to monitor successfully their progress and to extend learning. At Newcastle College, Newcastle Sixth Form College, Carlisle College and Lewisham Southwark College, too often teachers answer their own questions, rather than probing for information about what learners do and do not know. As a result, not enough teachers extend learners' knowledge beyond the minimum expectations. However, at Kidderminster College, teachers use questioning effectively to check learning, and social sciences, humanities and physics teachers at Newcastle Sixth Form College use skilful questioning techniques to increase learners' confidence and increase their knowledge.
- Apprenticeship assessors, and teachers on study programmes at Newcastle College, Newcastle Sixth Form College, Kidderminster College and Rathbone Training, do not provide clear enough feedback to learners to identify what they need to do to improve. They do not check sufficiently that learners act on their feedback. At Carlisle College, not enough adults receive feedback that enables them to improve their work.
- In too many divisions, teachers do not help learners on vocational study programmes to make quick progress in developing skills in English and mathematics. Too often, teachers do not plan well enough to develop learners' mathematics skills, even where this is an integral aspect of the course. At Lewisham Southwark College, teachers do not use the results of assessments of learners' English and mathematics skills at the start of the course well enough to support learners to develop these skills. As a result, learners make slow progress and make the same mistakes repeatedly.
- At Carlisle College, West Lancashire College and Rathbone Training, most teachers plan well-paced and interesting lessons that challenge most learners to learn well and develop good practical skills. They use their vocational expertise well to help learners understand the link between their studies and future work scenarios. For example, engineering and childcare learners at Carlisle College work to exacting standards on projects with strong links to professional practice.

- Teachers make sure that adult learners at Newcastle College and learners on vocational courses at West Lancashire College develop their spoken English skills well. Teachers introduce and explain technical terminology well and engage learners in activities such as role playing and giving presentations, which help them practise their speaking and listening skills. At West Lancashire College, teachers successfully support learners to improve their mathematics skills. For example, in plastering lessons, learners are taught to calculate the area of a wall and accurately gauge how many bags of plaster they need to complete the job.
- At West Lancashire College and Kidderminster College, teachers use their subject expertise well to help learners develop skills that match those needed by employers in their chosen vocational area. For example, teachers demonstrate to a high standard how to mask a car in preparation for a respray, and in music teachers explain clearly how to deconstruct segments of music. Consequently, learners can relate what they learn to their future employment and education.
- Learners benefit from good physical resources, including the virtual learning environment (VLE). At all divisions, learning takes place in well-equipped facilities which are of a good standard. Teachers use information and communication technology (ICT) well, and most provide good resources on the VLE and via online forums. Most learners use these well to continue learning outside of lessons.
- Most teachers across the group promote diversity well within the classroom. As a result, learners improve their understanding of living in British society. Learners on study programmes at Newcastle College know about the importance of tolerance and respect through discussion and practical work. At Lewisham Southwark College, learners on study programmes explore each other's cultures and learn how food, music and customs are part of the local community. At West Lancashire College, teachers invite asylum seekers to the college to discuss their experiences with learners. They use speeches given at the United Nations to explore differing attitudes to the education of girls.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Requires improvement

- Too many learners do not attend their classes regularly or promptly enough. Learners' attendance is not good enough on study programmes, adult learning provision and provision for learners with high needs. Learners' attendance at English and mathematics lessons is very poor. This contributes to learners not making the progress of which they are capable. Too many learners on study programmes and adult learners, particularly at Newcastle College, Newcastle Sixth Form College, Lewisham Southwark College and West Lancashire College, are late to lessons, which disrupts learning and slows progress for them and their peers.
- A small minority of learners on study programmes and adult learners do not have positive attitudes to learning. These learners do not come to lessons equipped with files or the equipment needed for practical workshops. They do not keep their folders up to date, resulting in gaps in their work and their completion of homework.
- Fewer than half of the learners on study programmes at Newcastle College go on external work placements. Learners have limited opportunities to work independently from their peers and tutors and too few have the opportunity to develop their skills or make informed decisions about their future careers by experiencing the world of work. Most

learners in the other divisions of NCG benefit from a diverse range of meaningful external work placements.

- A minority of apprentices, and of learners on study programmes at Lewisham Southwark College and Kidderminster College, have a limited understanding of how to keep themselves safe from the risks of radicalisation and extremism in their locality and the wider world. Although a range of topics related to the risks of radicalisation and extremism are covered during learners' induction and pastoral tutorial sessions, learners have a limited understanding of how to apply these to their personal lives and their community.
- Learners on study programmes benefit from good extra-curricular activities which are linked well to their career aspirations, the development of study skills and to supporting them to maintain good mental health and well-being. Many learners complete additional qualifications. For example, learners on early years and health and social care programmes gain first-aid certificates and learners on sports courses complete coaching qualifications. Learners on hospitality and catering courses complete barista qualifications to extend their range of possible job options. Learners at Newcastle Sixth Form College participate in a wide range of activities to support their studies and interests and as a foundation for life at university.
- Teachers across study programmes and adult learning programmes use a broad range of visiting speakers, master classes, trips and employer-related assignments to support learners' understanding of future careers and to develop work-related skills. Learners at Lewisham Southwark College learn about the impact of knife crime from a local surgeon and lawyers.
- Teachers use effective strategies to help learners to contribute to the life of their college and to understand the importance of working together. Learners with high needs take part in activities such as art therapy and pass on what they have learned to their peers. At Lewisham Southwark College, hospitality learners organise sessions for other learners on healthy eating, and business learners provide sessions on personal finance.
- Leaders and managers have developed the physical resources of the divisions well so that learning takes place in high-quality, and often industry-standard, environments. These include the aviation, rail and energy academies at Newcastle College and the professional sports facilities used by subcontractors for Rathbone Training study programmes. Learners in these areas have a good understanding of the technical knowledge and skills that they need to develop, and an experience of how they will use these when they go on to future employment.
- At all divisions, most learners enjoy their learning and take pride in their work. They behave well and are respectful towards their peers and their teachers. Learners are enthusiastic and confident. Learners with high needs develop high levels of independence, confidence and self-esteem.
- Most learners receive good levels of personal support to help them remain on their course and complete their qualifications. For example, learners who have personal barriers to learning such as homelessness, mental health concerns or financial issues receive high levels of support and swift referrals to external agencies to help them overcome these barriers.
- Most learners receive effective and impartial careers advice and guidance. The majority of learners have clear career aspirations and know what they need to do to achieve their

goals. For example, at Newcastle College, many learners on level 3 programmes continue to higher education programmes at the college. Staff use their good relationships with external agencies, such as the North East Collaborative Outreach Programme 'Future Me' for study programme learners and the National Careers Service for adult learners, to provide learners with independent careers guidance to help them make decisions about their next steps.

- Learners across all provision types and divisions have a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe in college and in their everyday lives. Learners know to whom they should report safeguarding concerns and are confident in staff to deal with these swiftly. High regard is given to health and safety in lessons and, as a result, most learners adhere to health and safety requirements.
- Learners demonstrate a sound understanding of British values. Most learners are respectful to their teachers and to their peers. The inclusive learning environments across all divisions support learners to understand and respect each other's beliefs and cultures. For example, adult learners, when discussing end-of-life care for patients, explore the need for respect and the privacy of patients and their families, and know how to take account of cultural and religious considerations.

Outcomes for learners

Requires improvement

- In 2016/17, the proportion of learners who achieved their qualifications across the divisions differed considerably by provision type and subject, and overall required improvement. Not enough learners on study programmes achieved their English and mathematics qualifications. Most learners on study programmes develop vocationally relevant skills that enable them to produce work that is of a standard that meets industry or awarding body expectations, and a high proportion pass their vocational qualifications.
- Too many apprentices make slow progress, and as a result do not complete their apprenticeship within their planned timescale. In 2016/17, the proportion of apprentices across the group who completed within their planned timescales was too low. For apprentices due to complete their training in the current academic year, in-year performance records show the proportion to be higher, but it still requires improvement. At the time of inspection, although most apprentices have been retained on their programmes, nearly a fifth of all apprentices in learning were beyond their planned end date. Not enough apprentices make the expected progress from their starting points or develop new skills on their programme. Apprentices at Carlisle College make good progress and achieve well.
- Not enough learners make sufficiently rapid progress in improving their skills in English and mathematics. As a result, the proportion of learners who achieve GCSE grades 4 to 9 in English and mathematics is too low. The proportion of learners on study programmes who achieve functional skills qualifications in English and mathematics is too low, especially for learners at Newcastle College, Kidderminster College and at Rathbone Training.
- Not enough learners make the progress expected of them based on their prior educational attainment. At Lewisham Southwark College and Newcastle College, too few learners on vocational programmes make the progress expected of them relative to their starting points and achieve their full potential. Learners at Carlisle College, Kidderminster

College and West Lancashire College make good progress relative to their starting points. Learners who complete their A-level programmes at Newcastle Sixth Form College achieve the grades expected of them. Too few learners studying AS-level qualifications pass their examinations or achieve the grades they are capable of, and too few continue into the second year of the A-level programme.

- Learners who declare that they have additional learning needs achieve less well than their peers. This is in the majority of provision types across the group's divisions, except for learners on study programmes at Carlisle College and West Lancashire College and adult learners studying at Newcastle College and West Lancashire College.
- Adult learners achieve well. The proportion of adult learners who achieve short, employment-related qualifications is high. Most adult learners at Carlisle College, Lewisham Southwark College and West Lancashire College achieve functional skills qualifications in English and mathematics. The proportion of adult learners who achieve diploma and access to higher education qualifications is high at all divisions other than Newcastle College, where it accounts for just over half of learners on these courses and is too low.
- A high proportion of learners who have high needs achieve their vocational qualifications and personal learning aims. They develop effective independent and practical skills. As a result, a high proportion progress to appropriate work opportunities, independent living, traineeships, supported internships or higher levels of study.
- The proportion of learners who complete their programmes and go on to a positive destination is high. Almost all learners on study programmes and adult learning programmes who successfully complete their qualifications move on to further education, training or employment. Of those completing their A levels, progression from Newcastle Sixth Form College to higher education is high, and a high proportion of these learners are the first generation in their family to attend university. Leaders and managers were unable to provide information about what apprentices went on to do after they had completed their programmes, or information about a minority of learners at Newcastle Sixth Form College who left the college after their AS-level study.
- The proportion of current learners remaining on programme at the time of the inspection is high. In most divisions, in-year retention is higher than at the same point last year. However, not enough learners are still in learning on study programmes at Newcastle Sixth Form College and on adult learning programmes at Carlisle College.

Types of provision

16 to 19 study programmes

Requires improvement

- Across the divisions, NCG has just over 10,000 learners on study programmes. Of these, over 4,000 are at Newcastle College. Carlisle College, Kidderminster College, Lewisham Southwark College and Newcastle Sixth Form College have between 1,000 and 1,200 learners each. Rathbone Training has just under 800 learners, and West Lancashire College around 600.
- The study programmes are characterised by differences in the quality of learners' experiences and of teaching and learning at the different divisions. Overall, study programmes are generally of higher quality at Carlisle College, Kidderminster College and West Lancashire College, and less strong at the other divisions.

- Across the group, achievement rates on study programmes vary too much and, in too many cases, are not high enough. The proportion of learners who achieve qualifications in English and mathematics is too low. At Rathbone Training, none of the learners who took GCSEs in English and mathematics in 2016/17 passed them, and achievement rates for learners on functional skills qualifications in these subjects were low. Learners' achievements also vary considerably from division to division and from subject to subject. For example, the proportion of learners who achieve qualifications in construction is low at West Lancashire College and Newcastle College, but is high at Carlisle College.
- Teachers do not take enough account of the English, mathematics and vocational knowledge and skills that learners have at the start of their programme to teach lessons that provide learners with the challenge they need to reach their full potential. At Newcastle Sixth Form College, not enough AS-level learners achieve or exceed their target grades and too few progress to the second year of study. On vocational courses, teachers do not consistently challenge learners to produce work of a high enough standard. They do not set learners work that deepens their knowledge or builds sufficiently on previous learning. At West Lancashire College, teachers are more skilled in this aspect of their practice; they plan and teach lessons that support and challenge learners to make good progress.
- In too many divisions, teachers do not routinely use assessment or feedback well enough to check learners' progress, ensure that they can recall knowledge, or deepen their understanding. For example, at Lewisham Southwark College, teachers do not use well enough strategies such as questioning learners on their understanding to gauge what learners have learned. At West Lancashire College and Carlisle College, teachers assess learners' progress effectively. They give feedback that helps learners to identify what they need to do to improve, both during lessons and on their assignments.
- The extent to which learners on vocational programmes across the divisions develop their skills for employment through external work placements is not consistently good. In particular, at Newcastle College too few learners have sufficient opportunities to practise their vocational skills in their chosen industry because too few attend an external work placement. In the other divisions, where learners do go on work placements, they are able to explain the benefits that they gained from this. For example, hospitality learners at Lewisham Southwark College gained an insight into the differences of working in a range of settings from bistros to fine-dining restaurants. Across the divisions, most teachers use their links with industry well to set learners projects that allow them to interact with clients and professionals.
- Leaders and managers across all divisions have designed study programmes well to give learners the experiences that they need to help them progress towards their next steps in education, training or work. At Rathbone Training, leaders have adapted the programmes effectively to provide short and intensive courses for learners who are not yet ready for a year-long programme of study.
- Leaders have ensured that vocational areas are well resourced, which means that learners develop their vocational skills well in realistic work environments. For example, in Progress Sport, a subcontractor to Rathbone Training, learners train in professional gyms and a football academy sponsored by the Football Association. In Newcastle College's aviation academy, learners work at the local airport on a wide range of aeroplanes.
- Staff across the divisions provide good careers guidance so that learners have the information that they need to make informed decisions about their next steps once they

complete their study programme. As a result, the large majority of learners progress to positive destinations in further and higher education and employment.

- On vocational study programmes, most learners develop good practical skills that enable them to achieve their qualifications, and the majority complete practical work at a high level. At Rathbone Training, the majority of learners who have not been in education or employment for a considerable time develop the skills and confidence they need to seek work and go on work placements. At West Lancashire College, a significant proportion of learners in vocational lessons complete challenging practical work at a level higher than that required for their qualification, notably in bricklaying, beauty therapy and motor vehicle engineering.
- Learners take part in valuable enrichment programmes and gain additional qualifications which help prepare them for life and work in modern Britain. For example, at Newcastle Sixth Form College, learners take part in cyber-security workshops, and others have worked with a charity to raise awareness of body image issues in contemporary society.

Adult learning programmes

Good

- The college provides courses for over 8,800 adult learners at Newcastle College, Carlisle College, Kidderminster College, West Lancashire College and Lewisham Southwark College. Newcastle College and Lewisham Southwark College account for around three quarters of learners. Most learners enrol on programmes at entry level and levels 1 and 2, with a small proportion of learners on level 3 programmes. The large majority of learners study on vocational programmes, courses in English, mathematics and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), courses to develop their employability skills, and access to higher education courses.
- Across the divisions, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment is consistently good, and this is reflected in the positive outcomes for learners in achieving their qualifications.
- Leaders and managers have designed adult learning programmes that are responsive to the specific needs of the local community. Leaders, managers and staff work effectively with a range of partners, including institutions of higher education, Jobcentre Plus and local authorities, to provide a broad range of programmes for adults. Adult learning provision meets local and national priorities well, enabling adults who are at risk of social exclusion to participate in learning.
- The large majority of teachers develop and use effective learning activities which enable learners to work independently and to make good progress in developing a range of professional and work-related knowledge and skills. On vocational and academic courses, tutors use their understanding of learners' prior educational attainment to good effect when planning lessons, so that they design activities well to meet the needs of individual learners.
- Teachers use a wide range of interesting and varied learning resources and materials to engage and motivate learners, including the use of information learning technology. For example, learners on a pre-entry ESOL course used an interactive online quiz that assessed their knowledge about adjectives and verbs contained in a newspaper article.
- Teachers assess learners' knowledge, skills and abilities well at the start of the course to ensure that learners are placed on courses at the appropriate level to meet their career

aspirations. Teachers use this information effectively to plan and use learning activities that challenge learners well, particularly those for whom English is not their first language and for those seeking work.

- Staff provide effective support to remove barriers to learning for adult learners with additional needs. Teachers and learning support staff identify accurately learners who would benefit from extra help, and swiftly provide suitable support, including specialist support when necessary. For example, in a cookery lesson, learners with hearing and visual impairments received highly effective support that enabled them to participate fully.
- Adult learners benefit from, and value highly, the extensive vocational expertise and experience of their teachers that help them to improve their subject knowledge and job-seeking skills. Most teachers routinely and successfully use their strong vocational and occupational experience and knowledge to bring topics to life during classroom and workshop sessions. For example, at Kidderminster College, learners studying music are helped to form bands and play at local events. With the effective support from tutors, they quickly become skilled in how to analyse a piece of music and to explore how artists use techniques such as voice and guitar layering.
- The large majority of teachers provide learners with helpful developmental feedback on their progress and performance. Teachers routinely boost learners' confidence by providing them with clear and personalised feedback during lessons and when completing practical tasks and assignments. Teachers check learners' understanding well in lessons. For example, they make good use of peer and self-assessment strategies, which extend learners' understanding of what they are learning. However, a minority of teachers at Lewisham Southwark College do not provide sufficiently helpful feedback to learners.
- The large majority of adult learners make secure gains in developing the skills in English needed for their studies and for future employment. Learners improve their communication skills by participating in activities that challenge them to listen to and use language accurately and confidently when speaking. This aspect of learners' development is less strong at subcontracted providers where too many learners do not improve their skills in English as a result of insufficiently helpful feedback on spelling, punctuation and grammar.
- In most vocational subjects, learners apply their mathematical skills accurately. Learners on plumbing courses successfully develop their measuring skills, and carpentry learners become more confident in calculating weights and converting them from metric to imperial units when working on sash windows.
- Learners receive good information, advice and guidance on progression to further learning, work or higher education. Learners on access to higher education programmes receive good support with their university applications. A large majority of learners progress to the next stage of education or develop their careers as a result of their learning.
- In a small minority of lessons, teachers do not provide sufficient variety of activities for the least and most able learners to make sure that they fulfil their potential, and this impedes their progress. Learners' responses are not probed sufficiently as teachers move on too quickly. As a result, the security of learners' knowledge and understanding is not always fully explored or confirmed. A small minority of teachers accept too readily the responses provided by more confident learners, and do not routinely check that learners of all abilities have a secure level of understanding before moving on to the next activity.

Apprenticeships

Requires improvement

- At the time of the inspection, NCG had around 2,900 apprentices. Of these, around a third are enrolled at Newcastle College, a quarter at Carlisle College, just under a fifth at Kidderminster College and the remainder at Lewisham Southwark College and West Lancashire College. NCG offers apprenticeships across a wide range of frameworks and standards. The largest subject areas are health and social care, management, business administration and customer service. Around two fifths of apprentices are adults on level 3 programmes, and a quarter are adults on level 2 programmes. The remainder are aged 16 to 18, with approximately two thirds on level 2 programmes and one third on level 3 programmes. A small number of adult apprentices study at level 4.
- Across colleges, frameworks and standards, a lack of consistency in the quality of apprentices' experiences is borne out by the achievement rates in 2016/17. At Carlisle College, apprentices made good progress and around two thirds achieved their apprenticeship in the planned time. The proportion of apprentices who completed their programme in the planned time was too low at Kidderminster College, Lewisham Southwark College and Newcastle College, and was very low at West Lancashire College. Variability in the quality of training extends to subcontractors, with some performing well, but others poorly. Managers have taken positive steps to cease working with poorly performing subcontractors.
- Senior leaders at NCG and at each of the colleges are fully aware of the weaknesses in apprenticeship provision. They have cited these in their annual self-assessment report and in their reports to the local college governors. The corporation has identified improving apprenticeships as a key action for the current year, and initiatives to share best practice from Carlisle College are in place.
- Since September 2017, governors and NCG leaders have placed a strong emphasis on improving the quality of apprenticeships and, in most divisions, new leaders have been appointed. The new leaders are making a demonstrable difference this academic year, and recent changes are accelerating the pace of improvement. New monitoring systems enable the apprenticeship managers to maintain a closer oversight of progress in raising standards. In the current year, there is evidence of an increase in the proportion of apprentices who achieve their qualifications in the planned time. Leaders and managers have more work to do to ensure that apprentices across the colleges are assured of consistently high-quality training.
- Assessors and tutors do not consistently plan or provide learning that challenges apprentices well enough to develop new skills. Assessors do not take sufficient account of apprentices' prior skills, knowledge or experiences to identify apprentices' starting points. Tutors do not complete assessments for apprentices who have prior qualifications in English and mathematics, resulting in a minority of apprentices not developing these skills further so that they are more effective in the workplace.
- Too many apprentices do not develop new skills and knowledge quickly or successfully enough. Inspectors saw several examples where apprentices receive accreditation for existing skills as opposed to developing new ones.
- Managers do not plan the training for adult apprentices well enough to ensure that it is sufficient. A few apprentices do not receive regular planned off-the-job training to

develop the new skills they need to make progress in their careers. The quality of off-the-job training varies across the colleges; it is well planned and taught at Carlisle College, whereas at West Lancashire College, although improving, it is still not good enough.

- The quality of feedback that assessors give to apprentices ranges from effective to weak, but overall is not good enough. A significant minority of apprentices do not receive useful feedback on their work to help them improve. At Kidderminster College, assessors are more skilled at giving apprentices purposeful feedback.
- Assessors do not set precise enough targets on what apprentices need to do before each review meeting. They provide their apprentices with lists of units, or components of units, that they need to complete. However, not enough apprentices are fully aware of the knowledge and skills that they have already gained or those that they still need to acquire to be successful in completing their qualifications to a high standard.
- Assessors and tutors too often accept mediocre standards of work from apprentices, and do not push apprentices further to reach their potential. Apprentices at Carlisle College develop their skills well. For example, engineering apprentices can design, fabricate and build complex ventilation ducting to a high industry standard.
- Too many apprentices do not have a good enough understanding of how the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism apply in the workplace. Staff do not expand learners' understanding of the dangers posed by those who hold extremist views beyond posing simple closed questions on these. Staff do not raise apprentices' awareness of British values sufficiently.
- Most apprentices receive good guidance that ensures that they are placed on an apprenticeship that matches their career aims. Apprentices also receive suitable guidance to help them to plan their next steps. For example, at Newcastle College, apprentices receive effective independent careers advice through employer events that are held in conjunction with the different curriculum areas.
- Apprentices develop effective work-related skills which employers value, such as good attendance, punctuality and effective teamworking. Apprentices demonstrate positive attitudes about their programme; they take pride in their work and contribute enthusiastically in their employers' businesses. For example, inspectors observed apprentices applying complex skills, such as in motor vehicle engineering when diagnosing and rectifying a brake fault.
- The large majority of employers are supportive of their apprentices and provide good guidance and mentorship to help them to integrate effectively in the workplace. Apprentices speak enthusiastically about the new skills that they acquire from their mentors. For example, medical practice level 2 apprentices work alongside receptionists to learn how to book appointments, welcome patients and solve queries.
- Leaders and managers are beginning to nurture effective relationships with employers, particularly in developing apprenticeship standards. They have developed the range of apprenticeships offered well to meet employers' needs. At Lewisham Southwark College, they now deliver apprenticeships for dual fuel smart meter installers. At Newcastle College, leaders and managers have reviewed the delivery model of level 3 software development programmes to allow entry at various points in the year to meet the needs of a large employer.

Provision for learners with high needs

Good

- At the time of the inspection, NCG had 500 learners with high needs across its divisions. Learners study on a programme that aims to provide them with education, training and support towards independent living, supported employment, further education and community engagement.
- The provision is uniformly good across all the divisions, and learners make good progress towards their personal, social and work targets. Learners enjoy their learning and are confident to contribute, and most know that making mistakes is part of the learning process.
- Leaders and managers work well with local communities, specialist services and local authorities to develop a curriculum and provide effective support that meets the diverse and complex needs of learners well. Staff are well trained and experienced to support learners to manage their own behaviour and to minimise challenging situations. Consequently, learners make good progress in overcoming personal barriers and learn to manage their own behaviour effectively.
- Leaders and managers have developed good partnerships with local employers and relevant services. This results in learners successfully securing independent and supported work experience with a wide range of employers and organisations that is appropriate to their personal goals and job aspirations. Learners develop the work skills that they require, and a high proportion move successfully to appropriate employment or higher levels of study. At Carlisle College and Lewisham Southwark College, a small proportion of learners do not have access to a supported internship programme to meet their specific work goal.
- Leaders and managers use high-needs funding well to provide learners with good resources, assistive technology and highly skilled staff that help them to participate fully in their learning and develop their independence well. Learners develop effective practical skills in learning environments that reflect industry standards. For example, learners at Carlisle College developed and performed a short play in a theatre, and catering learners at Lewisham Southwark College interpret recipes and prepare food to realistic deadlines for the college cafe.
- Teachers use their expertise effectively to support learners to develop their vocational skills to a higher level. For example, learners in art lessons improve their drawing skills by learning advanced ink techniques to develop the contrast in their paintings. They develop their initial research drawings and produce complex final pieces for their assessments. In ICT lessons, learners develop effective work skills such as the use of graphic typology and the setting of accurate routers and virtual private network connections. Because of the skills that they develop, a high proportion of learners progress to appropriate work opportunities, traineeships, apprenticeships or higher levels of study.
- Managers and staff successfully develop and implement learning and support strategies to meet learners' individual needs. Specialist communication, personal emergency evacuation plans, and health and behaviour strategies are planned well, and staff use them effectively in the classrooms. In employability lessons, learners carefully consider the importance of personal appearance and body language during job interviews.
- Teachers plan and teach high-quality and interesting learning activities that challenge learners to make greater efforts in developing their independence and help them to

succeed. For example, learners learn how to prepare and cook a healthy meal. They develop good organisational skills by completing everyday cleaning tasks and develop the ability and confidence to travel independently. This helps learners to prepare well for adult life.

- Staff provide effective advice to learners at the start of the course, and good careers education throughout their programmes. They make good use of the outcomes of early assessments of learners' knowledge and skills to adapt their teaching to meet learners' needs during the early stages of their course. As a result, learners quickly settle into college life and develop realistic plans for their future lives and work.
- Learners across the divisions participate in a broad range of work-related and social initiatives that benefit the local communities, such as a retail outlet, a 'grow a seed' horticulture project, theatre performances, sensory garden charitable projects, voluntary work with foodbanks, and fundraising with large supermarkets. Learners interact well with people they are not familiar with and improve their communication and social skills.
- Learners have a good awareness of personal health and safety. For example, they routinely wear personal protective equipment during practical lessons, and know why this is important, and they move safely around the campuses.
- In a small minority of cases, teachers do not use the information that they have about what learners have achieved on their course to plan their next steps. In these instances, teachers do not provide learners with further and sufficiently challenging work to help them to develop their knowledge and skills to a higher level.
- In a small proportion of lessons at Carlisle College and Newcastle College, teachers do not provide challenging tasks to help learners to develop their skills in English and mathematics to a higher level. As a result, these learners do not acquire the skills to be as successful or confident as they could be in work and adult life.

Provider details

Unique reference number	130552
Type of provider	General further education college
Age range of learners	16+
Approximate number of all learners over the previous full contract year	26,538
Principal/CEO	Joe Docherty
Telephone number	0191 200 4800
Website	www.ncgrp.co.uk

Provider information at the time of the inspection

Main course or learning programme level	Level 1 or below		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4 or above	
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+
Total number of learners (excluding apprenticeships)	2,676	5,937	3,307	5,084	5,554	577	1	-
Number of apprentices by apprenticeship level and age	Intermediate		Advanced		Higher			
	16–18	19+	16–18	19+	16–18	19+		
	485	909	244	1,056	3	236		
Number of traineeships	16–19		19+		Total			
	-		8		8			
Number of learners aged 14 to 16	-							
Number of learners for which the provider receives high-needs funding	500							
At the time of inspection, the provider contracts with the following main subcontractors:	Home Group Manchester Young Lives Ltd MIFA Ltd Mode Training Limited PET-Xi Training Ltd Progress Sports Limited SCL Education & Training Limited Skills4U North East Ltd Sport Works Limited Street League							

Trans4m Leicester CIC
Youth Education Project (YEP) Limited
Care-Fully Trained Ltd
Ken Bate Associates Limited
Discover Consultancy & Training CIC
Groundwork Cheshire, Lancashire & Merseyside
Maersk Training Newcastle Limited
TLG Business Services Ltd
Vortex Training Solutions Ltd
Group Horizon Limited
Pentlands Assessment Centres Ltd
Premier Training International Limited
The Skills Network
Acorn Training Ltd
Equitrain Limited
Training Event Safety Solutions Ltd
Universal Learning Streams (USL) Ltd
Abberley Care Farm
Equestrian Training Ltd
System People Limited
Taylor Made Training (NW) Ltd
The Appleby Heritage Centre Limited

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the director of quality as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. Inspectors used group and individual interviews, telephone calls and online questionnaires to gather the views of learners and employers; these views are reflected within the report. They observed learning sessions, assessments and progress reviews. The inspection took into account all relevant provision at the provider.

Inspection team

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Martin Ward	Her Majesty's Inspector
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Malcolm Bruce	Ofsted Inspector

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Ken Fisher	Ofsted Inspector
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