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LIFTING THE LID ON WHAT'S KEEPING 1,700 OFSTED STAFF BUSY



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EXCLUSIVE: GOVERNMENT TO TAKE OWNERSHIP OF COLLEGES

- New legislation planned to put colleges back into public ownership
- Education secretary boasts of 'revolutionary' reform in White Paper
- Area reviews, bailouts and insolvency regime deemed to have failed

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Frameworks set for stay of execution

BILLY CAMDEN

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Exclusive

The government is considering a U-turn on its planned date to switch off old-style apprenticeship frameworks as providers raise major concerns over the deadline.

Numerous training firms and colleges that spoke to FE Week warned they will have to pause starts in areas such as construction, stonemasonry, hairdressing, beauty therapy and logistic operations as they do not yet have a viable replacement standard ready for delivery.

The situation has been made worse by the Covid-19 outbreak, with many planned starts on the frameworks being withdrawn in recent months as employers battle cashflow issues.

The deadline for stopping new starts on all frameworks is set for July 31.

Rob Nitsch, the chief operating officer of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, said last month that talks to extend this deadline were under way, but that the decision ultimately lies with the Department for Education.

A spokesperson for the DfE confirmed this week that they are “continuing to monitor the situation closely” and will “consider what further action may be needed so that apprenticeships can continue and businesses can meet their skills needs”.

“The end-point assessment is not ready”

The consideration is part of their attempts to measure the “full impact of the Covid-19 outbreak”.

Many providers shared their frustration at the current cut-off date with FE Week.

Building Crafts College delivers frameworks in stonemasonry to around 20 new apprentices every year. A replacement level 2 stonemasonry standard has been in development since



November 2017 and while it was finally “approved” by the IfATE on May 1, it still needs an assessment plan created and funding rate decided before it can be delivered.

The college has been involved in the trailblazer group for the standard, but quality manager Frances Hill said that when they have asked what to do with new apprentices this year, once the frameworks have been turned off, “we were told, you will have to hold them off as there will not be any funding for them as the end-point assessment is not ready”.

She added that the “official estimate” for the assessment plan is “six months, whereas the more realistic but unofficial estimate is 12 to 18 months”.

Michelle Turner, a director of Stone Restoration Services Ltd and lead trailblazer contact for the stonemasonry standard, said they are “aiming to finalise and submit the end-point assessment plan at the earliest opportunity, taking into account the added challenges around Covid-19”.

“We are planning for the long term and are confident that the new standard will be a major

improvement on the old framework and will serve the sector well for years to come,” she added, but stopped short of giving an expected date for it to be ready for delivery.

Derek Whitehead, principal of Leeds College of Building, said there are “major concerns” that there “aren’t enough level 2 standards” in construction and the built environment to replace existing frameworks.

While there are 84 construction standards ready for delivery at various levels, Whitehead said there are “gaps in provision” such as “no standard for plumbers who just do bathroom installations”.

“New standards were put in the hands of employers to drive and unfortunately it’s not happened and it doesn’t help where the bulk of their employers, for example, in construction, are small and medium-sized businesses and micro companies, at that. The current Covid situation isn’t helping with such developments,” he told FE Week.

Whitehead said the frameworks cut off “definitely needs to be delayed” until a “full review by all sectors is undertaken together

News

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with end-point assessment capacity”.

Giles Holmes, senior account manager at Leicester College, shared similar concerns and called specifically for the level 3 and 5 built environment frameworks to stay on.

The college was planning to work with its employers this spring to decide what standards in construction they could use instead, but this has not been possible due to the impact of coronavirus.

“Standards are not like-for-like replacements for frameworks”

Holmes said the “ability to be able to continue to deliver” the built environment frameworks in 2020-21 would mean “we can secure good numbers of starts in construction and work with the local levy construction employers to ensure we are preparing to deliver the right construction standards that meet their needs”.

David Rose, chief executive of KEITS Training Services Ltd in Hertfordshire, raised concern that there are no apprenticeship standards yet in animal care level 3 and floristry levels 2 and 3 ready for delivery to replace their frameworks.

He said the pandemic has put a stop to their planned recruitment and they will “miss the opportunity now, should the switch-off not be delayed”.

“Without extending frameworks, new starts nationally for 2020 will be even more dismal reading and there will be less opportunity for young people to follow an apprenticeship route,” Rose added.

Multiple providers named beauty therapy and hairdressing at level 3 as a gap in apprenticeship standard provision.

While the beauty therapist level 2 standard was approved for use in 2018, Carla Hales, the business director at Debut Training Academy, said: “The standards for our industry have not been released yet, therefore if frameworks are discontinued we will not be able to start any new apprentices in August.

“This will be detrimental to our business as we have now had no new starts since March 2020.”

Charlotte Moreland, managing director at

the National Hairdressing Training Academy, said they are “stuck between a rock and a hard place if the July date happens for switch-off”.

In response to the concerns, a spokesperson for the IfATE said standards are “not like-for-like replacements for frameworks”.

When asked what advice they would give to providers who believe there is no standard available that could be used instead of the current framework, such as for stonemasonry, the institute would not give a straight answer.

Instead, a spokesperson said: “We are

committed to supporting the sector fully through the challenge of the lockdown and against the impact of Covid-19.

“We are looking at how we can progress all standards in development at best speed in the prevailing circumstances without compromising quality.”

The DfE added that where employers believe that there is a genuine occupational gap that is not met by existing standards, they should contact the institute via enquiries.ifa@education.gov.uk

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Government to take ownership of colleges

NICK LINFORD

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From front

Exclusive

The government is working on a plan to bring colleges in England back into public ownership, FE Week understands.

Work has begun on a White Paper to be followed by legislation, after recent attempts to financially stabilise the sector with an area review programme and restructuring funds totalling around half a billion pounds were deemed to have failed.

The number of colleges in formal intervention over their finances, currently more than 30, continues to rise and government bailouts have not stopped in recent months despite attempts to end them last March with the introduction of a new education administration regime.

But it is understood that civil servants have concluded the first and so far only colleges to be put into administration, Hadlow College and West Kent and Ashford College, have been both too slow and too costly.

This newspaper first revealed the government was working on a new FE Bill in January and last week Gavin Williamson, the education secretary said the reforms would be "revolutionary" - but until now the potential for the nationalisation of the college sector was unknown.

A key option being considered is to reverse legislation introduced in the Education Act 2011, which removed the need for colleges to seek consent before borrowing from banks and limited government powers to intervene where a college is being mismanaged or is performing poorly.

Government is understood to be concerned that even in instances where a college has been issued with an inadequate financial

grade, an inadequate Ofsted assessment, received bailout funding and placed into 'Administered College Status', the college governing body remains independent.

This means the government, has no overall control of which courses are run, whether they must merge and with whom, and more generally how they spend public funds.

Government powers became so limited under the 2011 Act that in May 2012 the Office for National Statistics took colleges in England out of the public sector classification.

It is understood Williamson and the team around him are becoming increasingly frustrated by this inability to step in when they deem there to have been leadership failures.

In his annual report for 2018/19, the FE Commissioner, Richard Atkins said that in the severe problems he saw "they were frequently the result of poor governance and leadership over a number of years, resulting in weak decision-making".

The government has started to parachute in paid chairs from their National Leaders of Governance programme as well as investing in a Strategic College Improvement Fund - but this has not gone far enough, and the general lack of control will now be addressed.

Work on the White Paper has picked up a pace in recent weeks, as concern over college finances has heightened with the coronavirus. It is led at the DfE by Keith Smith, who was redeployed from the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

Smith is working closely with Williamson but reports to Paul Kett, director general for HE and FE at the DfE.

Another key civil servant is Matt Atkinson, who was initially drafted in from PWC to

oversee the college restructuring deals and is now director of the provider market oversight team. FE Week



Gavin Williamson

understands Atkinson will take over the FE Commissioner's team when Atkins finishes his second two year contract this October.

There has been tension between the FE Commissioner's team, which is part of the DfE, and the ESFA's intervention team, something that could be revealed once the Dame Nay report into college financial oversight is published.

Department for Education did not deny the plan to take greater control of colleges.

A spokesperson said: "The Education Secretary already made clear that we are working on a White Paper aimed at delivering ambitious reform in our vital FE sector.

"We have been working very closely with the sector on the development of the reform programme from the start and will continue to do so. We will outline further details in due course."

David Hughes, chief executive of the Association of Colleges, when asked about the secret plans said: "Ministers and officials are already engaging us as they shape their reforms and I am confident that will continue.

"It is too early to be sure where it will end, so it would be wrong to pre-judge what the reforms should be or to rake over old problems when what we need to be doing is to work on a better system for the future."



Keith Smith, Matt Atkinson and Paul Kett

Brighton-based adult ed charity rescued by council

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A long-running adult education charity has been saved from going under after a local council agreed to a £100,000 rescue deal.

The Friends Centre was on the brink of collapse after losing access to direct government skills funding, hitting repeated financial deficits and experiencing a substantial drop in cash reserves.

Brighton and Hove City Council, which subcontracts to the 75-year-old charity, has now stepped in to protect almost 50 jobs and the learning for around 1,000 adults by bringing the training “in-house” from August.

The council insists this is not a takeover, even though Friends Centre staff will transfer to the council, via TUPE, to continue learning delivery. Decisions for the charity will continue to be made by its trustees, including president and well-known FE figure Alan Tuckett, who was knighted in the Queen's New Year Honours 2018.

He welcomed the council's support but told *FE Week* the reason it is needed “speaks volumes about the impoverishment of public life that a narrow utilitarian approach to education funding has fostered, and points us to the need for other ways of supporting the cultural institutions of a civilised society”.

Helen Osborne, the chief executive of the charity, said that they were “looking at partnerships” with other providers to stay afloat prior to the council's proposal but “we now feel that this is the best possible option for delivery in the city”.

“There are still a number of areas that we need to work through with the council, and these are ongoing discussions,” she added.

The Friends Centre launched in 1945 when it started teaching demobbed troops, evacuees and refugees from the Second World War. It currently teaches 1,000 people annually, including English, maths and IT skills for the homeless.

Other courses on offer include functional skills, English for speakers of other languages, and mental health awareness.

The charity is



classified as an independent training provider and lost access to direct government funding in 2017 after failing in its bid to the controversial adult education budget tender, which was riddled with problems and delays.

It has since had to subcontract from Brighton and Hove City Council, a model which it states is “unsustainable”.

The council's own adult education budget funding allocation for next year is expected to total £569,988. A spokesperson said “additional council funding of £101,030 has been agreed” to deliver the Friends Centre's services for 2020-21.

As well as the TUPE arrangement, the council will lease the Friends Centre's premises for one year as part of the deal.

The charity's latest financial accounts, for 2018-19, show a deficit of £14,333. The trustees had planned to “return to running a balanced budget, or one which delivers a surplus and did not deplete our cash reserves below £90,000”, but this was not achieved and reserves fell to £43,150.

A joint statement from the council and charity said the main funding issue “has been around not having a direct government contract to the Friends Centre itself”.

Both Brighton and Hove City Council and the Friends Centre are rated ‘good’ by Ofsted.

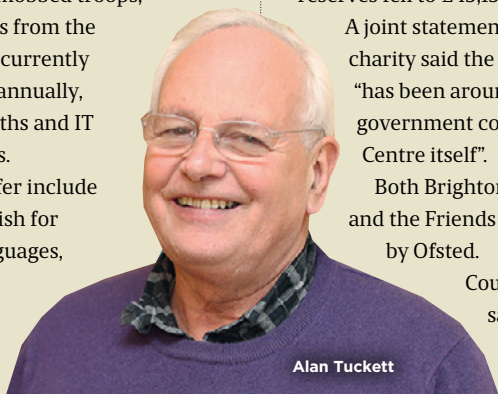
Councillor John Allcock said: “We absolutely need this service in our city,

as its vital to sustain and develop adult skills.”

Tuckett, who led the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education for 23 years and became known as FE's “campaigner-in-chief” for lifelong learning, was chief executive of the Friends Centre in the 1970s.

“It had then, and now, the happy knack of combining a commitment to adult education as a second chance, with a belief that for everyone making sense of change and how you can help to shape it, enriches lives,” he told *FE Week*.

Tuckett added that the charity “celebrates art, culture, ideas, language”, which are “exactly the values this [Covid-19] virus has helped us rediscover as the basis for a society worth living in”.



Alan Tuckett



Helen Osborne

Huge demand for health and social care training from public as 400,000 volunteer to support the COVID-19 fight

There has been a spike in demand from individuals looking to complete online training in the wake of the Coronavirus crisis.

The demand comes as 400,000 people have signed up to become an NHS volunteer to support our health service in facing one of the biggest challenges of the century. With large portions of the population furloughed or left unemployed, training providers have seen a huge increase in the demand for Health and Social Care training from those volunteering or at home with ambitions to become key workers and play their part.

With classroom learning no longer possible to help prevent the spread of the virus, individuals are choosing to study online. National training provider, Learning Curve Group, launched their #EducateWhilstYouIsolate campaign in March to support those in isolation in gaining new skills and knowledge.

Within a month, they've seen over 22,000 people register their interest to complete an online course, with 75% of these courses in subject areas that will support key workers; not only across the health and social care sector, but warehousing and manufacturing too.

Despite the huge influx of enquiries, support from the government to provide this training has yet to be confirmed. Brenda McLeish, Chief Executive Officer at Learning Curve Group, said: "It's great to see such a huge appetite for training, and we want to support these individuals to gain knowledge and skills that will support us not only through this crisis, but in the long term too.

"We need support from the government to release existing funds to allow us to deliver this training to the 22,000 people who are sitting and waiting for funding. We're not



accessing the supplier relief scheme and we're not looking for handouts - we're looking for support to help people across the country who want to learn."

The government announced on April 24 that providers could access additional financial support to 'continue to deliver the best education and training possible' - however, this support won't cover the new demand for online training which would need to be funded via the Adult Education Budget.

"At a time of national crisis, it's important that we focus on both getting through the difficult weeks and months ahead, but also the long-term impacts this will have," McLeish continued. "We're going to see staggering numbers of unemployment once we're through the other side and using this time to give individuals skills and knowledge can only be a positive."

The campaign has been supported by colleges across the country, but without Government support, thousands of learners will be left without funding and unable to

complete their qualifications.

At the beginning of April, the Government released a publication that said FE providers should continue to deliver learning online, 'including for ESFA funded AEB, via existing sub-contracting arrangements to support existing learners to successfully complete their courses... or retain evidence where this is not possible' it also suggested that providers should be supporting 'furloughed workers to enhance existing or develop new skills'.

With FE providers being told to continue delivering learning online, Learning Curve Group are engaging with grant funded providers to engage with the campaign to support learners in their area.

The interest in studying online has never been higher, and whilst this is a rapidly changing situation that no one has experienced before, if the Government wants providers to support learners through online learning, it's clear that gaps in funding need filling.

Low Pay Commission calls on government to better protect apprentices

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The government has been urged to take action against recurrent “very high levels” of illegally low apprentice wages.

The Low Pay Commission published its third report this week to advise government on compliance with national minimum wage rates, and highlighted that as many as one in three apprentices in some age groups are not paid their entitlement.

The analysis suggests that “confusion” around the requirement to pay apprentices for their training hours is “likely to account for a large proportion of this underpayment”.

The report said the highest levels of non-compliance are recorded for apprentices aged 19 and over in their second year, which is after their minimum wage has increased from the apprentice rate to the appropriate minimum wage for their age.

“Large proportions” of younger, 16-to-18-

year-old apprentices in their first year also report underpayment, it added.

The LPC has made three recommendations to government to better protect apprentice wages.

The first is to use “targeted communications” to both apprentices and their employers to “highlight underpayment risks, and in particular, the problem of non-payment of training hours”.

The second proposal is for HMRC to “review the way they record apprentice underpayment, and to publish the numbers and profile of the apprentices they identify as underpaid”, while the third is for the tax office to “review their approach to investigations involving apprentices, to understand whether these investigations would identify non-payment of training hours”.

The current apprentice rate, from April 1, 2020, is £4.15 per hour, which increases to the national minimum wage for over-19s when they move into their second year of the programme.

The LPC’s report uses the Apprenticeship Pay Survey (APS) as the most reliable source of minimum wage compliance. The latest survey,



for 2019, was released in January and revealed that cases of illegal wages being paid to apprentices had risen by 1 per cent.

It found that 19 per cent had reported being underpaid – slight increase on the 18 per cent rate from the last survey in 2017.

Non-compliance at levels 2 and 3 was higher than average in hairdressing, at 48 per cent, and lowest on management apprenticeships, at seven per cent.

A government spokesperson said: “All businesses, irrespective of size or sector, must pay the correct minimum wage to their staff, so we won’t hesitate to take action against those who fail to do so.”

ESFA seeks legal advice in face of unpublished Ofsted reports

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Exclusive

The Education and Skills Funding Agency is taking legal advice on whether it can intervene at new providers before Ofsted publish their inspection reports.

The watchdog paused the publication of all further education and skills reports on March 20 owing to the coronavirus pandemic, but later said it would release them sooner if requested by individual providers.

Ofsted previously told FE Week it was sitting on around 50 reports for providers that had been visited before the Covid-19 outbreak. It published 12 of them at the time of going to press this week – all of which showed positive results.

This newspaper understands that a number

of the unpublished FE and skills inspection reports were early monitoring visits of new providers that resulted in ‘insufficient progress’ judgments and would normally result in them being suspended from new starts, in line with ESFA rules.

The agency’s policy states: “When Ofsted publish a monitoring visit report that finds that ‘insufficient progress’ has been made under one or more of the themes assessed, then unless an exceptional extenuating circumstance is identified, we will take a range of actions as outlined in contracts and funding agreements.”

When asked about whether it could take action against providers found making ‘insufficient progress’ in monitoring visits if the report has not been published, the ESFA would only say that it is working with Ofsted and its legal team to understand the ramifications of Ofsted’s pause of publications and to decide the best course of action to minimise disruption to apprentices and

providers.

It means that there is likely to be a number of new providers that have been judged ‘insufficient’ by Ofsted but can still recruit new learners and apprentices.

An Ofsted spokesperson said the organisation would not comment on unpublished reports, but told FE Week the DfE and the ESFA are “regularly made aware of provisional outcomes of inspections and monitoring visits”.

“Where a report has been finalised it is sent to the DfE/ESFA at the same time as it is sent to the provider, in line with our statutory duties,” he added.

The decision to pause the publication of inspection reports was revealed by Paul Joyce, Ofsted’s deputy director for FE and skills, during an FE Week webinar in March.

He said they had taken the decision because they are “well aware providers have enough to deal with” during the current pandemic.

News

£10m upgrade to the digital apprenticeship service

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A two-year £10 million project to renovate the digital apprenticeship service as it is scaled up is being launched by the Department for Education.

The development, to start as early as next month, will aim to “simplify processes to remove burden” by, for example, creating a new function for paying end-point assessment organisations direct.

The number of employers using the system is expected to increase by more than 150,000 in the coming months as small and medium-sized businesses transition on to it.

Large levy-paying employers have had full use of the digital service to manage their apprenticeships since the “minimum viable” system became operational in 2017.

It currently allows businesses to manage their apprenticeship funding, select a suitable standard or framework, choose a provider to deliver training and provide digital certification.

Over the past three years the department has “continued to add new capabilities” that are “connected through personalised user-outcome, AI-based, real-time data models”.

Two tenders looking for suppliers to now “make the service easy to use” and to enable “all employers to take greater control of apprenticeship funding” are currently live from the DfE and total £5 million each.

The successful bidders must scale the apprenticeship service “so that this holds true at significant volumes”.

Another “problem to be solved”, according to the tenders, is to “surface unmet demand to the marketplace” by “ensuring suppliers have visibility of real-time employer demand and can explore opportunities to fill gaps and meet employers’ skills needs”.

Officials also want the service to “mature” by suppliers “building out our continuous improvement function with focus on simplifying processes to remove burden, ensuring we maintain service availability and reliability as we scale the volume of users and increasing performance and efficiency”.

A key part of the upgrade will be to add a function that enables EPAOs to receive payment direct from government – rather than the current system, where they are paid through training providers.

The incumbent software house supporting the digital apprenticeship service is the firm Contractsonline Ltd.

Both DfE tenders are worth up to £5 million each and will both “be supporting apprenticeship services”.

“Whilst there is some crossover in capabilities required for delivery, there is varying essential criteria which we are looking for in each opportunity,” the tenders state.

“They will be run independently of each other and will be assessed against the skills experience outlined. The current delivery model brings together managed services, potentially from different suppliers and permanent staff.”

The closing date for one of the tenders is May 6, with a start date of June 1, while the last day for applications for the other is May 13, with the contract due to commence on June 14.



Four-month delay for DAS transition

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The full transition on to the digital apprenticeship system has been delayed by four months.

Officials had planned to end provider funding allocations being used to train apprentices with small non-levy-paying businesses by October 31, with all starts to be managed through the online service from November 1.

But “in light of the challenges being faced by providers and employers as a result of the current coronavirus pandemic” the transition period has been extended to April 1, 2021, the Education and Skills Funding Agency announced this week.

“We are extending the transition period on to the service. Funds available for new starts on non-levy-procured contracts can now be used until March 31, 2021,” they added.

“We remain committed to giving smaller employers greater control over their apprenticeship choices by moving towards a system in which employers select an apprenticeship standard, choose their training provider and secure access to funding for all new apprenticeships through the apprenticeship service.

“As originally planned, this means, over time, more employers who do not pay the apprenticeship levy will begin to access apprenticeship training via the apprenticeship service, as well as through a provider with an existing government contract (now extended until March 31, 2021).

“Contract variations will be issued in the summer to support the changes, and performance-management rules will be confirmed shortly through the usual routes.”

Only larger employers with an annual pay bill of over £3 million who pay the apprenticeship levy can draw down funding for an unlimited number of starts from the online service.

Small employers were originally expected to have access to the service in April 2019. Their transition on to the system began in January but non-levy paying businesses have been capped initially and can only make reservations for up to three apprenticeship starts.

Highlights from our webinar with Toby Perkins

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FE Week was joined by Labour's shadow minister for apprenticeships and lifelong learning Toby Perkins on Monday for our latest webinar on the response to the coronavirus pandemic for the FE and skills sector.

Here were the main takeaway points.

Extend supplier relief support to levy-funded apprenticeships

The Labour Party believes the Education and Skills Funding Agency should extend its Covid-19 supplier relief to all apprenticeships, including those funded through the digital services that are currently barred from the financial support.

Perkins said the issue, which the Association of Employment and Learning Providers is challenging legally, needs to be implemented to "safeguard a tremendous amount of the sector".

"I think it's a position the government will ultimately be forced into, and the sooner they get on with it, the greater the reduction in casualties, either in terms of businesses and apprenticeships or in terms of job losses."

A national skills response to coronavirus is needed

The shadow minister said it was important to attempt to predict the impact of the crisis on the economy and what the skills response to that should be. "I think that means there's going to be a huge need for retraining."

He claimed there are likely to be many people in the job market as a result, and proposes a major adult education and reskilling programme "to give people hope... To give people the skills that they need to adapt to the changing circumstances is absolutely crucial".

Perkins went on to say he thinks the government needs to be giving "really serious thought to working collectively with the sector on the provision of all the alternatives that will enable us to build in a better-skilled future out of the current crisis".

Colleges need additional funding for an expected increase in students

Perkins warned that if, due to the economic



Toby Perkins

circumstances and furloughing of staff members, many companies decide not to go ahead with planned apprenticeships, colleges will be faced with a "massive increase in the number of full-time students".

He is calling on the government to look at how colleges can be funded in the event they do find a surge in such learner numbers "to be able to provide that provision without hitting a cashflow crisis".

Updating IT infrastructure would be 'very valuable'

In response to Andrew Adonis's controversial comments about education establishments not providing adequate online learning and support, Perkins said: "I think we all recognise that this is an incredibly difficult period of time and I think it's important alongside any critiques to recognise the absolutely extraordinary steps that many teachers and lecturers are going to in order to provide both educational support and personal support to learners and to their families at this time."

He acknowledged that many in the sector were "dismayed" by Adonis's comments, but added that Adonis may have heard alternative cases that have led him to believe that learners are being let down. If this is the case, these should be investigated.

The MP added there should be an assessment of what infrastructure is available to deliver remote learning. "I think there is always going to be a need to make sure you are investing in something that you are going to be able to continue to use going forward."

He noted that there is representation to suggest that updating IT in the sector is "an overdue project anyway", which would have both an immediate benefit plus longer-term benefits, "so I would absolutely support that."

T-levels introduction may consume departmental attention

Last month the government said it is still committed to rolling out the first T-levels in September 2020, despite the pandemic. Perkins said his "biggest worry" with the plan is that the new qualifications are something that are going to affect a "tiny number of students in the first instance, but will consume a huge amount of departmental attention" and their ability to deal with "really pressing issues facing a far greater section of the sector".

He admitted it is difficult to determine the impact from the outside but that, so long as they are in a position to address the other challenges, "I've no objection".

Perkins added the other main obstacle with T-levels is the work-experience element. "That will be a substantial undertaking, I think, under any circumstances. To do it in the current climate is even more challenging, so there needs to be some flexibility around that sort of issue."

'Huge concern' over redundancies in the sector

Perkins said he is "very worried" about likely job losses in FE "on the back of nine or ten years of terrible economic allocation". He is concerned that "if they were to see the sort of scale of cuts or deductions in income that I'm hearing, that there isn't going to be enough in the system for them in some cases to even survive, but certainly to prevent really significant job losses in a sector that I just don't feel can afford it".

The shadow minister added that it must be ensured that the FE sector comes out of the crisis in a position to contribute to skills being at the "forefront of the national response" and with a workforce capable of achieving this.

News

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MP slams RNN Group for 'over-expanding' and 'overpromising'

YASEMIN CRAGGS MERSINOGLU
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Exclusive

An MP has hit out at a college group's financial "mismanagement" after it confirmed plans to close and potentially sell off a campus in his constituency this summer.

Around 55 students at cash-strapped RNN Group's Dinnington site will be moved to other nearby campuses from September 2020, while almost 30 jobs have been put at risk.

The college will look to either rent out or sell the campus buildings in an effort to balance the books after running into financial difficulty.

The Conservative MP for Rother Valley, Alexander Stafford, said he was "bitterly disappointed" and added that the announcement "couldn't have come at a worse time", with students' education already being disrupted as a result of coronavirus.

He said that "any job loss is devastating to the community, especially in this climate".

"I would hope that they could try and reduce job losses more because they did promise that they would look as widely as possible to try and find alternative employment for the people working there," he told FE Week.

The MP blamed prior financial "mismanagement" by the RNN Group, which

he said had "over-expanded, over-merged and overpromised". It recorded a £4 million deficit in 2018-19 – almost double the shortfall of the year before.

The Dinnington campus was formerly known as Rother Valley College, which merged with Rotherham College of Arts and Technology in August 2004.

RNN Group was formed following a merger between Rotherham College of Arts and Technology and North Notts College in 2016 and a further merger with Dearne Valley College in 2017.

In one of his last face-to-face meetings before lockdown, Stafford spoke to apprenticeships and skills minister Gillian Keegan and other stakeholders about how to save jobs and the site.

He has also met with the FE commissioner, Richard Atkins, and said they had reached out to offer support to the college.

Stafford has now written to the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, to suggest using the Dinnington campus' main building as one of the new sites for government departments outside London, or regenerating it as a performing arts centre as part of the Cultural Investment Fund proposed in the Budget.

He said: "It's quite a grandiose building, with a clock tower, and I really want that to be saved for the community, rather

than knocked down or sold off as flats. That's something I'm concentrating on now."

Jason Austin, chief executive officer and principal, said: "We understand the strength of feeling for the Dinnington campus. However, we have had to take difficult decisions to ensure that the RNN Group is on a secure and sustainable financial footing and well positioned for the future."

While 26 jobs are currently at risk, the majority of Dinnington's 122 staff will transfer to RNN's other sites.

Approximately 575 learners have been studying 38 different courses, such as animal care management and construction, at the campus this academic year, 480 of which were supposed to finish this summer.

Students due to stay on will either be relocated to Rotherham College's town centre campus ten miles away, North Notts College in Worksop seven miles away or Dearne Valley College in

Wath upon Dearne which is 13 miles away, from the start of the next academic year.

RNN is one of a number of colleges that have announced plans to close and sell off campuses that have been met with MP opposition.

Other cases have included Cornwall College Group, BMet, Warrington & Vale Royal College and most recently Newton Rigg College.



Alexander Stafford

Draft AEB funding rules omit subcontract limit

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Draft rules for funding the adult education budget in 2020-21 have not included any changes to subcontracting, despite the government's warning of an overhaul.

The sector had been bracing itself for big amendments, including a funding and distance cap on the provision, following the Education and Skills Funding Agency's "subcontracting post-16 education and training" consultation, which closed on March 17.

The plan was to start implementing rule changes at the start of 2020-21 but none surfaced in the draft rules published this week.

The ESFA said the rules are "our current advice for the funding year" and they "may publish further updates about the impact of Covid-19 on our funding rules, as these become clear".

The subcontracting consultation was launched

earlier this year after the agency's boss, Eileen Milner, sent a sector-wide letter warning she will take strong action against any provider that does not play by their rules, following scandals such as the one at Brooklands College.

When the call for views got under way in February, the ESFA said it was aiming to "eliminate subcontracting that is undertaken for purely financial reasons".

Ten recommendations followed, including a percentage cap on provision of 25 per cent of a provider's ESFA post-16 income in 2021-22, and further reducing that percentage to 17.5 per cent in 2022-23 and to 10 per cent in 2023-24.

It also proposed that where the aggregate value of a subcontractor's delivery exceeds more than £3 million of ESFA-funded provision, the agency would make a referral to Ofsted for the subcontractor to be subject to a direct inspection.

Another key recommendation was to introduce "stronger criteria for subcontracted provision delivered at a distance", stating that as a "broad

rule of thumb", partners should be no more than one hour away from the prime contractor by car.

Further plans include stricter controls on the circumstances in which the whole of a learner's programme can be subcontracted, as well as tighter oversight of sport-related provision as it is a "particular concern" to the ESFA.

A new "rationale for subcontracting" requirement as part of provider subcontracting declarations is also in the works. Providers will need to "state the educational intent for entering into subcontracting arrangements and that governors and boards have agreed this".

The consultation states that "entering into subcontracting arrangements for financial gain" will not be considered an acceptable reason for doing so.

FE Week analysis of ESFA data shows that subcontracting accounted for £650 million in government funding for adults in 2018-19, and the practice fully or partially funded 25,230 students aged 16 to 19 at 587 subcontractors.

Hereford SFC to build extra classrooms

YASEMIN CRAGGS MERSINOGLU

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A sixth-form has brought forward plans to build extra temporary classrooms as colleges across the country brace themselves for an expected influx of students due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Hereford Sixth Form College has applied for planning permission to install two mobile classrooms in time for new learners arriving in September.

“We have accrued reserves for a rainy day, and if this isn't a rainy day, I'm not sure what is”

Principal Peter Cooper estimates the number of students could increase by 10 to 15 per cent, from around 2,000, in the wake of the current crisis and expects some social distancing measures to apply.

This is based on the likelihood of more students staying on after their first year and a “few” learners who are disappointed with their results wanting to return to improve their grades.

The Association of Colleges has predicted that college places could be needed for an additional 100,000 young people across the country, who would have expected to start an apprenticeship, work-based learning programme, employer-based training or entered the labour market in the coming academic year.

The organisation has also estimated that pressures on available college places will include “a rising population of young people, potential increases in transfers from private to state provision, and the inevitable space constraints created by social distancing”.

However, Cooper cautioned that the upturn “really depends on the situation on the ground when we get to September”.

He predicts that some students may be too scared to travel into the college in the current climate, which could lead to a reduction in the



overall number.

As a result, the principal believes other colleges making similar provisions will be dependent on how “tight” their current capacity is and the local dynamics in their area.

He said the new temporary classrooms will cost his college around £200,000.

“We have accrued reserves for a rainy day, and if this isn't a rainy day, I'm not sure what is,” Cooper told *FE Week*.

The college was originally set to submit the planning permission application once it received a decision on its Condition Improvement Fund bid for a new building, but brought this forward as the current circumstances made the extra space even more necessary “to ensure that we have some flexibility for room utilisation”.

The principal is confident the planning permission request, which was submitted in March, will be granted.

In preparation for a potential return in June or September, Cooper has committed a budget of at least £50,000 for purchasing personal protective equipment, sanitising materials and heat sensors.

He claims the sixth form has not faced a significant hit on its finances during this period, and is well placed to respond to the “direction of travel” if additional spending or the cutting of costs is needed.

Cooper also praised the college community's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

He said: “Sometimes in adversity you learn and find ways of doing things, and I've been absolutely delighted with the efforts of staff and students to embrace the changes.”

These included the adoption of a move to remote learning platforms, such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom and other online communication methods.

“I've been absolutely delighted with the efforts of staff and students to embrace the changes”

“I think people have risen to the challenge massively, which I think will have benefits stretching well beyond the crisis,” he continued.

“However, I also think that it highlights many of the qualities that sixth-form colleges bring to things because what people miss out on is the peer-to-peer contact, social skills development and the wider learning skillset which you cannot replicate through these same means.”

News

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Oldham's IT team get to do their 'disaster recovery'

YASEMIN CRAGGS MERSINOGLU

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A college's IT services team have been hailed "unlikely heroes" in the face of Covid-19 after rapidly connecting more than 6,000 staff and students when the outbreak hit.

Lee Murphy, IT services manager at Oldham College, said he always had a plan for "disaster recovery" scenarios but never expected to have to put it into practice.

In total, his team of seven either had to buy, source, build, prepare, install, test, protect and deliver more than 300 separate pieces of kit in a matter of days.

With no Oldham College staff on site to take deliveries, every single one of the purchases had to be sent directly to Murphy's home in Rochdale.

"My house has been like an Amazon depot," he said. "My neighbours just keep seeing huge IT-delivery trucks coming and going from my house at all hours. They must think I'm running some incredibly dodgy racket from home – I might have to move!"

Staff rounded up around 100 laptops that students had been able to borrow and recommissioned them all with "standalone" access



Oldham College's haul of IT equipment

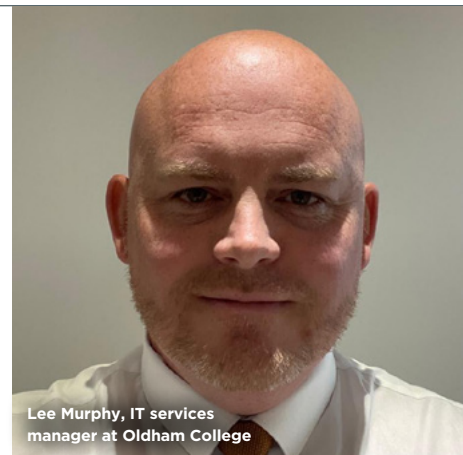
to systems.

A planned purchase of 145 Chromebooks was brought forward, and 40 new mobile phones were also sourced so administrators and programme leads could regularly contact learners.

Some students, including those studying English as a second language, had no kit, so workbooks had to be printed and hand-distributed to their home.

Some employees had no home broadband, so each had to be sorted with access to a mobile network.

One staff member has been visiting campus each day to check that all the central infrastructure is



Lee Murphy, IT services manager at Oldham College

functioning as it should. The rest of the team have been monitoring user activity, identifying issues and logjams and dealing with enquiries: more than 500 phone calls, 50 emails and 25 IT service requests have been received.

Principal Alun Francis said "a huge debt of gratitude" was owed to Murphy and the IT services team for their "incredible" work during this period. "They are always positive, full of solutions and never shirk a challenge.

"To be honest, we would have failed without them in the last few weeks. They have been truly astonishing every day."

Taking up the ventilator challenge

YASEMIN CRAGGS MERSINOGLU

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Engineering apprentices have been helping companies produce more than 60,000 ventilator parts for the NHS in the face of increased demand during the coronavirus pandemic.

Over the past five weeks, 14 level 3 and 4 apprentices who are employed by Shipley-based firm Produmax and who train at Keighley College have been producing components for a consortium of manufacturers that includes the likes of Rolls-Royce and Formula 1.

Paul Birtles, operations director at Produmax, said: "The apprentices have been a phenomenal help during these challenging times. It's brilliant to see them involved in the whole process of the ventilator components, from using advanced equipment to quality checking."

The apprentices have been supporting

the manufacturing of component parts using advanced computer numerical control equipment and employing subtractive and additive machining techniques.

Birtles stated it has been "incredibly rewarding" to see how much the students have developed since starting their apprenticeships.

Max Weatherhead, one of the level 3 apprentices, told FE Week he was "proud to be part of something that is helping save lives".

Ronnie Magee, deputy head of Keighley College, added: "It's fantastic to see a local company supporting the NHS during these challenging times.

"Our apprentices are thrilled to be able to make a difference and assist with producing ventilator components."

Two other level 3 advanced engineering apprentices from Keighley College have also been assisting in the production of ventilator components at Yorkshire Precision Engineering as part of the VentilatorChallengeUK consortium.



Max Weatherhead, Keighley College apprentice at Produmax

Both apprentices have been supporting the production of parts by setting tooling and monitoring performance and consistency.

Lynda Laybourne, sales and finance director at Yorkshire Precision Engineering Ltd, said: "We've been working tirelessly around the clock to make this happen; the apprentices' work ethic is admirable and we're incredibly proud that they can help us fight against the virus."

In total, the firm has produced 8,000 brass-turned parts and 4,000 plastic mill parts, which will be distributed to hospitals across the country.

Feature

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What does an inspectorate do when it can't inspect?

JL DUTAUT
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Six weeks after lockdown and the sudden end of inspections, and five weeks after Ofsted mooted a mass redeployment of staff, JL Dutaut finds out what the inspectors have been up to

It's now six weeks since "business as usual" came to an abrupt end for Ofsted. Yet just last week, chief inspector Amanda Spielman admitted to the education select committee that a "considerable number" of her staff were "less than fully occupied". Cue rumblings of criticism among the profession. But what is the inspectorate to do when its primary function is deemed inappropriate?

Perhaps better to ask what it is that Ofsted staff and inspectors are doing at this time of national crisis. It is five weeks, after all, since Paul Joyce, its deputy director for further education and skills (FES), said Ofsted was working with the Department for Education to redeploy its staff, including as support providers if needed.

Acknowledging that "under-occupation" is a fact for many, what is it that colleges would like this workforce to be doing? (It's worth noting, however, that inspections haven't stopped altogether. They will also resume, which means the organisation has to avoid conflicts of interest, not only now but in the future.)

According to Karen Shepperson, the



inspectorate's director for people and operations, the decision was made early on "to do whatever we could to support the wider government effort, while maintaining our independence on the few emergency inspections we've had to do (in the social care space)".

Most redeployment is happening in-house. About a third of Ofsted's 1,700 staff are "fully occupied with the day job or our own emergency response", she says. The bulk of the rest, who have been reassigned, are helping other government departments and working through local authorities, who have been tasked by DfE to coordinate local responses. Ninety-five

are supporting the Department of Health and Social Care; 240 are supporting the Department of Work and Pensions; 20 are with the DfE. A further 240 are or will soon be supporting 105 local authorities (LAs).

"Some HMI are foster carers; one has been seconded to make PPE"

Other redeployments bring the total to some 700 of the 1,200 or so available (see infographic). Of those, few are working in colleges. Ten, for example, are working with Star Academies, but even that work is limited to supporting Starline, a national parent helpline for home learning. About 500 remain "under-occupied". Why aren't they in schools and colleges?

As the Facebook relationship status goes, it's complicated.

As Shepperson says, the DfE directive is for LAs to coordinate local Covid-19 responses. "We have therefore been directing our support



Karen Shepperson

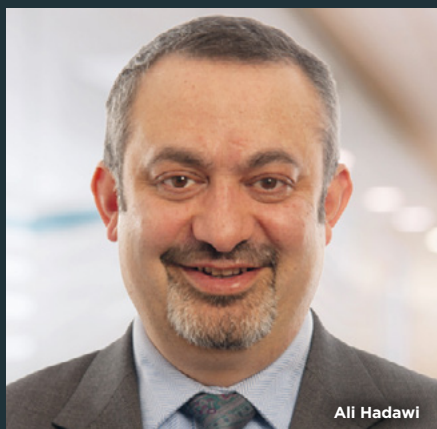


Paul Joyce

Feature

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Ali Hadawi

mainly through local authorities. If schools and colleges need support they should contact their LA, and if Ofsted can provide that support, then we will."

But that's an unusual place for college leaders to look for support and Joyce says most is being coordinated through the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).

"Our advice... is to go to ESFA territorial teams... We've linked very closely with the ESFA and DfE, so if providers do contact those teams, they will do some triage activity to identify what sort of support providers are likely to need and then if necessary DfE will make that referral to us."

Meanwhile, his team of 80 FES staff are also working with sector associations, including the Association of Colleges (AoC), the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), the Sixth Form College Association and HOLEX, among others.

Joyce's own work consists of "arranging some of the redeployment placements, and leading on the policy work we're doing internally about return to inspections and what that might look like when it happens".

"We've also got a range of deployment placements across FE and skills and, as you would expect, they are across civil service departments or in local authorities. Some HMI are volunteering as foster carers, and one HMI has been seconded to an engineering firm to make face masks and PPE for the NHS."

Next, while leaders like Central Bedfordshire College principal, Ali Hadawi want more Ofsted involvement in colleges and across the sector and believe its inspectors could make positive contribution, it is unclear whether his opinion is widely shared.

And even among those who do want Ofsted involvement, it is not clear there is any consensus as to what that might look like.

Hadawi has forthright ideas, but they are by no means guaranteed to be shared by all, and it's unclear that Ofsted has the expertise and capacity to respond to everyone's needs.

Although 500 are nominally available for redeployment, the 80-strong FES team are already in the main internally redeployed. Responding to only some could be seen to create an uneven playing field.

However, her explanation that low staff absence and "a very limited" number of pupils lessens "the need for additional people to work in schools and colleges" seems potentially misleading, and it is an interpretation Joyce also offers.

As suggested, it may in fact be that colleges and independent providers are not accessing available support because it is not being offered where they would normally seek for it.

Equally likely, it may be that the relationship between colleges and their inspectorate is such that turning to Ofsted for support is simply no longer a consideration.

As Hadawi says, there might be a need and an opportunity to "reset the relationship between a teacher and an inspector".

"There will always be judgments when Ofsted come to inspect," he says, "but we've got experiences in the past where Ofsted didn't only inspect." For him, there must be a way through the Covid crisis that "uses Ofsted expertise to help improve the quality of learning that our learners are receiving remotely".

As well as developing curriculum provision,

"We could be thinking together about the hallmarks of good remote teaching"

he is concerned about assessing the quality of teaching. "All we seem to know is to ask teachers to allow us to do an observation of the session remotely. There must be better ways of doing that, and I wonder whether if there was an engagement with Ofsted – not in a judging space, but in a co-creation space – where we could be thinking together about what are the hallmarks of good remote teaching and learning are."

And while this indicates that there is a general need for support within colleges, there is also sector-wide work that could be put in place for them to tap into, rather than in response to specific requests.

For example, Hadawi thinks Ofsted could

Tracey Zimmerman; 'This is the best CPD I've ever had'

Ofsted's pen profile of Tracey Zimmerman says she has "spent many years in the further education sector, including a significant period as a senior manager", with leadership roles across "health and care, childcare, construction, hair and beauty, basic skills and motor vehicle".

In normal times, she inspects general FE colleges, independent learning providers and prisons. But she has also been a volunteer for most of her adult life, including with the Red Cross "when I was getting my teaching quals".

When Ofsted gave the redeployment order, she was straight on to her local hospital. Bypassing the national volunteering scheme, she found herself supporting a non-Covid ward with "general cleaning, replacing stock, helping with the drinks and meals for patients". She also provided much-needed companionship.

"It gives staff the time to do the personal and medical care," she says.

Many colleges have reported their students volunteering in hospital, and Zimmerman did her training alongside young volunteers of college age and worked along staff doing top-up degrees while working on the wards.

"With Ofsted I look at apprentices doing health care jobs... I saw this as an opportunity to get hands-on and to see how it works and to feel really up to speed with what's going on in the industry."

But two weeks ago she came down with Covid symptoms. "I was in bed for ten days," she says, "but I'm much better now. We were tested on Sunday and are waiting for results".

She is making a full recovery, and maintains that that it has been "the best CPD I've ever had".

The community response has left her reflecting on her role. "It's really important to do inspections with people rather than to them. And I think, you know, we'll all be different people at the end of it."



Tracey Zimmerman

Feature

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use its networks and leverage to ensure the quick spread of best practice, to fill the need to support managers who are having to relearn their jobs from scratch while socially distanced, to create a “safe space for them to share their challenges and anxieties” and to work out what works.

To an extent, some of that work is beginning to happen. Joyce notes that his team has worked and are continuing to work with the DfE sourcing and pulling together free online resources for the Skills Toolkit online learning platform.

“Many of our staff are supporting the most vulnerable families”

In addition, the FES team is collaborating with sector organisations such as the AoC and AELP “to look at some sort of Ofsted evaluation of online learning practice so that we can identify what’s working well and perhaps what doesn’t work as well. But we’re very conscious that this is not going to be inspection activity. This is not going to be grading anything. What we want to do is to contribute where we have that experience and expertise and to get a message out in the sector of what works well.”

As the Covid crisis response changes – with providers set to reopen to progressively larger groups of students over an indeterminate period and a return to routine Ofsted inspections unlikely – there is every chance that this work will develop.

One certainty is that the speed and effectiveness with which it will happen will be in great part determined by the inspectorate’s ability to build trust in its supportive aims and to ensure its staff have the freedom to innovate and to be seen, too, to make mistakes.

The openness with which it has responded to this feature is an encouraging sign. The picture may remain unclear as to precisely what an inspectorate does when it isn’t inspecting, but an inspectorate, after all, is made up of inspectors.

As Shepperson says: “This is the greatest challenge the civil service has faced for a generation at least. Many of our staff redeployed across government are supporting the most vulnerable families. We have had an amazing response from [them].”

The stats: what Ofsted’s staff are doing

1,700 the total number of in-house Ofsted staff

33%

DOING THE DAY JOB

41%

ARE REDEPLOYED

26%

‘UNDEROCCUPIED’

The redeployments:

Local authorities

- **240 staff** are already signed up to **105** local authorities (but just 60 are currently underway)
- A **senior HMI** and **16 non-inspector colleagues** supporting the London Gold group, helping all London councils with work including recruitment checks. The work has helped recruit over 600 staff across social care settings
- Around **30 screened staff** to act as foster carers, with another **80 staff** able to offer lighter touch support to children

Schools

- **10 schools inspectors** helping to man the national StarLine helpline, run by Star Academies
- Another **10 schools inspectors** and **one early years inspector** being seconded to support schools. Most of these are new starters to Ofsted who have been seconded straight back to their previous employers.

Other government departments

- **25** deployments with the department for health and social care, including supporting virus testing
- Another **70 staff** supporting virus testing by clearing email backlogs, with another **30 staff** likely to be moved to support their call centre
- Around **20 deployments** supporting social care, early years and further education at the Department for Education
- **200 staff** acting as case managers for universal credit at the Department for Work and Pensions, and **40** supporting remote training

Other

- **40 staff** supporting the administration of virus testing for children’s social care staff
- **Three** people volunteering for the NHS in hospitals



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EDU WEEK JOBS

Coronavirus Cover Roles

Education organisations are seeking to fill the following emergency cover roles:



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EM Skills CIC	Volunteer Online Teachers - English, Maths and Science	Home Based
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READER'S REPLY

Help!: DfE to spend £10m 'simplifying' the digital apprenticeship service

 **Derek Tilley, website:**

We manage a very large UK-based owner-provider apprenticeship programme. Since the introduction of the apprenticeship service we have had to take on extra staff to cope with the increase in data entry. Why they could not have used the ILR system to work out the funding is beyond me. It only works for one or two apprentices per employer.

Batch uploading is a problem. In every way the new apprenticeship service was a retrograde step in the funding claim methodology. So [I'm] not holding my breath that the improvement will be an improvement. Needs to start with the end-user, not top-down to suit the civil servants.

 **Brenda McLeish, Twitter:**

£10 million would be better spent on adult education to support learners to upskill to deal with post-covid employment issues!

MPs in fight to save land-based college

 **M Barker, website:**

We really do need these colleges – the children are our future. We need to encourage our own into land-based skills and not retain businesses keeping the wages at ridiculously low, as if low-skilled. If we let this continue to happen, we will have to rely on imports from the EU and elsewhere. Our food is the best: look after it and the next generation producing it.

Lawyers claim ESFA provider relief scheme 'unlawful' in letter to minister

 **Bryan Davis, website:**


So at face value the argument is simplistically that there is no contract. In reality, there are contracts with each of, and all of, employers, the ESFA and a provider. Given this argument, it is difficult to see how the government

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REPLY OF THE WEEK

Apprenticeship quango launches learner satisfaction survey

 The various government-inspired surveys previously undertaken by funding bodies and Ofsted have a serious negative impact on apprentices completing the quality improvement surveys of training providers and colleges as apprentices do not get why the same kinds of questions are asked repeatedly and they get "survey burnout". Ofsted should be able to complete survey reports on the introduction of standards to inform all government departments. Take the burden away from ITPs and colleges please!!

Phil Hatton, website

can argue that contractual arrangements don't exist. If this is so, then this case definitely has merit.

Throw in Ofsted inspections and QAR sanctions, then the evidence stacks up against the government position.

Revealed: Covid-19 hit to apprenticeship starts

 **AELP, Twitter:**

Officials should be informing @GillianKeegan of the actual fall in starts because they can see them in real time on the digital service. No starts means no cashflow.

 **Ryan, Website:**

Once we get out of the brunt of the lockdown and businesses start to open again, we might see a possible rise in apprenticeships being taken on, in my opinion, due to the reduced wage apprentices are required to be paid, this would allow businesses to more quickly gain staff after the mass lay-offs. At the very least, companies would save more on wages but may also be able to claim money back from the government for providing these apprenticeships.

DAVID
HUGHESChief executive,
Association of CollegesColleges aren't expecting a
bailout – they want to help
with a 'September Promise'

If this detailed list of requirements is supplied, colleges will be leading the way out of the likely autumn employment crisis for young people, writes David Hughes

Colleges in England look set to lose around £150 million of their income – two per cent of turnover – in the last term of this academic year. Most will be able to cope with that after using the government's job-retention scheme and negotiating open-book deals with key suppliers; some will need cashflow support.

Next year, colleges will benefit from their grant-funded 16-to-18 study programmes and adult education budgets being largely protected, reflecting their non-profit, charitable status. That will give them some security on about 60 per cent, on average, of their turnover, with enormous uncertainty about income from apprenticeships, student fees, commercial training, other commercial income and higher education. There are sectors that will fare much worse, but it's still very tough – although I'd imagine many ITPs would prefer that scenario to their own.

This week I wrote to the secretary of state for education, Gavin Williamson, setting out this financial position. I stated that after ten years of neglect, colleges generally do not have the strong financial position you would want going into this crisis. Not that we



are expecting any kind of bailout – the government is already borrowing more than ever before to cope with the unprecedented spending they have embarked upon.

“Commentators from all sides are clear that unemployment will balloon”

My letter makes a simple point: that colleges have shown during this crisis just how vital they are to millions of students, the communities in which they operate and the employers they support. Their switch to online learning has been swift and effective, their civic acts have been heart-warming and far-reaching. Crucially their role in supporting nearly 700,000 young people and over a million adults has continued unabated.

But the real message in my letter is this – colleges are vital

now, but they are even more important for the recovery we all want to see. We have asked the secretary of state to continue working with us to secure new investment and flexibilities in how funding can be used to support people in these unprecedented times. I'm confident that we will achieve both because the labour market conditions facing young people and adults will be so tough this autumn that not investing in the people impacted would be an obvious grave mistake.

Commentators from all sides are clear that unemployment will balloon, leaving graduates and experienced adults competing for every job. In that environment we know that young people will suffer because of their lack of experience, and apprenticeships will be harder to come by. Adults will be able to quickly re-cycle into new jobs if they get some training and support to use their transferable skills and enhance them as needed.

We've asked the government to offer a September Promise for every 16-to-18-year-old. This

would ensure that colleges have the capacity and resources to be able to offer a flexible study programme to around 100,000 extra young people who will be unable to find work or an apprenticeship. The funding is important, but so is the flexibility to design a programme that supports them while they are seeking work and hopefully work with an employer willing to make the job an apprenticeship.

We are also asking for a new programme aimed at 19-to-24-year-olds struggling to find work. This would bring together the National Skills Fund, National Retraining Scheme and potentially the new Shared Prosperity Fund with the adult education budget to provide colleges with the resource to support adults needing shorter training courses to quickly get back into work.

All these investments need to be funded at the right rate and with the flexibilities to deliver with agility. Our final ask is for some of the capital funding announced in March to be brought forward to support colleges to invest in IT hardware and software and to prepare college buildings for opening safely in the autumn.

Colleges want to serve their communities; they have shown that in recent weeks. With the right investment and support from government, they will be central to the recovery we all want to see.

NEIL
DAVIESDirector,
Watertrain Ltd

Observations from a disappointed independent training provider

It is a mistake for the ESFA to use the apprenticeship achievement rate to measure the quality of provision. Neil Davies explains the true context that should be considered

I understand a journalist's need to create the eye-catching headline, otherwise their article may get overlooked. A link to an article dropped into my inbox last week and on opening it, I inwardly groaned. Off the webpage sprang: "Providers that failed to meet the minimum standard for apprenticeship achievement rates last year will be informed next week of the government's action to challenge this situation."

The article went on to quote from an FE Week webcast earlier that week in which the skills minister Gillian Keegan had expressed concern at historic "low-quality" apprenticeships delivery and said: "I was quite shocked at some of the lower quality delivery that happened in the first stages of the levy being introduced."

I feel sure that I join many ITPs who are fed up with statements that malign all our efforts and achievements without, seemingly, having an understanding of the full picture – a picture created by government. I believe some context is important.

The minister links lower quality to the advent of the levy. Whether a fan or not, the source of funding is not related to quality of delivery. Quantum certainly will be. In recent funding band reviews, government has reduced initial funding allocations across many



apprenticeships. So if the vast majority of employers are unable to make a cost contribution, what might give if funding is reduced?

"The ESFA QAR number is too blunt a tool to be an indicator of quality"

The minister and the Education and Skills Funding Agency are using the apprenticeship achievement rate (QAR) as a measure of the quality of provision. I do not see the direct link.

ITPs have done an incredible job in taking the scant new standard descriptors and developing employer-specific training plans. Such radical change is going to take time to implement effectively as both ITPs and employers learn to adapt. Do we believe that all this effort and investment is recognised?

Government insisted that ITPs start delivery of the new standards

even though, for many, there were no end-point assessment organisations (EPAOS) approved. ITPs had to design delivery programmes to meet employer needs without knowing what the final assessment criteria might be. Do we believe that this potential systemic mismatch has been considered before criticism is levelled?

New EPAOS had no experience of implementing theoretical processes, and an arbitrary 90 days was deemed an appropriate timescale for end-point assessment. How many ITPs, learners and employers have been impacted by the inability or incapacity of EPAOs to respond to the pipeline of completing apprentices?

How many ITPs suffer financially because the 90 days was not achieved? How many ITPs suffer financially because their programme, agreed with the employer, did not quite map to the EPA final-assessment criteria? This resulted in either the loss of the vital completion element or incurring unbudgeted costs to get learners through EPA, or both.

Without an exemption Level 2, English and Maths became a mandatory element of apprenticeships. I dare say there will be many a tale of ITPs doing their utmost to get a learner through their functional skills, incurring additional costs, losing the 20 per cent completion payment. We all know that, despite best efforts, some learners will not achieve. Is it a fair indicator of quality?

The ESFA QAR number itself is difficult to reconcile and it is too blunt a tool to be an indicator of quality. ITP performance is affected by factors completely outside their influence or control: left employer, changed job role, on maternity leave, sickness absence etc. The raw data is available, so would it not be fairer to be judged on a wider range of factors. Would not a percentage entering EPA gateway and then the percentage achieving be a more interesting measure?

Our organisation was significantly impacted by the lack of capacity in EPAOs, and despite best efforts, a material number of our achievers fell into the following year. Curiously, while writing this article, the expected ESFA letter has dropped into my inbox. Thankfully, no intended action, as they have accepted the reasons behind their number. In our submission, to demonstrate the blip, we were able to point to currently outstanding achievement numbers for this funding year. Symptomatic, but sadly no word of recognition or appreciation of the good work being done.

DAVE
HOPLEY

Director of Student
Services, Stoke on
Trent College



One positive we'll take from coronavirus is that it forced us to be innovative

Students need support more than ever during the Covid-19 crisis, and rapidly finding new ways to reach and engage with them has been challenging and eye-opening, says Dave Hopley, director of student services at Stoke on Trent College

The college halls are almost empty, but it's been a busy day in student support services. This morning we sent out our weekly e-vouchers to all our students in receipt of the vulnerable bursary fund payments, or free school meals, so they could access money for food.

“Our wellbeing warriors offer tips on self-care, body positivity and managing anxiety”

Our trained counsellors provided emotional support to students and their families via video call, instant messaging and telephone. Two of our peer mentors – trained students who support other students – hosted their twice-weekly Zoom wellbeing session while another prepared for their weekly online craft workshop. Our wellbeing warriors wrote their blog, offering tips on self-care, body positivity, managing anxiety and mindfulness.

Our admissions team responded to calls and emails

from young people worried about exam results, reassuring them that they'll still have a place at the college in September; and we hosted the first of ten virtual open event sessions running throughout the week.

Our careers team supported worried members of the public as well as students, providing virtual careers advice on training, CV writing and job hunting to anyone who needs it.

While our doors may be closed to all but our vulnerable students, the college is still very much open. However, Covid-19 forced us to become a virtual college overnight and making sure that our 10,000 students and 400 staff feel safe, supported and engaged in our community has been one of the biggest challenges we've faced.

It's been a steep learning curve as we adapt to working in this virtual world. We've had to upskill in new areas of digital technology in a short space of time. Some staff didn't even have wi-fi in their homes until this

year, yet now they're using digital technology every day.

This has been one of the positive impacts of Covid-19. We've pulled together to introduce things almost overnight which would have taken months or even years to implement. People haven't been afraid to come up with new ideas and try them out, even if they may not work. We set up an online debating club which was a success, and we've now started a Ludo club. We're running a weekly group throughout May for Ramadan and we're launching “Mr Slotivator” sessions – fun workouts to keep students active.

It can be overwhelming for staff as well as students as they're adapting to new ways of working while juggling their own family responsibilities, so we've taken a proactive approach to their wellbeing. We've introduced a “my acts of self-care” initiative and virtual time-to-talk sessions. We all want to feel connected, even when we're apart.

Engaging with students was challenging at first. They may

be more digitally capable but they are not used to working in this way. We started small and built things up, using various communications channels to promote services. Word got out, students enjoyed something and told their friends, interest grew, and feedback so far has been really positive.

“Covid-19 forced us to become a virtual college overnight”

We'd all like to go back to normal soon but there are definitely positives we'll take from this experience and our virtual college won't disappear when the doors reopen. Some things have worked so well online and will continue to complement what we do face to face in the long term. For example, our wellbeing services have become much more accessible and the team has supported more than 200 students and their families online. We've had more nominations than ever for our student union elections because students have found it easier to submit their manifesto online.

I'm proud of the student services teams, who are working really hard at home to complement what our academic staff are doing, making sure that not only do our students achieve, but that they're safe and supported in this unprecedented time.



STUART
SHIELD

Property and
Housing Management
Tutor, Catch22



Why take on an apprentice during these challenging times? Here's why

If businesses in the hardest-hit sectors are to thrive post-lockdown, new skills and new ways of working will be essential, writes Stuart Shield

For apprenticeship training providers and colleges up and down the country, the past month has seen a rapid shift to digital delivery. And, for many, it's proving a great success.

At Catch22, we've been delivering our property-management apprenticeships almost entirely via Microsoft Teams. Not only has this meant quality training can continue, but we're actually signing up brand new learners.

Some apprentices who are being upskilled have been furloughed by their current employers and are therefore able to spend more time focusing on their apprenticeships.

We've changed the frequency of our learning sessions – from one-a-month face-to-face sessions, to (on average) an hour's session every two to three days. Some are one-to-one, others are group sessions. Our apprentices are visibly more engaged, enthusiastic and are performing better.

We've also seen greater engagement from employers (in particular, senior managers) who are more easily able to observe apprenticeship training and assessment sessions now that they're being done digitally. Previously we had struggled with some senior leaders, who couldn't see the value of apprentices. Now, though, with greater exposure,

they are recognising the benefit and are investing more in the scheme.

Such is the success, our plan is to include digital delivery in our future apprenticeship training programmes so that we have a mixed model of delivery.

Adapting to business needs

We use a partnership model working with employers, aimed at delivering bespoke training designed to provide mutually tangible benefits. For example, we have developed supplementary bespoke modules with some of our partners to meet the needs of the current climate – including a module on handling angry, difficult customers, and effectively managing expectations.

“We are seeing growing skills gaps and people shortages”

If there's any certainty during what is otherwise a period of huge uncertainty, it's that businesses and their operational functions will need to change. New practices and procedures (whether that's moving to increased digital delivery, or adapting to staff shortages) are being implemented everywhere. As a result, we're seeing growing skills gaps, people shortages and therefore more development opportunities.

Brexit and Covid: the double blow to hospitality, tourism and property

Industries such as hospitality and housing and property have suffered a double blow in recent times – first, the implications of Brexit, and now, the pandemic. Travel and tourism are suffering in the current lockdown, with no obvious endpoint in sight and a huge reluctance from anyone to plan future travel.

As for retail – while some businesses, such as supermarkets, food stores and online retailers, will be doing well and actively recruiting, high-street stores are in crisis. The move to solely online trading has been the approach of some, while others are preparing for re-opening, albeit with increased hygiene and social distancing measures in place. All this requires staff – whether new or existing – to have different skills.

So if businesses in these hard-hit sectors are to survive, then thrive, once lockdown measures start to be lifted, they will need to adapt rapidly.

Why apprentices hold the key

Forward-thinking businesses are looking at how they build capacity back into the organisations by reskilling or upskilling existing staff. This, as well as bringing in new staff with relevant skills, is going to be essential. This messaging is something that training providers can promote to businesses – particularly those that have apprenticeship levy to spend and are looking to how they adapt in



the post-Covid-19 world.

Bringing in new apprentices who are adaptable can help boost capacity and add fresh energy to companies. Apprenticeships are developed in-house and allow businesses to both retain (through upskilling or reskilling existing staff) or bringing in new talent, without the time and expense of going through a lengthy recruitment process.

Apprentices are a valuable investment for any organisation. And we know from the businesses that we work with, and provide apprenticeships for, in times of difficulty it is often the apprentices who prove among the most valuable staff, delivering the frontline services that help keep businesses afloat.

If businesses can retain and develop the apprentices into the managers of the future, then even as businesses go through natural attrition and staff churn, they can be confident that they have the key skills within the organisation to survive even the most brutal of societal shocks.

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Movers & Shakers

Your weekly guide to who's new and who's leaving



Alison Hackett

Director of People and Organisational Development, City College Plymouth

Start date April 2020

Previous job

Assistant Director People and Organisational Development, Kingston and Sutton Councils

Interesting fact

Alison enjoys yoga and she is planning on learning to play the piano this year



Ian Valvona

Chair, Richmond upon Thames College

Start date March 2020

Concurrent job

Civil servant, Department for Education

Interesting fact

He led the set-up of the country's first independent children's social care trust in Doncaster for government



Julie Milburn

Principal and CEO at Sparsholt College Group

Start date July 2020

Previous job

Deputy Principal, Curriculum, Sparsholt College Group

Interesting fact

In her early career, Julie worked at a land based college in the North East

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