

**FURTHER EDUCATION
COMMISSIONER ASSESSMENT
SUMMARY**

Greenwich Community College -
Structure and Prospects
Appraisal

AUGUST 2015

Assessment

1. Background

This report sets out the results of a Structure and Prospects Appraisal (SPA) undertaken by the FE Commissioner and FE Advisers between April and July 2015 in relation to Greenwich Community College (GCC) and its provision. The SPA was triggered by the results of an FE Commissioner intervention, which took place in January 2015.

It is important to note that the initial intervention reached the conclusions:

- that significant changes are required to all aspects of the college's operations if the college is to survive as an independent institution and should be placed in Administered College status
- that a SPA should be carried out as soon as possible with a view to identifying a suitable merger partner.

These conclusions formed the starting point for the SPA.

2. Methodology

The detailed approach undertaken by the FE Commissioner and his team is set out in later chapters of this report and is not repeated in this Executive Summary. The work undertaken has been designed to meet one of the key requirements set out in 'New Challenges, New Chances', namely that *"the appraisal delivers a robust, evidence-based proposal with local stakeholder buy-in, and supported by funding bodies"*.

In summary terms, the work undertaken during the SPA:

- Examined the external environment in which the college operates;
- Reviewed the performance of the college in both curriculum/quality and financial terms;
- Analysed the performance of key competitors to the college;
- Gathered and assessed the views of key external stakeholders;
- Conducted a competition to identify the most appropriate merger partner for the college;
- Analysed the strengths and weaknesses of the partners themselves and of their propositions;
- Concluded on the way forward and set out proposed next steps.

This work is summarised in this executive summary, and set in detail in the sections of the report which follow. The option of closure was discounted unless a viable and cost-effective merger option could not be secured.

It should be noted that the work of the FE Commissioner's team was reported to a Steering Group comprising three governors (including the Chair of the Board), the college's interim Principal and representatives of the funding agencies and of BIS. The Group met three times during the SPA process.

3. The external environment

GCC is the only FE college sited within the Royal Borough of Greenwich (RBG) in south east London. Other FE provision in the borough comes from Ravensbourne (a Higher

Education Institution) and Hadlow College. The latter is a specialist land-based college, which has 2 campus locations in Greenwich, offering horticultural and animal care provision. The largest post-16 provider in Greenwich is the Shooters' Hill Post-16 Campus, which (as the name implies) is a specialist post-16 academy. There are four other academies with sixth form allocations for 2014/15, along with four maintained school sixth forms and a University Technical College. As seen elsewhere in London, affordable transport links mean that a significant cohort of learners, particularly those participating in FE, travel to other boroughs to access provision.

4. The College's performance

GCC is the largest provider of further and adult education in the RBG. It is a small General Further Education College. The college attracts learners from the local area, the majority coming from within the Greenwich local authority area and neighbouring boroughs, particularly Bexley and Lewisham. Many learners have disadvantaged backgrounds and a low level of prior educational attainment. Around half are from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and over 100 languages are spoken at the college.

4.1 Curriculum and Quality

The college has been 'Requiring Improvement' for several years and has failed to improve outcomes for learners. The Ofsted judgment in November 2014 was 'Inadequate' and success rates are virtually the lowest in the sector. Current evidence would suggest that despite some improvements in 14/15 are likely to remain unacceptably low. Whilst the college has been delivering across the majority of subject sector areas, the plans for 15/16 have significantly narrowed the spread of the offer in order to concentrate on priority areas, increase efficiencies and improve learner outcomes.

4.2 Finance

The college is in a weak and unsustainable financial position. In particular:

- it posted material deficits in 2012/13 and 2013/14 and is forecasting a further significant deficit in 2014/15. Cumulatively, these deficits amount to over £6m;
- the college is forecasting a further deficit of c£2m in 2015/16;
- the deficits have impacted on the college's liquidity, and its cash balance is forecast to be zero by early 2016.

5. The views of stakeholders

Very few external stakeholders hold the college in high regard. There is general criticism of a college which has failed to engage externally and has been slow to grasp new opportunities. Consequently the college is seen to have been in decline over the past 5 years. External stakeholders have been highly critical of the leadership teams and the quality of delivery for learners. The college has not demonstrated any desire to grow local partnerships (with the exception of ESOL) and the college's relationship with the RBG is poor and disconnected. The local authority has taken action to grow their own Skills Centres, with other FE providers, in the absence of any proactivity by the college. The college is not perceived to be focused on the needs of young people in the Borough. Local school improvements have been significant over recent years but the college is viewed as non-collaborative, insular and inward looking. Partners described the college's support of learners as 'horrendous' and 'significantly inadequate.' Several have already severed their relationship with the college, including the University of Greenwich. Many stakeholders recognise that a new provider of high quality vocational provision is required and that a merger is probably the best outcome to achieve this. They would all want to see

safeguards in place to retain sufficient provision in the Borough especially at Levels 1 and 2 and local ESOL provision.

6. The competition to identify a merger partner

In order to consider and potentially secure the future of vocational provision in the RBG, the Steering Group decided to conduct a competition to identify the most suitable future partner for the college. The precise nature of the partnership was not specified, although it was accepted that the nature and quantum of the challenges facing the college meant that potential partners were most likely to suggest merger arrangements. In parallel, an analysis was conducted to determine whether the existing and future learners could be accommodated in neighbouring institutions.

The Steering Group initially established a long-list of potential partners, drawn from the following groups:

- RBG – potential commissioning model;
- Other local general further education colleges;
- Other local academies and UTCs.

The long list comprised:

- City and Islington College
- Ravensbourne College
- Royal Borough Of Greenwich UTC
- Westminster Kingsway College
- Newham College
- Barking and Dagenham College
- Hadlow Group
- Lambeth College
- Bexley College
- Bromley College of Further and Higher Education
- Croydon College
- Tower Hamlets College
- Shooters Hill Post 16 Academy

The SPA team contacted each of the organisations on the long-list to gauge their initial level of interest. Several discussions were held with the RBG. Only 6 organisations, expressed any serious interest and with the exception of Croydon College, all were invited to make a formal proposal and presentation to the Steering Group. Croydon was discounted at this stage, being judged to be more difficult to reach for many GCC learners than the other interested organisations.

It should be noted that the Steering Group recognised that the closure of the college would, in principle, be an option for consideration. However, given the strength of interest from potential partners (see below) it was decided not to analyse the closure option in detail at this stage. It was recognised that if the competition were to be unsuccessful, further analysis and consideration of this option would be required.

7. The short-listed partners

In summary terms, the characteristics of the short-listed partners are as follows:

College/provider	Type	Ofsted Grade	Financial health status 2014/15
Bexley College	General FE	Good (2014)	Good
Bromley College of Further and Higher Education	General FE	Good (2013)	Good
Tower Hamlets College	General FE	Good (2011)	Outstanding
Royal Borough of Greenwich	Local Authority	N/A	N/A
Shooters Hill Post 16 Academy	Post 16 Academy	Requires Improvement (2013)	N/A

After further careful consideration, neither the RBG nor Shooters Hill Post 16 Academy made a final proposal. Each of the 3 remaining FE colleges submitted a proposal based on their own strategies and how they saw the opportunity to merge with GCC. The proposals were evaluated against the ten factors to be considered in any major structural change as set out in *New Challenges, New Chances*.

In summary, the results of the evaluation of the written proposals are that the proposals were ranked as follows:

- Bexley College (score = 6)
- Bromley College of Further and Higher Education (score = 12)
- Tower Hamlets College (score = 12)

These considerations are clearly separated by a significant margin, leaving Bromley College of Further and Higher Education and Tower Hamlets College significantly in the lead at the written proposal stage. Following the presentations, the Steering Group unanimously agreed that Bromley College of Further and Higher Education was the preferred merger partner. Bexley College was thought to be too small with a less experienced senior team. Both the written proposal and presentation from Bexley College was significantly weaker than the other two proposals. The key reasons for the Bromley College choice were as follows:

- Bromley College already supports a much higher number of Greenwich residents than Tower Hamlets College
- Bromley College has significant recent successful merger experience whilst Tower Hamlets College does not
- The Bromley team demonstrated a greater understanding of the needs of the area during their presentation whilst the Tower Hamlets team admitted that they had found the time frame challenging to understand all the issues

- The Bromley College proposal was considered to be the stronger by RBG
- The estates plans proposed by Tower Hamlets College were considered unrealistic and undeliverable

The Steering Group and RBG were concerned about Tower Hamlets plans to withdraw all Level 3 curriculum for at least 2 years. In addition their expectations that many more learners would travel north of the river were considered unrealistic.

The Steering Group recommended to the Board of Greenwich Community College that the Bromley College of Further and Higher Education Proposal should be accepted and this was passed unanimously at a Board meeting held at the college on 21st July 2015.

Recommendations from Further Education Commissioner

1. **The Minister approves the merger between the Bromley College of Further and Higher Education and Greenwich Community College, subject to the necessary due diligence.**

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