



**08 July 2026**

<b>Title</b>	Annual Report for New Directions College
<b>Purpose of the report</b>	To note the report for information
<b>Report status</b>	Public report
<b>Executive Director Commissioning Report</b>	Emma Gee, Executive Director Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services
<b>Report author</b>	Lisa Welch, Adult Learning and Skills Manager and Principal New Directions College
<b>Lead Councillor</b>	Cllr Rachel Eden, Lead Councillor for Education and Public Health
<b>Council priority</b>	Promote more equal communities in Reading
<b>Recommendations</b>	That the committee notes the report for information

## **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1. In January 2022, ACE Committee requested an annual report that highlights the key activities and outcomes delivered by New Directions College.
- 1.2. This report provides the latest update and covers activity during the period August 2025 to April 2026 and the performance information for the 2024-25 academic year. The report highlights the core service offer, performance, emerging developments and learner feedback.
- 1.3. This report demonstrates how New Directions College continues to improve outcomes for residents, widen participation and support economic inclusion during a period of funding reform and financial constraint.
- 1.4. The report sets out the policy context, service offer, performance outcomes, in-year developments and learner feedback.

## **2. Policy Context**

- 2.1 New Directions College is Reading Borough Council's Adult and Community Education (ACE) service. It is funded through the Adult Skills Fund (ASF), with a small amount of additional income from course fees, apprenticeships and external funding bids. Since ASF replaced the Adult Education Budget in August 2024, all grant funded adult skills provision now operates under Department for Education / Department for Work and Pensions funding rules, following the closure of the Education Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) in March 2025. The College is inspected under Ofsted's updated Education Inspection Framework (EIF) and is currently graded Good (December 2024). The work of the College aligns with the Government's growth and labour market priorities, including the Skills for Growth agenda and emerging national workforce planning reforms, which emphasise place-based delivery, progression into work and support for adults furthest from the labour market.

- 2.2 Local Authority ACE sits within the wider Further Education (FE) sector and focuses on learning at Level 3 and below. Level 3 qualifications are broadly equivalent to A levels and represent the highest level typically delivered within adult and community education. They are designed to equip adult learners with the specialist skills and knowledge needed to progress into skilled employment, higher-level apprenticeships or further study, and are a key pathway for adults returning to learning later in life. Learners must be aged 19+ and meet ASF eligibility and residency rules, which were updated for 2025–26.
- 2.3 Reading Borough Council uses a place-based approach to plan its adult learning offer, drawing on local economic, social and labour market intelligence. This ensures programmes align with local priorities, employer needs and learner aspirations. The approach is strengthened through participation in Berkshire Connect to Work, a multi council programme supporting residents facing barriers to employment with tailored skills, health and job readiness support with co-location of employment support staff at the College’s main location.
- 2.4 ASF funding is targeted towards adults who are disadvantaged or underrepresented in education. The College works closely with partners, including employers, Jobcentre Plus and local agencies, to widen participation and support progression into further learning or work. These partnerships help ensure that learners develop strong personal, social and employability skills.
- 2.5 The College continues to deliver apprenticeship provision, with strong employer engagement where programmes remain in scope, while taking a planned and cautious approach in response to national funding changes.
- 2.6 Nationally, adult skills remain a major priority within the Government’s growth and labour market mission. This supports place-based delivery models like Reading’s, ensuring adult learning aligns with economic need and contributes to local and national growth. The establishment of Skills England has strengthened coordination across the post-16 system, with a growing emphasis on data led workforce planning.

### **3. New Directions College 2025-26**

#### **Background**

- 3.1. Reading Borough Council has delivered adult education since 1958. Today, New Directions College continues to provide an inclusive and supportive space where adults can build confidence, develop essential skills and progress into further learning, employment and improved wellbeing.
- 3.2 The College offers a wide range of informal and formal learning from entry level to Level 3 qualifications, alongside employability support, confidence building programmes and community-based learning. Provision focuses on skills for life, work and community participation, including:
- English, maths and digital skills, fully funded for eligible adults under statutory entitlements;
  - English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), including asylum seekers and refugees;
  - Vocational qualifications (Levels 1–3) in Early Years, Education/Teaching Assistant, Hospitality, Barista Skills;
  - Apprenticeships, currently available at Levels 2, 3 and 5 (however, recent national defunding of several Leadership apprenticeship standards means the College will reduce and refocus its apprenticeship offer moving forward);
  - Family learning, delivered in partnership with schools;
  - Supported learning for adults with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or mental health needs, building independence, social skills and employability ;

- Employability and work readiness, including CV support, interview preparation, confidence building workshops and sector-based programmes with local employers such as Thames Water, IKEA and Crowne Plaza;
  - Creative and wellbeing programmes, including arts and ceramics, supporting mental health and social connection.
- 3.3 The College operates from its main site at 330 Northumberland Avenue, with additional delivery at Southcote and Whitley Community Hubs, Children’s Centres as part of the Family Hub offer, Libraries and community venues. Further expansion is planned once the new Central Library at the Civic Centre is completed.
- 3.4 A substantial proportion of learners are long term unemployed, from vulnerable households, adults with mental health needs, learning difficulties or disabilities, and newly arrived communities including refugees and asylum seekers. The College provides comprehensive Additional Learner Support, including:
- Childcare, travel and course related financial support;
  - Access to digital devices and equipment;
  - In class learning support;
  - Dyslexia assessment and specialist support;
  - Support for visually impaired and deaf learners;
  - Exam access arrangements and concessions.

This ensures all learners, regardless of background or need, can access, participate in and succeed in learning.

### **Performance and Learner Outcomes (2024-25)**

- 3.5 The College’s key performance objectives are to maintain achievement above national averages, improve year-on-year outcomes following the post-pandemic dip, and close gaps for priority learner groups including those with SEND, ESOL learners and adults furthest from the labour market. Outcomes have improved year-on-year, with achievement now above national averages and strong performance for priority groups. In 2024–25, overall adult skills achievement rose to 89.4%, exceeding the most recent national average (NAR 87%) and demonstrating strong recovery and improvement. Achievement refers to the proportion of learners who successfully complete and achieve the qualification or learning aim for which they were enrolled, in line with national funding and Ofsted definitions.
- 3.6 In 2024–25, the College enrolled 877 learners on government funded adult skills provision, with particularly strong performance in English (99%), ESOL (95%) and Skills and Employment provision (94%). Achievement in English improved markedly from 91% in 2023–24 to 98–99% in 2024–25, reflecting strengthened curriculum delivery and assessment practice. Maths achievement, while improved overall, remains an area for development, particularly at Level 1.
- 3.7 The learner profile continues to be predominantly female, with 75% female and 25% male learners in 2024–25. For the first time, male learners outperformed female learners, achieving 94.0% compared with 87.8%, reflecting the impact of targeted interventions to support male learners’ engagement and attainment. Leaders recognise that further work is needed to rebalance this gap while sustaining improved outcomes for male learners.
- 3.8 Learners declaring a learning difficulty or disability (LDD) represented 23% of the learner cohort in 2024–25. Outcomes for this group improved significantly, with learners with LDD achieving 92%, compared with 88.6% for learners without LDD. This represents a notable improvement (+3.8%) and evidences the impact of strengthened learning support, improved curriculum design and more systematic monitoring of progress.

- 3.9 The College serves a more ethnically diverse learner population than the Reading borough population as recorded in the 2021 Census, reflecting its accessibility to learners from neighbouring areas as well as Reading residents. Overall achievement across ethnic groups was strong at 90.9%, with particularly high outcomes for Asian Chinese (96.3%) and Arab (96%) learners. Some variation remains between groups, and targeted actions are in place to close remaining gaps.
- 3.10 The most popular areas of provision continue to be Skills for Life (English, maths and ESOL), followed by preparation for life and work, vocational education (particularly Early Years and Education), digital skills and hospitality programmes. Hospitality and barista provision for adults with SEND remains a particular strength, with 99 learners and a 97% achievement rate, alongside strong progression into volunteering and employment.
- 3.11 Overall, learners are well prepared for their next steps. Of those who responded to destination surveys, 66% progressed to further learning, 11% entered paid employment, and most remaining learners were supported into positive pathways aligned with their circumstances. While destination data capture remains an area for improvement, outcomes demonstrate that the College continues to achieve strong impact for learners furthest from the labour market.

### **In Year Performance and Key Developments (August 2025-April 2026)**

- 3.12 This section covers in year performance from August 2025 to April 2026. This period has been characterised by significant financial constraints across the adult learning sector, including funding reform, the ending of time-limited national programmes and rising delivery costs. These factors have shaped delivery choices and require a focus on stability, quality and financial sustainability.
- 3.13 The College has continued to respond to sustained demand for ESOL provision, reflecting the needs of refugees, asylum seekers and new migrant communities in Reading. Demand remains particularly strong from Hong Kong British National (Overseas) households, alongside ongoing support for Ukrainian and Afghan communities. ESOL remains one of the largest areas of provision, with strong retention and achievement, despite learners often facing complex personal and housing related challenges.
- 3.14 Recognising that local demand for ESOL exceeds the capacity of any single provider, the College secured funding from the Southeast Strategic Partnership for Migration to establish and chair the Reading and the newly formed Berkshire ESOL Provider Network. This partnership approach enables local providers - including all 6 Berkshire Local Authorities, Reading Community Learning Centre, The English Language Centre, Activate Learning and Reading Refuge Support Group - to coordinate delivery, share good practice and resources, and strengthen collective capacity. Working in this way is increasingly important in mitigating reduced funding and ensuring provision remains accessible across the borough.
- 3.15 The College has also continued to develop its hospitality and barista programmes for adults with SEND, which have become an established area of strength. Learner numbers increased to 99, with 97% achievement. Achievement refers to the proportion of learners who successfully complete and achieve the qualification or learning aim for which they were enrolled, in line with national funding and Ofsted definitions. The College's learner café continues to provide supported work experience opportunities, helping learners develop confidence and practical skills. Progression into paid employment for this group remains challenging, particularly following the closure of some accessible town centre venues, and further partnership working with employers alongside referrals into the Connect to Work Programme will be explored. This will include closer working with Supported Employment services, local employers and the Berkshire Connect to Work programme to improve progression routes for SEND learners.

- 3.16 Partnerships with Jobcentre Plus and local employers have continued to grow, supporting unemployed adults through employability programmes, sector-based training and job search support. The College continues to deliver a weekly Jobcentre Plus Job Club, ensuring residents can access advice, guidance and progression support. Early destination data shows positive progression into further learning and employment, although improving destination tracking remains a priority.
- 3.17 In response to changes in national apprenticeship funding and increased financial risk, the College has taken a planned and cautious approach to apprenticeship delivery. Apprenticeship numbers have been deliberately reduced while programmes are reviewed and strengthened. This approach has enabled improved outcomes and reduced risk and ensures that any future apprenticeship activity is sustainable and aligned with employer demand.
- 3.18 The College remains actively involved in local and regional partnership structures, including the Social Inclusion Board, Mental Health and Wellbeing Board, Sanctuary Forum, the Berkshire Adult Learning Officers Group, the Thames Valley Further Education & Skills Partnership and the Learning, Skills and Employment Workstream of the Berkshire Prosperity Board. These partnerships support alignment with wider Council priorities and will play an increasingly important role in sustaining provision as funding pressures continue.
- 3.19 The College has also continued its Recognition Awards programme, celebrating the contribution of learners, staff and volunteers, with the annual ceremony held at Reading Town Hall. This remains an important element of maintaining morale and recognising achievement during a period of change.
- 3.20 Overall, the work of the College has continued to be focused on stability, financial responsibility and partnership led delivery. Looking ahead, the College recognises that working more closely with partners will be essential to maintaining access, impact and value for money as public funding remains constrained and further change will be needed to support a financially sustainable service.
- 3.21 The College is operating within an increasingly constrained financial environment, with ongoing changes to grant conditions, funding methodologies and cost pressures across the sector. As part of the Council's wider Medium Term Financial Planning (MTFP) process, a review of the financial sustainability of the Adult and Community Education service will be required. This will consider the impact of national funding reforms, demand pressures, and the long-term viability of the current delivery model. A further report will be brought forward in due course setting out options to ensure the continued delivery of a high-quality, financially sustainable service aligned to Council priorities.

### **Learner Feedback**

- 3.22 Learner feedback for 2024–25 remains consistently strong and demonstrates high levels of satisfaction, safety and confidence across the College's adult learning provision.

### **Learner Satisfaction Survey**

- 3.23 Based on over 300 learner responses, results show that learners feel safe, supported and positive about their experience at New Directions College:
- 100% of learners say they feel safe at College;
  - 99% say they enjoy learning (all or most of the time);
  - 99% say they are happy learning at New Directions College;
  - 99% report that the College encourages respect for others;
  - 98% feel listened to by tutors and staff;
  - 98% would recommend the College to friends and family;

- 95% say they are making progress towards their goals;
- 92% say the College encourages them to respect staff and other learners;
- 89% say the College supports their mental health and wellbeing;
- 88% say the College supports their physical health and wellbeing.

These outcomes reflect the College's strong inclusive culture and its focus on learner wellbeing alongside academic and vocational progress.

### **End of Course Learner Survey**

3.24 Responses from 131 learners completing courses further reinforce these findings:

- 100% say they feel safe at College;
- 99% would recommend their tutor;
- 99% say they are more confident because of their learning;
- 98% say the course met their expectations;
- 97% say their skills have improved;
- 97% say their knowledge has improved;
- 97% say their tutors give helpful feedback on progress;
- 92% say they received the information, advice and guidance needed to decide next steps;
- 92% say they had the information they needed at the start of the course.

The most common reasons learners give for studying at the College continue to be improving employment prospects, building confidence, and progressing to further learning, with learners frequently highlighting the welcoming environment and quality of teaching.

### **Learner Comments**

3.25 Qualitative feedback continues to emphasise tutor expertise, supportive learning environments and improved confidence. Examples include:

*"The tutor created a friendly atmosphere where everybody felt welcome. I gained confidence and practical skills that I can use straight away."* — Employability learner

*"I didn't understand many things at the start, but my tutor explained everything patiently. I now want to progress to the next course."*— Digital Skills learner

*"The course exceeded my expectations. The support and encouragement made a real difference to my confidence."*— Supporting Teaching and Learning learner

### **Summary**

3.26 Overall, learner feedback for 2024–25 confirms that New Directions College continues to deliver high-quality, inclusive adult education, with learners reporting strong progress, increased confidence and positive experiences, even during a period of funding and system change.

## **4. Contribution to Strategic Aims**

4.1 New Directions College supports the Council Plan by improving access to learning, skills and wellbeing support for Reading residents, particularly those who face barriers to participation. Adult and community education plays a key role in helping residents gain confidence, develop skills for work and everyday life, and improve their health and wellbeing. By delivering learning in community settings and working closely with partners,

the College helps residents engage locally, supports employers to access skills, and contributes to stronger, more inclusive communities across the borough. In a challenging financial environment, the College's focus on partnership working, targeted provision and value for money ensures that services continue to be effective, targeted and deliver value for money.

4.2 The Council Plan has established five priorities for the years 2025/28. These priorities are:

- Promote more equal communities in Reading;
- Secure Reading's economic and cultural success;
- Deliver a sustainable and healthy environment and reduce our carbon footprint;
- Safeguard and support the health and wellbeing of Reading's adults and children;
- Ensure Reading Borough Council is fit for the future.

Adult and community education contributes to each of these priorities by widening access to learning, supporting progression into employment, promoting wellbeing and sustainability, and strengthening community engagement.

4.3 In delivering these priorities, we will be guided by the following set of principles:

- Putting residents first;
- Building on strong foundations;
- Recognising, respecting, and nurturing all our diverse communities;
- Involving, collaborating, and empowering residents;
- Being proudly ambitious for Reading.

4.4 Delivery of this work is guided by the Council's principles. The College puts residents first by shaping provision around local need, recognises and values Reading's diverse communities, and works collaboratively with partners to extend reach and impact. Learning programmes empower residents to build skills, confidence and independence, supporting long term resilience and self-reliance. The service remains ambitious for Reading, while grounded in practical delivery.

## **5 Environmental and Climate Implications**

5.1 The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers).

5.2 This is an annual update report on New Directions College for ACE Committee and does not introduce new environmental or climate impacts. However, the College has continued to strengthen its approach to sustainability, with a growing focus on practical delivery and learner engagement. Increased use of the College's green space has supported outdoor learning, wellbeing activities and environmental awareness, particularly within ESOL and supported learning programmes. The appointment of a Sustainability Manager has helped embed Education for Sustainable Development across curriculum planning and enrichment activity. In a challenging funding environment, the College will continue to work with partners to build on this work and maximise impact through shared resources and collaboration.

## **6 Community Engagement**

6.1 The College has longstanding and trusted community relationships, working closely with local partners to ensure provision reflects the needs of Reading's diverse neighbourhoods. Engagement with parents and families continues to be a core strength,

with programmes designed to build confidence, support children's learning and respond to new and emerging local priorities. In a tightening funding environment, these partnerships are increasingly central to the College's strategy. By working collaboratively with community and voluntary sector organisations, the College can extend its reach, share resources, and ensure that adult learning continues to meet the needs of residents across the borough.

## **7 Equality Implications**

- 7.1 No adverse equality implications arise from this report. The College has key actions within the Council's Tackling Inequality Strategy and is delivering provision as part of the Council's Placed Based work. This includes targeted employment focused provision in Whitley and Church Wards.

## **8 Other Relevant Considerations**

- 8.1 This is an annual update report on New Directions College for ACE Committee. There are no other relevant considerations here.

## **9 Legal Implications**

- 9.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this Annual Update report.

## **10 Financial Implications**

- 10.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

## **11 Background Papers**

- 11.1 There are none.