

**FURTHER EDUCATION
COMMISSIONER ASSESSMENT
SUMMARY**

Norton Radstock College –
Structure and Prospects
Appraisal

NOVEMBER 2014

Appraisal

Background

1. This report sets out the results of a Structure and Prospects Appraisal (SPA) undertaken by the FE Commissioner and two FE Advisers between September and October 2014 in relation to Norton Radstock College and its provision. The SPA was triggered by the results of an FE Commissioner intervention, which took place in July 2014.
2. It is important to note that the initial intervention reached the conclusions that:
 - a. the College could not continue to operate as an independent institution and should be placed in Administered College status.
 - b. a Structure and Prospects Appraisal should be carried out in the next 3 months with a view to identifying a suitable merger partner.
3. These conclusions formed the starting point for the SPA.

Methodology

4. 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"*.
5. The work undertaken during the SPA is set out in summary terms below:
 - a. Examined the external environment in which the College operates;
 - b. Reviewed the performance of the College in both curriculum/quality and financial terms;
 - c. Analysed the performance of key competitors to the College;
 - d. Gathered and assessed the views of key external stakeholders;
 - e. Conducted a competition to identify the most appropriate merger partner for the College;
 - f. Analysed the strengths and weaknesses of the partners themselves and of their propositions; and
 - g. Concluded on the way forwards.
6. The option of closure was discounted unless a viable merger option could not be secured.
7. It should be noted that the work of the FE Commissioner's team was reported to a Steering Group comprising five governors (including the Chair of the Board), the

College's Principal and representatives of the funding agencies. The Group met three times during the SPA process.

The external environment

8. Norton Radstock College is located in the Somer Valley in North East Somerset, within the local authority of B&NES (Bath and North East Somerset) and within the area covered by the West of England Local Enterprise Council (LEP). There are considerable opportunities for the College to play a significant role in the 'skills build' for its local communities and in the potential development of incubator work spaces for new business start-ups. These opportunities, however, are currently underdeveloped.
9. The Somer Valley was formerly part of the North Somerset coalfield and retains a rich industrial heritage. It has an engineering skills base and once was an important centre for the printing and packaging industry. However a number of recent factory closures have increased the already high level of out-commuting due to lack of available jobs. The local community frequently feel that the City of Bath agenda dominates the local authority and the priorities of other organisations.

The College's performance

Curriculum and Quality

10. The College provides vocational programmes in all 15 subject areas. The largest areas are health and social care and preparation for work and life. The College no longer offers 'A' level courses. Apprenticeships are offered in 5 curriculum areas across 17 pathways. The College works with schools to broaden vocational opportunities for learners aged 14 to 16 and offers foundation degrees (*to be discontinued in 2015*) and some minimal access to higher education courses. The College draws a significant number of learners from areas of high deprivation. Within the College's main catchment area there are six secondary schools, all of which have sixth forms. Many learners enter the College with low prior attainment; consequently a high proportion of the College's work is at foundation and intermediate level. The College has failed to be graded above 'Requires Improvement' for the past 10 years and in May 2014 Ofsted deemed the College to be 'Inadequate'.

Finance

11. The College is in a very weak financial position. It has failed to achieve its budgeted outturn and has recorded deficits over each of the last four years. It is forecasting a further deficit (of over £600k) in 2014/15. This level of deficit for a college with a turnover of only £6.3m is unsustainable. The College also faces cash difficulties. Current forecasts show that the College will have a cash deficit exceeding £200k in March 2015, which could be worsened by a further £700k if the College is required by

its bankers to repay a bridging loan. This is currently being extended on a temporary basis pending a land sale, the terms of which have yet to be concluded.

The views of external stakeholders

12. Very few external stakeholders hold the College in high regard. There is general criticism of a College which has failed to change over time and has failed to grasp new opportunities. Consequently the College is seen to have been in decline over the past 5 years. The senior team has lost external and internal credibility and the College has little or no strategic impact in the area. There is some regard for its pastoral support for vulnerable learners but its overall activity is either largely unrecognised or deemed to be unsatisfactory. Stakeholders vary in their opinion of its future. There are those who feel that learners would be better served through its closure and the re-routing of transport to higher quality providers. Others feel that a vocational skills offer is vital for the socio and economic regeneration of a predominantly rural area, with its pockets of deprivation.

The competition to identify a merger partner

13. In order to consider and potentially secure the future of vocational provision in the Norton Radstock area, the Steering Group conducted a competition to identify the most suitable future partner for the College. The precise nature of the partnership was not specified in detail, 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.

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

- a. Other local general further education colleges;
- b. Other local education providers

15. The long list comprised:

- a. City of Bath College;
- b. Bridgwater College;
- c. City of Bristol College;
- d. Bath Spa University;
- e. University of Bath;
- f. Frome College;
- g. Midsomer Norton Schools Partnership;
- h. South Other local single and multi-academy Trusts;

- i. Higher education institutions in the locality;
- j. Gloucestershire and Stroud College;
- k. St Brendon's College;
- l. Strode College;
- m. Wiltshire College;
- n. Writhlington School;

16. The SPA team contacted each of the organisations on the long-list to gauge their initial level of interest. Three organisations expressed serious interest in partnership or merger opportunities namely:

- a. City of Bath College;
- b. Midsomer Norton Schools Partnership;
- c. Writhlington School;

17. These 3 potential partners submitted expressions of interest to the Steering Group who considered the initial propositions and agreed to ask all 3 potential partners to submit full proposals and give a presentation to the Steering Group for detailed consideration.

The short-listed partners

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

College/provider	Type	Ofsted Grade	Financial health status 2014/15
City of Bath College	General FE	Good (2013)	Good
Midsomer Norton Schools Partnership	Multi-Academy Trust	Good (2013)	N/A
Writhlington School	Single Academy Trust to become Multi-Academy Trust in 2015	Good (2011)	N/A

19. Each organisation submitted a proposal based on their own strategies and how they saw the opportunity to merge with Norton Radstock.

20. The proposals were then evaluated against the ten factors to be considered in any major structural change as set out in New Challenges, New Chances.

21. In summary, the results of the evaluation process were that the proposals were ranked as follows:

- a. City of Bath College (score = 13)

b. Midsomer Valley Schools Partnership (score = 6)

c. Writhlington School (score = 5)

22. Each organisation then formally presented their proposals to the steering group and were questioned accordingly. The Steering Group unanimously agreed that the City of Bath College Proposal was the most robust and offered the best solution for learners and employers in the area.
23. The Steering Group recommended to the Board of Norton Radstock College that the City of Bath College Proposal should be accepted and this was passed unanimously at a Board meeting held at the college on 5th November 2014.

Recommendations from Further Education Commissioner

1. The Minister approves the merger between the City of Bath College and Norton Radstock College.

You may re-use this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. Visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available from www.gov.uk/bis

If you require this publication in an alternative format, email enquiries@bis.gsi.gov.uk, or call 020 7215 5000.