

**North Area College  
Reinspection of Management: January 1999  
Report from the Inspectorate  
The Further Education Funding Council**

## **The Further Education Funding Council**

*The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education according to a four-year cycle. It also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.*

### **Reinspection**

*The FEFC has agreed that colleges with provision judged by the inspectorate to be less than satisfactory or poor (grade 4 or 5) should be reinspected. A college may have its funding agreement with the FEFC qualified to prevent it increasing the number of new students in an unsatisfactory curriculum area until the FEFC is satisfied that weaknesses have been addressed.*

*Reinspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circulars 97/12, 97/13 and 97/22. Reinspections seek to validate the data and judgements provided by colleges in self-assessment reports and confirm that actions taken as a result of previous inspection have improved the quality of provision. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work they inspect. The opinion of the FEFC's audit service contributes to inspectorate judgements about governance and management.*

### **Grade Descriptors**

*Assessments use grades on a five-point scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses. The descriptors for the grades are:*

- *grade 1 - outstanding provision which has many strengths and few weaknesses*
- *grade 2 - good provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses*
- *grade 3 - satisfactory provision with strengths but also some weaknesses*
- *grade 4 - less than satisfactory provision in which weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths*
- *grade 5 - poor provision which has few strengths and many weaknesses.*

*Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.*

*Cheylesmore House  
Quinton Road  
Coventry CV1 2WT  
Telephone 01203 863000  
Fax 01203 863100  
website: <http://www.fefc.ac.uk>*

*© FEFC 1999 You may photocopy this report and use extracts in promotional or other material provided quotes are accurate, and the findings are not misrepresented.*

## **North Area College North West Region**

### **Reinspection of management: January 1999**

#### **Background**

North Area College in Stockport, Greater Manchester was inspected in September 1997 and the findings published in inspection report 01/98. Management was awarded a grade 4. The audit service assessed financial management as adequate.

During the inspection in 1997 the key strengths of management were: successful diversification of the curriculum, including the development of a large community education programme; clear lines of communication and staff who were generally well informed of developments; improving quality, regularity and consistency of the financial information and the college's employment of an additional internal auditor to supplement the work of its primary internal auditors. The major weaknesses were: lack of significant progress towards ambitious strategic priorities; managers yet to be trained in the use of the new management information system; insufficient use of performance indicators; managers' need for further training and the failure to share good practice in management.

Reinspection took place in January 1999. During the reinspection, inspectors examined a range of documents, scrutinised students' achievement and retention data and college targets and had meetings with managers, staff and a representative of Stockport Training and Enterprise Council.

#### **Assessment**

The college has made progress in addressing areas of weakness identified during the inspection of September 1997 and in building on strengths. Some weaknesses remain. Target-setting, benchmarking and the use of performance indicators are now routine and demonstrate improvements, though some targets are still below national benchmarks. Lines of communication, which were primarily used for giving information, are now allowing the college's staff full involvement in planning and decision-making. A new process for strategic planning involves all staff. Curriculum areas have been effectively reorganised. There is a new management structure. The strategic plan remains ambitious, but is supported by more realistic operational plans. Inspectors agreed with the judgement in the self-assessment report that the extended curriculum is responsive to business and community need. Some aspects of the college's work identified as strengths in the self-assessment report require further development. Although management at a senior level has become more effective, recently appointed middle managers' roles are less clearly defined and developed. Their job descriptions are unclear. Two weaknesses identified during the previous inspection remain and are recognised in the self-assessment report. Managers lack confidence in the accuracy of computerised management information. The college is using dedicated support tutors in the three curriculum areas to improve the accuracy of retention data and to monitor and improve students' attendance. Retention rates, although improving in some areas, are still below national averages.

The FEFC audit service concludes that financial management is good. The college is financially sound. The finance function is led by a qualified and experienced accountant. Managers closely monitor the college's financial performance. Financial information is promptly prepared and is clear and comprehensive.

**Revised grade:** management 3.