



Department
for Education

A guide to effective practice in curriculum planning

**An exploration of the principal stages
involved in effective curriculum planning**

March 2024

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Summary

This publication provides information on the principal stages involved in effective curriculum planning, to be used as a guide by college leaders and curriculum planning leads. It includes case studies of integrated curriculum and financial planning models used by a range of colleges.

Expiry or review date

This guidance will be reviewed before October 2024.

Who is this publication for?

This guidance is for:

- College chief executive officers, principals, chairs, and governors
- Curriculum planning leads and practitioners

This guide is for colleges (general further education colleges and sixth form colleges), specialist designated institutions. The use of the term 'college' in this guide is generic.

The guide may be of interest to other provider types, and stakeholders such as private training providers, local authorities, and Mayoral Combined Authorities.

Introduction

This guide has been constructed from the collective experience of a range of curriculum planning practitioners from across the sector. Presented in 2 sections, the first sets out the principal stages involved in effective curriculum planning, and the second offers a series of appendices containing further detail, together with case studies in effective integrated curriculum and financial planning that represent the range of colleges that form the largest part of the post-16 provision. Whilst the guide can be used as an introduction for someone new to the process of curriculum planning, its primary purpose is to share effective practice with those already actively involved in planning who are seeking to improve their processes, with a view to increasing curriculum efficiency and financial sustainability¹.

The guide links the 2 sections with a series of boxed '*effective practice points*', provided as examples of the process in practice. Appendices in section 2 provide more detailed information and the application of the processes described in section 1.

Every further education organisation carries out curriculum planning, and there is no prescriptive model that will work for every type and size of organisation. Different approaches are adopted to suit the business model and funding streams at play in the organisation. There are many variations of planning models, but within all there is a common purpose and each addresses the need to:

- control costs,
- deploy resources efficiently and appropriately,
- respond to local, regional, and national skills needs,
- maintain standards and the quality of provision,
- monitor the progress against the plan to facilitate in-year adjustment to maintain efficiency and quality of provision.

This research is based on a series of case studies undertaken by the Further Education Commissioner (FEC) with the support of curriculum planning professionals drawn from the diversity of organisations that make up the further education (FE) sector. These broad guidelines are not an attempt to control the way in which organisations plan curriculum and allied resourcing, but to share examples of effective practice from across the sector.

The uncertainty and intricacy of further education funding, combined with its use as a central policy enabler, adds a complexity to its use that might not be the case in schools,

¹ The FE Commissioner team offer a specific support package, Curriculum Efficiency and Financial Sustainability Support (CEFSS) to assist where appropriate.

universities, and training organisations with a simpler funding profile. It is this complexity that demands a more systematic approach to curriculum planning, whilst the very same complexity is what protects colleges from the potential impacts of changes in funding policy, the risks associated with not satisfying funding compliance, and the responsive nature of many project-based opportunities.

Whilst the sector is renowned for its ability to respond and flex its limited resource to meet the opportunities it is presented with, and the challenges associated with relatively short-term planning cycles involved in state funding methodologies, what undermines many organisations' ability to predict and forecast effectively is the extent to which planning facilitates informed decision making.

Effective integrated curriculum and financial planning provides a critical process through which an organisation, at every level, can review, plan, validate, monitor, and challenge the planned business of the organisation. Curriculum planning is not a single act of drafting a planning document, it requires a continuous cycle of multi-faceted development, punctuated by critical planning and monitoring points throughout the annual cycle. In addition, a growing emphasis on the need for effective collaboration and area approaches to meeting skills needs will demand effective organisational planning. Working collaboratively to meet local skills needs will present further complexities, whilst also offering the opportunity for specialisation and further sector efficiency.

Through work carried out by the FE Commissioner and the territorial teams of the Department for Education (DfE) Skills Group, it is clear that in several cases the demise of a college's financial health and ongoing performance is linked to the lack of depth, breadth, and accuracy of its business/curriculum planning.

This guidance presents a series of key processes considered effective by organisations within the sector. Importantly, it recognises that curriculum planning is not just the domain of financial efficiency but lies at the heart of creating the quality of its provision.

Intent

Curriculum planning (integrated curriculum and financial planning) is a college's core business cycle, during which it will work through in 'detail' what, why and how it will deliver its business in the forthcoming year(s). The curriculum plan, its offer, design, coverage, and appropriateness are structured to support academic and technical skills, personal development, careers awareness, and most of all personal progression.

It is important to note that the enhanced inspection framework expects colleges to involve employers and other stakeholders in the development of their curriculum.

Implementation

Combined with configuring the content and experience for its learners, a significant aspect of any plan will be the efficient and appropriate deployment of physical and human resource, combined with innovative delivery of learning experiences, through which the plan will be implemented.

Impact

Targeted/forecast attainment, outcomes and progression are a necessity of any plan to determine not only the quality of the plan and learner experience, but also the financial key performance indicators that drive efficiency.

Smart curriculum planning and design lays the foundation for all subsequent decisions relating to teaching, learning, assessment, management, and support, and should do it in a way that develops confidence in the process and credibility in the presented outcomes across the internal and external stakeholder groups.

Section 1:

Principal stages of curriculum planning

Why plan and cost curriculum? – taming the uncertainty

There are many benefits to integrated curriculum and financial planning that go beyond the development of a course listing and allied marketing collateral. Planning effectively can ensure that the organisation's provision contributes to critical internal and external drivers, not least funding rules and methodologies. Planning well in advance provides important insight into the mix of provision against key criteria such as level, subject sector area, value, resource requirements, and risk – particularly to quality, and meeting the skills need. An effective planning cycle will provide a detailed framework for:

- improving accuracy of planned income and budgeting
- delivering the strategic priorities
- contributing to central policy objectives, such as;
 - meeting local skills needs
 - T Levels
 - higher technical skills
 - adult skills
 - English and maths
- ensuring the consistency of learning experience, including
 - core entitlement
 - careers advice and support
 - enrichment
 - work experience/placement
- efficient delivery and use of resources
- resource development planning and capital investment
- scenario planning
- in-year course and resource reconciliation and adjustment
- performance monitoring at cost centre level and above
- multi-year planning to forecast income and expenditure patterns

The link to strategic planning

The strategic plan sets out the vision and ambition of the college and guides the route it needs to take to achieve this vision. The link to delivering the strategic priorities will often be a range of sub-strategies that set out how each component of the organisation will contribute to achieving the strategic vision. Each strategy will inform the business/curriculum planning process, for example human resource and estates strategies will facilitate effective resourcing through which to deliver the plan, curriculum strategy will inform the course profile, content and delivery, and digital strategy will guide the use of technology to both deliver and manage the curriculum.

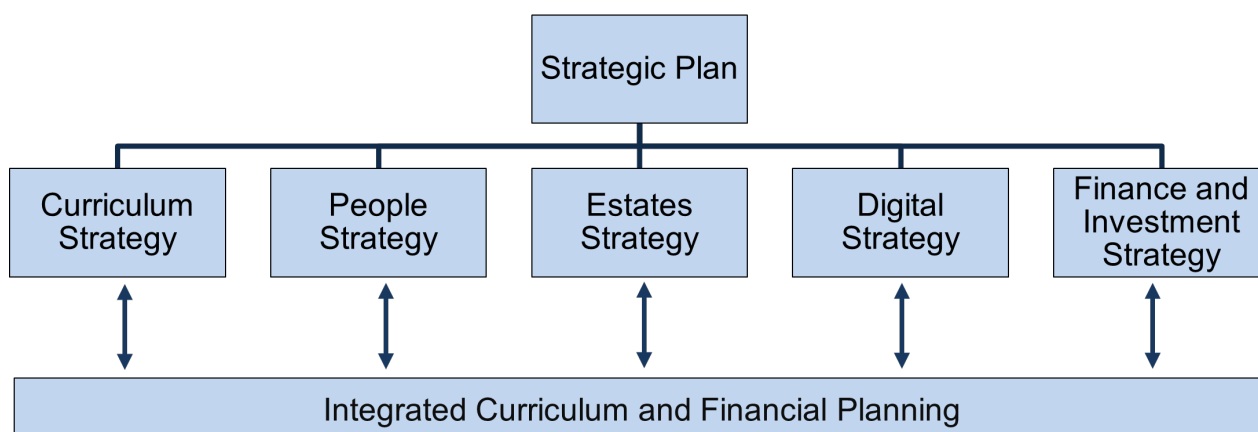


Figure 1: Curriculum planning aligning with strategy

In less well developed planning models, the link to strategic planning is either remote, or even missing from the curriculum/business planning process. Strategy documents are often high-level narratives with insufficient reference to indicative success measures through which to inform a detailed annual curriculum planning process. This can lead to curriculum plans being based on historical performance which fails to acknowledge the steps required to achieve the college's strategic priorities – that is, an over emphasis on looking back, and too little on looking forward.

Senior leaders draft a range of strategies to set out the long-term plans designed to deliver the strategic priorities of the organisation. Under the latest FE Reforms this includes the submission of an 'Annual Accountability Statement' as part two of the 'Accountability Agreement'. The statement will include a section which sets out the college's planned contribution to national, regional, and local priorities. The integrated curriculum and financial plan should align the aims of the 'Annual Accountability Statement' and college strategies to design a curriculum that delivers the strategic ambitions of the organisation. Governors and senior leaders need to ensure this is checked throughout the planning cycle, for example to ensure the process developed provides evidence that the planned activity is supporting key strategic priorities, where

appropriate. The plan will need to evidence the extent to which the college is contributing to relevant national, regional, and local priorities, such as:

- Meeting skills needs (local skills improvement plans) and employer involvement
- Adult skills
- Digital literacy and competence
- English and maths
- Higher technical skills
- T Levels
- Apprenticeships
- Climate change and the green agenda
- PREVENT and personal safety
- Work preparation
- Personal wellbeing and resilience

Governance and curriculum planning

Governance plays a critical role in the oversight of effective curriculum/business planning. Set out in the [FE and sixth-form college corporations: governance guide](#) are clear expectations that governors will require senior leaders to deliver an effective planning process, specifically, but not exclusively, by:

- establishing a business plan to meet the board's strategic plan and corporate vision, including an equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) strategy
- cultivating a culture of high expectation, ensuring high education standards and a positive student experience for all
- leading the planning, management and development of educational provision, mapped against resources, so that the college responds to students' needs in the context of local and national skills priorities – see [local skills](#).

Embedded with the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 (the Act) is a new duty² for the governing bodies of colleges and designated institutions to review how well their institution's provision meets local needs. Where a board oversees more than one college, such as in a college group, the duty applies separately with respect to each college.

Boards must:

- as part of the annual accountability statement, review how well the education or training provided by the college meets local needs, having regard to statutory guidance
- consider, in the light of the review, what actions the college might take to better meet those needs
- publish the review, as part of the annual accountability statement, on the college's website³. Governors should consider carrying out these reviews in collaboration with the governing bodies of other local colleges. Local skills improvement plans (LSIPs) will be an important reference point when considering technical education and training

An effective curriculum planning process can offer board members a framework for overseeing the planning process and how it aligns with the college's vision, mission and priorities as set out in its strategic plan. The high-level curriculum planning timeline featured on page 44 of this guide, together with the more detailed timeline in appendix 1,

² Find out more about the Local Needs Duty: [ESFA college and local authority accountability agreements - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

³ This should not be confused with the need to review governance processes every 3 years

flags critical stages in the planning cycle where governors should be presented with planning information to help them fulfil their responsibilities set out in the Act.

To support corporation members discharge this new duty, it is important that they:

- are familiar with the curriculum/business planning cycle and process
- are aware of critical stages where governors should have an interest in its development, oversight, and approval
- know what information should be presented to them
- can cross-reference the process operated by the college and the expectations as set out in the new duty.

The timelines referenced previously provide an oversight framework base on the following curriculum/business planning interactions:

1. **Annual strategic planning:** A review early in the planning cycle that offers an opportunity to review and explore the current and planned curriculum offer and its role in meeting local skills needs, the needs of learners and how it aligns with provision across the economic region
2. **Overview of new and withdrawn provision:** Later in the cycle, governors should be presented with a high-level overview of the planned provision for the next academic year. This should be presented in the context of meeting the strategic mission and vision of the organisation, but also how it will contribute to meeting local skills needs. Governors should feel comfortable to challenge senior leaders about their thinking behind the curriculum/business plan.
3. **Review of draft plan:** Having been involved in the strategic development of the offer at a high level, early enough in the cycle to effect change, governors should be given the opportunity to review the headline aspects of the plan and discuss whether it meets the college's strategic priorities. If not, senior leaders should be asked to address any concerns (financial, quality, meeting local skills needs etc) and represent the headline aspects.
4. **Validation of the plan:** Once it has been agreed, the corporation should formally endorse the plan for the following year. This should be aligned to oversight and validation of the allied budget to deliver the plan.

Effective Practice Point 1

The role of link Governor for Curriculum Planning at **Wyke Sixth Form College** provides governors with active oversight of planning against the college's mission and vision, its 2 strategic priorities and its 5 core curriculum planning principles. Supports them in their role in shaping the college's direction.

Sparsholt College has a well-established tactical overview and monitoring of college Curriculum Plan through a specialist committee of the Board, the Community, Employer and Market Requirements Committee (CEMR).

The link to quality and the student experience

It is important to recognise that integrated curriculum and financial planning is more than just a resource planning and distribution tool. The quality of provision is more about the plan resourcing the curriculum through which it delivers the entitlement, breadth, and quality of experience for all students. This demands the involvement of those responsible for the actual delivery of the plan to determine the best way to deliver within the confines of the resourcing model and funding methodologies.

Balancing efficiency and quality

An overemphasis on efficiency can often have a counterproductive effect on the quality and breadth of provision, and a balance needs to be struck. A good curriculum planning process will allow organisations to apply the planning principles whilst providing sufficient flexibility in the process to ensure the quality of provision and experience is achieved. Colleges and training organisations with loss-leader courses which have limited enrolments may operate below economic sustainability. Although loss-leaders, such courses can be important irrespective of efficiency and allowed to run cross subsidised from courses that offer much stronger efficiency. In these circumstances, it is important to assess efficiency at a cost centre level (curriculum area, department, faculty, or school) to ensure the cross-subsidy has not been applied more than once. In more advanced curriculum planning models, interdepartmental cross-subsidies can be achieved.

Scenario 1

A course may provide a critical resource locally or be considered a loss-leader as a feeder course for the next level when it is topped up with higher level entrants. Either way it would not be in the interest of the college, or the local skills need, to withdraw the programme, so curriculum planning must be flexible enough to allow cross-subsidy and/or marginal resourcing.

Scenario 2

A new course is to be launched that might need some pump-priming resource to give it the launch it needs to ensure long-term sustainability and that the experience of the first cohort of learners is positive. Additional resource could also facilitate in-year monitoring and adjustments as the curriculum rolls out. Either cross-subsidy or additional grant funds would need to be added to the planning assumptions to ensure the resourcing model works.

The extent of cross-subsidisation will in all cases need to be weighed carefully against the organisation's overall financial capacity and sustainability.

Key aspects of effective planning

Completeness: There is little purpose in developing an integrated curriculum and financial planning system that does not contain all the components for planning and resourcing the curriculum. Effective planning, regardless of whether centralised or devolved within organisational structures, requires a process. The more complete the planning process, the more likely it will inform decision making. Detailed analysis during the initial stages of curriculum planning should provide early indications and expectations of financial viability. This can also inform planners about contribution, resource utilisation, gaps in provision, growth opportunities, budgetary income and expenditure, and likely financial margins.

Accuracy: Colleges are complex organisations, often with many funding and income streams, large estates, dozens of courses, hundreds of staff, and thousands of students. Bringing all these variables together to plan effective provision that will inform decisions and facilitate a funding claim requires an emphasis on consistency and accuracy in the use of data. With current funding methodologies often spreading income over several years, inaccurate planning can result in inaccurate forecasting and associated long-term implications for the sustainability of provision.

Understanding – combining the science with the art: An understandable concern amongst professional educators is the extent to which a methodical planning process and its allied metrics potentially overrules the instinct and experience of a seasoned professional – the “computer says...” mindset. In the most effective planning processes, there is always a balance in the methodology where the ‘system/methodology’ produces a plan that is driven by the metrics, and the professional eye of an expert refines and finesses this plan in line with the strategic objectives of the college – for example, the system may show inefficiencies that would normally threaten the viability of the course, but an expert can resolve these by reviewing the method and/or mode of delivery. Understanding the system to make it work for the college, its students and its staff is a critical aspect of successful planning.

Key aspects of planning that are important to understand:

Planning conditions before commencement:

- establishing the resourcing tariff/blueprint for each type/level/year of course
- confirming planned learner numbers to work to
- agreeing curriculum department (cost centre) contribution targets.
- agreeing remission based on organisational policy and affordability
- understanding what contribution rate is required to achieve targeted earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortisation (EBITDA).

Funding and payment rules:

- ensuring every hour of delivered activity is fundable/paid for – over-delivery costs money and is technically inefficient
- managing the planning model to drive cash-flow forecasting
- recognising and applying the key funding rules

The detail:

- informed by, but not driven by, historical data – management information systems (MIS) are a valuable source of information, but should not determine the content of the plan
- ensuring executive sponsorship of the most important processes
- building in review and challenge from key internal and external stakeholders at set periods throughout the process.

**note example curriculum cycles and planning timeline feature later in the guide.*

Approaches to planning complex programmes

Colleges with wide curriculum offers will often embrace complex programmes that are either influenced by external stakeholders, such as employers with apprenticeships, and/or the importance of meeting the personal needs of specific groups of learners, such as those with special educational needs and or disabilities. These added influences increase the complexity of the curriculum planning process and need to be managed with same emphasis on cost effective quality delivery to that of mainstream activities.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeship planning can be complex and less predictable than other funding models, particularly when engaging with employers whose main focus is on their business and the need to meet the company objectives. In recent years this has been amplified by the effect of the pandemic on businesses, a competitive employee recruitment market, and the risk of an ensuing recession. Effective employer engagement is critical to manage turbulence in recruitment patterns and in ensuring new programmes meet the required skills. Organisations will often use well-developed commercial and/or in-house planning tools to help plan and monitor in-year performance.

The approach more sophisticated planning tools take is to simplify the complexities of the funding methodologies and ensure transparency for planners and senior leadership teams. The key purpose is to ensure that planners can assess the financial viability of each programme and the entire curriculum plan throughout the academic year. Using these systems, planners can easily design and model apprenticeship provision and, where available, profile the impact when planning new starts. This enables users to assess monthly cash flow, adjusted for actual recruitment and retention.

These types of systems provide institutions with a tool to monitor in-year funding performance against targets and provide a likely outturn based on both the current actual income and remaining planned. This can often be analysed through a range of management reports, including graphs that illustrate ongoing performance. When effectively used, these systems can provide the ability to profile costs based on the number of apprentices in-learning and associate key activities such as travel, classroom learning and other off-the-job training to provide a programme-based contribution analysis, ensuring consistent live analysis is available.

Key aspects to understand in apprenticeship curriculum/business planning

Possible delivery structures

Determining the delivery structure is critical in the context of responsibility and accountability for the quality and financial performance of the provision. Clarity relating to who does what, and who is accountable, will drive a responsible approach to performance. There are several structures operating within further education, but they tend to fall into three main models:

1. **embedded/integrated** - located within curriculum structure. With all other provision in the department, the responsibility of apprenticeships lies with curriculum managers to deliver the entire programme supported through college's administrative services.
2. **discrete** - located in central apprenticeship department with curriculum servicing arrangements³. Centrally delivered and accountable, with sole responsibility for all apprenticeship outcomes. Outsourcing arranged by the central apprenticeship administration.
3. **hybrid** – central apprenticeship department providing apprenticeship administrative function, with curriculum departments servicing off-the-job element of training⁴. Joint delivery between central function and curriculum leads. Accountability lies with curriculum lead.

³ Recommend detailed service level agreements are established to provide expected scope of responsibility and accountability of all parties.

Table 1: Possible structural responsibilities for FE-based apprenticeship provision

Responsibility/ Delivery Structure	Programme Management	Programme Administration	Skills Delivery	Assessment	Reviews	Outcomes	Financial Performance
1 Embedded/ Integrated	Curriculum department						
2 Discrete	Apprenticeship department						
3 Hybrid	Curriculum department	Apprentice department	Curriculum department	Curriculum department	Apprentice department	Curriculum department	Curriculum department

Income profiling

There are many factors involved in the effective planning of apprenticeship provision. Each contribute to income and carry a cost. Understanding their contribution to the overall apprenticeship provision, together with the resourcing costs required to deliver is the basis of planning apprenticeship provision. The following list of income and costs form the basis of income and cost profiling:

- Funding values (Standards)
- Apprenticeship numbers
 - Carry-in profile
 - Standard
 - Department
 - Subcontracted
 - Starts profile
 - Standard
 - Department
 - Subcontracted
- Advanced profiling/forecasting
 - Standard expected durations (minimum expected plus employer requirements)
 - English and maths requirements
 - EHCP profile
 - Apprenticeship levy type
 - Apprenticeship bands
 - Disadvantage uplift
 - Subcontracted activity
 - Planning scenarios
 - Financial performance monitoring

Being able to monitor apprenticeship income against the original planned forecast is critical to ensuring resources are used effectively. The system used should provide clear monitoring reports that measure:

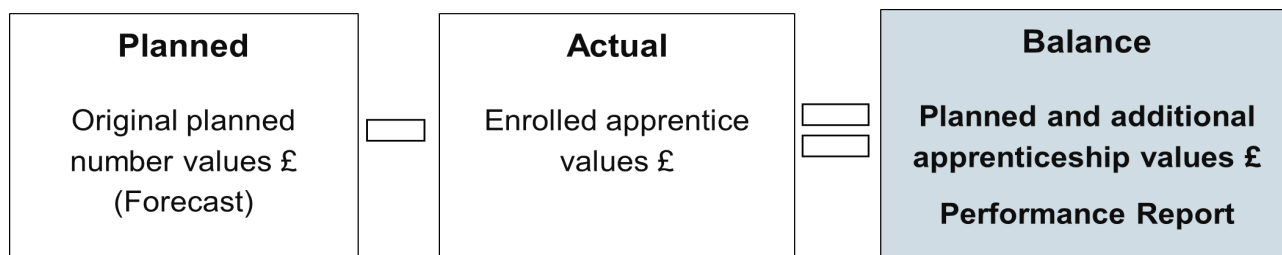


Figure 2: Model to effectively monitoring planned (forecast) against actual

- Reporting framework – standard, department, school, faculty, subcontractor.

Cost profiling

- Direct costs
 - Hourly based costs – teacher, assessor (these costs are often attributed against the main aim rather than the learners).
 - Learner based costs – assessor mileage, assessment
 - Hourly rates – teacher, assessor

To maintain efficiency, costs need to be reviewed regularly against actual and retained learner numbers.

Effective Practice Point 2

Basingstoke College of Technology has a bespoke approach to planning and resourcing apprenticeship provision to ensure effectiveness, efficiency, and contribution. This takes into account the variability of funding tariffs, delivery hours, assessing hours, training coordinator caseload, material costs and travel costs. The approach requires a 50% financial contribution after allocation of all direct delivery costs and a share of department management, technician, and administration costs. It calculates the number of apprentices required to achieve the 50% contribution. End Point Assessment income and costs are outside the contribution calculation.

Effective Practice Point 3

East Kent Colleges' Group approach to planning apprenticeships is to treat the programme as 'servicing out' from the curriculum departments to deliver the off the job elements. This means that curriculum departments are credited with the hours they deliver on behalf of the apprenticeship department. Apprenticeships are expected to deliver a lower contribution rate than other programmes due to the funding model. Apprentice trainers have a caseload of 40 apprentices which provides time for a monthly visit to each apprentice.

Off-the-job training is delivered by college-based departments for the apprenticeships that this applies to and there is a payment to these departments at a fixed hourly rate that includes some margin to incentivise these departments financially plus a transfer of funds to cover the teaching resources used by the apprentices during their off-the-job training. The apprenticeships budget covers the end point assessment fees. The college reports that these fees are an expensive form of assessment that have reduced contribution rates since the introduction of standards.

Special educational needs and disability (SEND) and high needs (HN) provision

The volumes of learners with a degree of additional personal learning needs continue to rise. Based on data in the 2021/2022 Individual Learner Record (ILR) the estimated percentage of 16–18-year-old and 19–24-year-old learners with an education, health and care plan (EHCP) is 28% of the total in further education. Approximately 7.5% have EHCPs.

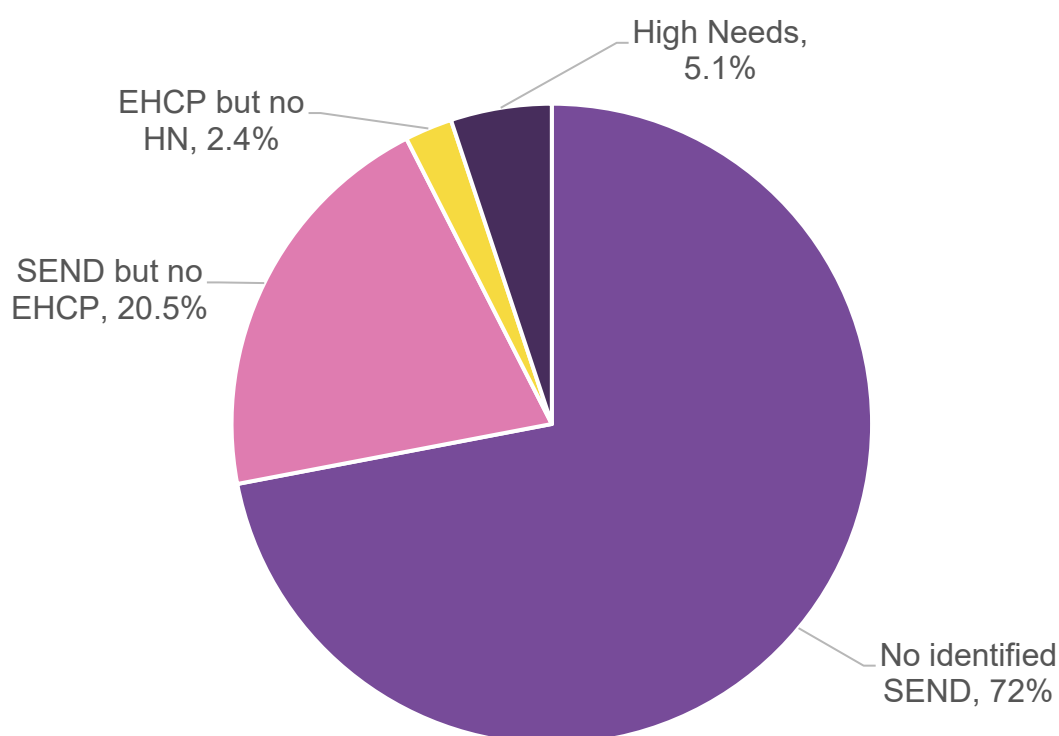


Figure 3: Pie chart representing 16-19 yr olds with personal additional support needs – 2020/21 ILR

The 16-19 study programme principles apply equally to students with SEND⁴. The SEND Code of Practice⁵ sets out the general responsibilities for young people with SEND, both with and without an education, health and care (EHC) plan. Colleges have a duty to use their best endeavours to secure the special educational provision that the young person needs, the duty applies to students with SEND up to age 25. Guidance states “Providers should take particular care to tailor study programmes to the individual aspirations and needs of students, in discussion with the student.” Local authorities are required to complete the process of naming the provider by

⁴ DfE: 16 to 19 study programmes: guidance (2021 to 2022 academic year), Section 1

⁵ [SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/442412/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25-years.pdf)

31st March of the prior academic year. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, resulting in some learners not securing a place at college until closer to the start of the study year. This adds further complexity to college planning. To overcome the delays in confirming learner needs, and to ensure realistic resourcing is available, colleges maintain a core resourcing pool based on historical needs and confirmed new entrants. Flex is built into the resourcing model through fractional staffing contracts and the use of hourly paid expertise.

Bespoke provision for those assessed as needing additional support is varied, college delivery models might include discrete provision for those with more complex needs and tailored inclusive provision within the main college curriculum. Below is a summary guide to planning stages for those requiring a higher level of support:

1. **Initial Assessment** – engage with students and their families as early as possible, the assessment of their needs should be a partnership approach with feeder schools, local authorities, and the college.
2. **Flexibility** – plan programmes that are flexible to meet the diversity of needs, and to respond to some inevitable changes in the student’s longer-term goals. Tailor programmes for individuals considering the balance of core components, additional support requirements and pace of learning.
3. **Support to make informed choices (IAG)** – lower-achieving students can arrive at college with unrealistic career plans and/or limited understanding of the opportunities available to them. If programmes are to be designed to maximise progression, then students need realistic learning goals linked to up to date EHC plans. This in turn should reduce withdrawals based on an inappropriate choice.
4. **Practical, hands-on teaching** - a workshop environment can enthuse a student who struggled in school. Basic skills can be embedded into vocational programmes, making them more appealing than separate classes. An introduction to their chosen occupational area will also help students progress to further learning, an apprenticeship, or employment at an elementary level.
5. **English and maths in line with DfE policy** - plan programmes at the education level (where appropriate) that supports the student to progress to their chosen next steps (FE, apprenticeship, or occupation).
6. **Engagement with employers and work-related activity** - introduce students to the opportunities available and to promote the behaviours that employers expect. A structured work placement may be right for some, but others working at entry/level 1, may benefit more from experiencing a variety of internal employment related activities, before they venture into work experience of even a supported internship.
7. **Provide appropriate pastoral and specialist support** - help students to progress, remain engaged and achieve. SEND students, those with EHC plans and those with social, emotional, and mental health needs (SEMH), may have received additional support at school. This may have included support from external professional services. Failure to provide sufficient support at post-16 increases the risk of withdrawal, so it is important that providers address pastoral and specialist support needs so that students can benefit fully from their study programme.

8. **Progression** - all programmes must focus on progression to the next stage of education, employment, or independent living. Programmes should be designed to have target outcomes facilitating the students next steps.

(Extracted examples from 16-19 Study Programme: Guidance 2021/22)

With limited access to established commercial planning tools, SEND provision relies almost entirely on the expertise and experience of SEND leads to forecast need. This involves establishing some key planning principles, for example:

- Planning for integrated/embedded (main stream infill)/discrete provision
- Likely average class size for discrete provision (6-10)
- Need for allied health professionals in addition to learning support staff
- Cost effective benefits of developing staff competence in wide application support such as Makaton, British Sign Language (BSL)
- Benefits of peer-to-peer learning and personal development

Key aspects that are important to understand when planning SEND/HN provision

Planning conditions before commencement

- early assessment will facilitate effective planning needed to meet individual needs
- establishing the planning model/table that is flexible enough to meet a range of needs – for both discrete (foundation learning) and embedded (mainstream) provision.
- establishing the working relationship with all stakeholders (schools, local authorities, charities) to support co-creation of personalised programmes.
- agreeing available data with stakeholders to inform planning
- agreeing SEND department (cost centre) contribution targets.

Funding, resourcing, and payment rules⁶:

- need to identify the fixed costs in provision that are difficult to attribute to the individual learning programmes. For example, staff to deliver – management structure including SEND coordination, schools' liaison and effective assessment and costing, additional learning support for learners in mainstream, specialist support such as emotional literacy support assistants (ELSA), teacher training, hidden costs associated with softer support such as social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH)

⁶ [How to fix disadvantage funding - David... | Association of Colleges \(aoc.co.uk\)](#)

- understanding and applying the key funding rules – block, elements 2 and 3
- investing in dedicated support staff to plan and cost programmes that will attract correct levels of additional funding
- managing the planning model to inform cash-flow forecasting

The detail:

- a clear focus on personalising an annual programme of study with progression as the key outcome

The following template offers an example of how the components of a specific tailored study programme might be built:

Template for Building a SEND/HN Discrete Study Programme*

Study programme for:	Planned with:	On:
-----------------------------	----------------------	------------

Core Aim

Qualification? (add details) _____	Preparation for progression: Non Qual / RARPA	Preparation for Employment: Non Qual / RARPA – Pre apprenticeship	Preparation for ? : RARPA	Programme length: _____	_____ hrs
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Maths

GCSE (≤3 / no qual held)	F. Skills (≤2 / no qual held)	Exempt - RARPA Using EHCP	Exempt - RARPA Using tolerance	Not required (4+ held)	_____ hrs
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English

GCSE (≤3 / no qual held)	F. Skills (≤2 / no qual held)	Exempt - RARPA Using EHCP	Exempt - RARPA Using tolerance	Not required (4+ held)	_____ hrs
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Work Experience

External / Industry Placement	Internal Placement	Work Related Training	Develop Work Skills	Life briefs and project work / Social Action	_____ hrs
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Enrichment/Tutorial

Tutorials – group / individual / frequency? + Enrichment offer to include.... Other input needed? e.g.: study skills support / mentoring / etc	_____ hrs
---	--------------

Totals

e.g.: start & finish times / extended programme / assessment planning / etc	Total hrs _____
---	-----------------------

Refer to the full current funding guidance [16 to 19 study programmes: guidance \(2022 to 2023 academic year\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/16-to-19-study-programmes-guidance-2022-to-2023-academic-year) - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) *Our thanks to Sarah LeGood at Riverside College for this template

Planning to plan – establishing the planning architecture

Critical to successful curriculum planning will be the development of a process/model that:

- has an established timeline/cycle, tools and process including corporate signoff, that provides as much thinking and preparation time as possible
- has an identified planning team that includes:
 - a senior manager with overall responsibility for curriculum planning
 - senior leads for each component of the plan, curriculum, management information systems (MIS), finance, human resources (HR)
- includes a strategic (governor) perspective – often longer term.
- is as simple as possible, and transparent
- ensures all budget managers know the process inside out, and what their agreed targets are for each area within the plan
- has an agreed course hours resourcing tariff for each type and level of provision
- ensures all outputs are owned by their respective leads
- embraces the college's entire portfolio of activities: 16-18, adults, apprenticeships, higher education (HE), full cost, subcontracted and links income, expenditure (pay and non-pay) with delivery
- is flexible enough to accommodate the entire business plan – all provision including the 'complicated bits' – high needs, SEND, apprenticeships, commercial income, fees, and loans,
- enables periodic review
- is fully understood by all relevant levels of the organisation

Effective Practice Point 4

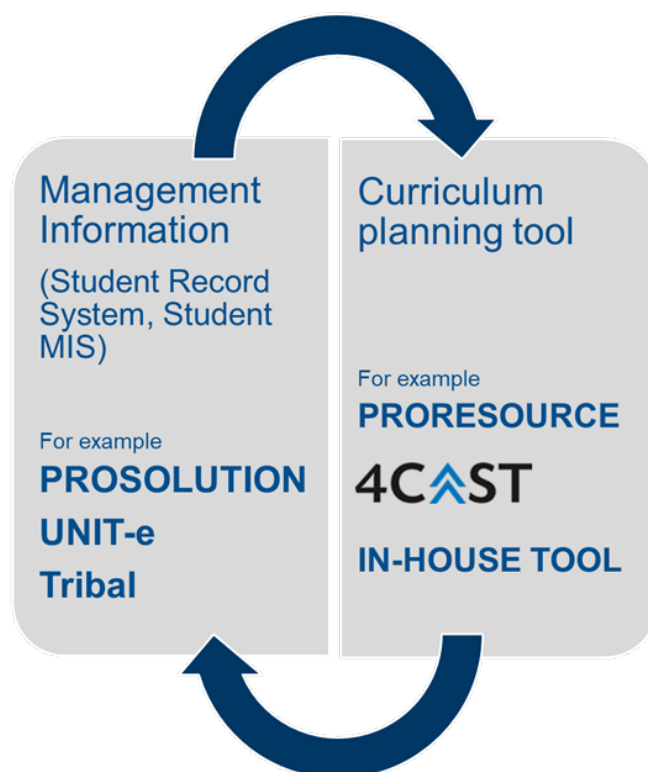
Weymouth College has an approach that is sufficiently flexible to allow for continued delivery of some low-contribution provision that is deemed important to meeting local needs, but such decisions are taken in full awareness of affordability.

The Luminate College Group's planning and monitoring system is designed to drive department heads to be innovative, responsive, and ambitious in terms of student recruitment and growth and effectively plan and manage the balance between income and expenditure at individual Business Unit level.

Curriculum planning tools – part science, part art

There are many highly effective examples of in-house, and several commercially provided, curriculum planning tools that will successfully deliver a costed curriculum plan. All provide a framework to combine the range of resources that deliver an integrated plan. The more sophisticated have a dynamic link between source data that automatically updates the plan as new data is combined with existing. This guide does not promote any specific tool but suggests that an organisation explores what is right for their specific needs.

Figure 3: Diagram illustrating the flow of data and interdependency between management information systems and curriculum planning.



Effective Practice Point 5

Basingstoke College of Technology uses Google Docs to provide an open, transparent, and inclusive approach to new course planning.

East Kent College Group has developed a 'Curriculum Blueprint' planning tool.

Weymouth College uses 4CAST supported by other interoperable technologies.

Wyke Sixth Form College has developed an in-house software package to digitise curriculum planning and ensure a live interface with curriculum planning, application, and enrolment processes. The system has significantly reduced workload and inaccuracy.

Expected outputs from an effective curriculum planning tool

Standard Curriculum Planning Outputs	Advanced Curriculum Planning Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learner / enrolment numbers • Cost centre analysis • Contribution (£ and %) • Income / funding (by income / funding stream) • Direct staffing costs (by staff type) • Direct non-staffing costs (by category) • Staff hours required (by staff type) • Average class size 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planned staff utilisation • Levels of remission • Monthly income (and potentially a cashflow projection for specific provision) • Planned year-on-year growth / contraction • Performance against plan / targets • Overheads (by category)

Table 2: Expected outputs from an effective curriculum planning tool

Planning to meet skills needs

The Unit for Future Skills (UFS) aims to improve the quality and availability of data on skills and jobs. The UFS team in the Department for Education has published a prototype dashboard on local skills supply/demand to support Local Skills Improvement Plans. The local skills dashboard shows statistics on local employment and skills in England to support local skills planning and delivery. Access to this type of information will be key for colleges as they seek to match their provision with that of the Local Skills Improvement Plans. Whilst still a prototype, the [local skills dashboard](#) contains valuable information about regional skills.

[RCU](#), a well-established commercial organisation working in the FE landscape, has developed a tool that provides colleges with a complete picture of all post-16 further education, including apprenticeships and higher education, alongside local community demographics, skills requirements, and progression opportunities in local areas. Already used by curriculum teams and senior leaders in the sector, Vector uses national ILR, schools and HESA data alongside local demographic information and labour market intelligence to inform curriculum planners by providing analysis, insight, and evidence as to local curriculum and learner recruitment profiles.

By combining data sources, Vector can provide useful information to inform planning in the context of major learner groups e.g. 16-18, adults, apprenticeships, HE.

Key areas of functionality are:

- Market share, learner numbers and trends by sector subject areas
- Course level curriculum tables with detailed comparisons to other providers
- Identification of local skills demand using local market intelligence
- Mapping of local recruitment trends and travel to learn patterns
- Future 16-18 learner numbers forecasting

Contribution analysis

What is financial contribution?

A college's core activity is to deliver education and training. It will also need a range of support infrastructure in place, including administration, technical support, and the provision of premises, to deliver learning. The planned financial contribution from the whole curriculum is the surplus of income received for core educational activities above the direct cost of delivering those activities. Direct costs will typically include teaching pay costs, technician costs, direct cost of materials and resources for delivering the learning, exam and assessment costs, and any direct learning support costs. The value of this contribution generated from core provision is the sum available to fund all of the other costs (overheads) which the college incurs.

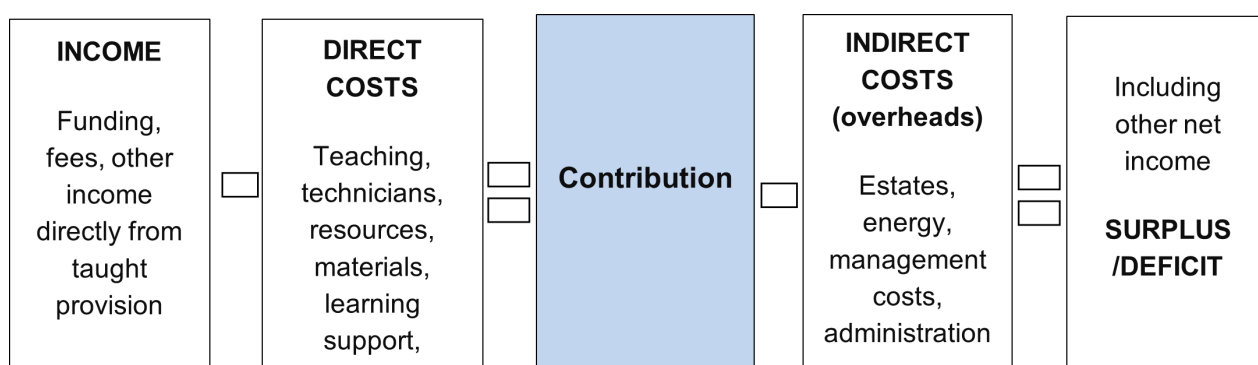


Figure 4: Contribution calculation

A college may also generate a direct contribution from other income sources, such as student refectories or college shops, which will also form part of the net income available to fund overheads. These sources are generally less financially significant than contribution generated from educational provision (curriculum) and should be planned and monitored separately.

Why plan and analyse financial contribution?

In order to achieve at least break-even financially, a college needs to ensure that its core educational provision is generating enough contribution to cover the rest of its activities. In simple terms, if the educational provision is not generating enough contribution to cover the rest of the college's costs (net of any contribution from commercial activities), it will make a loss and, depending on the size of the loss and the college's cash position, this may affect the viability of the college.

If analysis shows that historic contribution has not been sufficient to cover overheads, there needs to be an adjustment in planning which either *increases* the overall contribution achieved by the educational provision or *reduces* overhead cost. This is a

simple equation, but it is sometimes not fully worked through as part of curriculum and budget planning.

If colleges use contribution analysis as part of their course planning, it is not uncommon to use an historic target 'round' contribution rate, such as 45%. Although such rates might be widely used in the sector, analysis of historic college finance record data shows that actual contributions required to break even at a high level typically range from 25% to 70%, with the caveat that individual colleges' classification of certain types of cost within finance record categories will sometimes vary. As part of curriculum planning, colleges should check annually what *actual* overall % contribution they need to generate to cover their overheads, and plan any action needed as a result. Colleges that are struggling financially do not always fully understand what the actual overall contribution needed is, whether they are achieving it, and what elements can be adjusted to get it to where it needs to be.

In addition to this basic overall analysis, it is valuable to understand how much contribution each individual element of the planned curriculum is generating. This requires an integrated curriculum and financial planning system at a course or subject area level and can be set up 'in house' using a spreadsheet or using sector-specific commercial software. Having this level of information will give an understanding of the financial impact of any individual element of provision and whether it is achieving an agreed target contribution.

Such information will be only one element in assessing current and potential provision. There will be provision which generates lower, nil, or even negative contributions, but continues to run due to the importance of its educational, social, or local skills impact. Having detailed analysis available will allow management teams to understand what these areas are, how they are offset by contributions generated by other provision (cross-subsidised) and exactly how the overall mix of contribution is made up to cover the required overhead.

Finer points of contribution analysis

In practice, the distinction between direct educational costs and support costs is not always clear. For example, is the cost of renting a room for an evening class a direct cost of provision or an estate overhead? The general principle is that, if the cost would not have been incurred if the course provision as a whole did not run, then it should be included in direct costs for the provision, but if it is part of a general estates cost which would be incurred whether or not the course runs, then it is a fixed overhead.

Similarly, how should a college treat the cost of providing learning support in a classroom which is funded by separate higher needs funding? In principle, this would be part of contribution analysis of direct provision, but in practice this is often accounted for separately, since contributions from high needs support funding is lower and thus

warrants different accountability systems. If excluded from the core planning, the key principle in this case is that all *other* provision contributes enough to cover overheads and that the high needs provision is supported by the additional element of funding.

For points such as these, management teams will need to use professional judgement in deciding which costs are included in the analysis. There are many different approaches, as highlighted by the different methodologies employed by the colleges in the case studies. The important thing is to include as many reasonable direct costs in the contribution calculation as possible, not just teaching costs, and to be consistent in applying the same methodology for planning and for measuring actual performance.

For the purposes of benchmarking, a prescribed methodology for calculating contribution as a % of income is included in the latest version of the finance record. This assumes broadly that all teaching and teaching support activities generate core contribution.

Checking actual performance

Once the mix of contribution by subject area and overall contribution has been planned as part of the annual curriculum planning process, or as part of a proposal to commence new provision, it is important to check how actual contribution delivered compares with the plan. Actual results should be checked to see how close they are to plan once recruitment to any course or income stream is capable of being reliably measured. This is explored in more depth in the [FEC good practice guide for management accounts](#).

This should happen for 2 reasons:

- If contribution generated is lower than expected, there may be opportunities to make in-year adjustments to delivery to improve the position. However, it is important to assess the risk of adjustments impacting negatively on the student experience before making decisions.
- If actual contribution generated is significantly different to plan, the reasons, variances and impact should be analysed and used to inform future planning rounds – for example, what lessons could be learned? Has forecast recruitment tended to be optimistic? Has there been a greater reliance on agency staff costs than planned? Has inflation impacted non-pay costs?

The value of understanding contribution

Having a good understanding of what the actual overhead costs are, what actual level of contribution from income is needed to cover them, and how individual elements of the planned curriculum contribute as part of the mix, ensures that financial planning is based on real performance.

It is inevitable that some programmes that make up the planned curriculum will generate more contribution than others, with the possibility of a few generating losses (negative contribution), but if college managers and delivery staff understand the economic building blocks, then informed decisions can be made on the basis of good financial knowledge which ultimately will improve the financial viability of the organisation.

Benchmarking

In April 2022 the FE Commissioner set out a series of efficiency benchmarks and their method of calculation. Whilst all are linked to planning, the most relevant to effective curriculum planning is in relation to the deployment of staff. Successfully maintaining healthy staff costs (often referred to as pay costs) to income ratios is a critical component of maintaining organisational efficiency through the integrated curriculum and financial planning process. Regular reporting throughout the planning cycle will flag whether the planned activity can be/is being delivered within the expected staff/pay cost to income ratio.

The current guidance is that staff/pay costs as a % of income⁷ should be:

General further education college	<65%
Sixth form college	<70%

Further detail on the staff/pay costs to income ratio calculation can be found in appendix 5.

To support effective benchmarking, the FEC is developing a benchmarking tool designed to provide clear comparisons with like organisations across a number of key metrics. This will be accessible through View Your Education Data (VYED) which all providers have access to. The expected release date will be c. May 2023.

Commercial benchmarking tools are also available. One such tool is [My Benchmark](#), which is a subscription based online application for Further Education providers to compare performance against peers using a combination of college and publicly available datasets.

The sorts of things it offers are:

- Comparison of common KPIs against the sector for curriculum, quality, financial & learner metrics;
- insights into where a college's approach & processes are not in-line with the sector & best practice;
- pointers to potential investment and efficiencies including where to focus and scale;
- identification of gaps in current monitoring & performance management; and,
- discerning sector trends to support an effective review of organisational performance

⁷ Total staff costs (teaching and support, including contract tuition services but excluding restructuring and FRS102 pensions adjustments) as a percentage of adjusted income (excluding franchised provision income)

Business/curriculum planning models: *review, plan, validate, monitor, review...*

Standard planning cycle

A standard curriculum planning cycle will often consist of a series of planning functions that organisations undertake as they review the current year's performance and build the forthcoming year's plan.

The following diagram illustrates a typical approach, where the college starts by reviewing and reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of the previous plan and whether there should be adjustments to the existing curriculum and/or development of new provision – this is often carried out through strategic planning activity between governors, senior leaders, curriculum leaders, and external stakeholders. From this, a course listing emerges. Built on the current year's course listing, the new course listing will need to be reviewed against not only previous performance, but also new initiatives identified within the college and in consultation with employers and other key stakeholders, or in response to wider external priorities in the regional economy or government policy.

It is at this stage senior leaders may want to add in other important planning criteria relating to organisational efficiency, such as resourcing tariffs for types of courses, and establishing minimum average class size expectations for levels of provision. Reviewing the sustainability of provision can be a sensitive process, particularly if the sustainability of the provision is in question. Curriculum planning leads might apply a top level review of proposed curriculum to determine whether to invest or divest of provision before time and resources are invested in detailed planning. The following Venn diagram illustrates a simple model for top level viability assessment:

Invest/divest assessment framework

The invest/divest assessment framework (figure 6) illustrates 3 distinct criteria that a college might use to priorities investment in an area of curriculum. In this case, the areas relate to:

- The strategic priorities of the college
- The college's level of available resources and expertise
- The assessed market for the provision

A **review** assessment is split into 2 types. Those that satisfy a single criterion are considered high risk, and those that meet two criteria and considered a lower risk. Each flags the need for further research into areas of weakness. For example, if the assessment identifies that the market and resources are relatively strong, but the provision is not a strategic priority, then senior leaders would need to determine if an

adjustment to provision could realign it with the strategic priorities without adversely impacting the market or the quality. Likewise, if the provision is a strategic priority and the college has the resources/expertise, but there appears to be an issue with the market (for example too much competition), then senior leaders will need to assess if the provision is worth retaining.

A **strong** assessment meets all the criteria for continued investment in the provision.

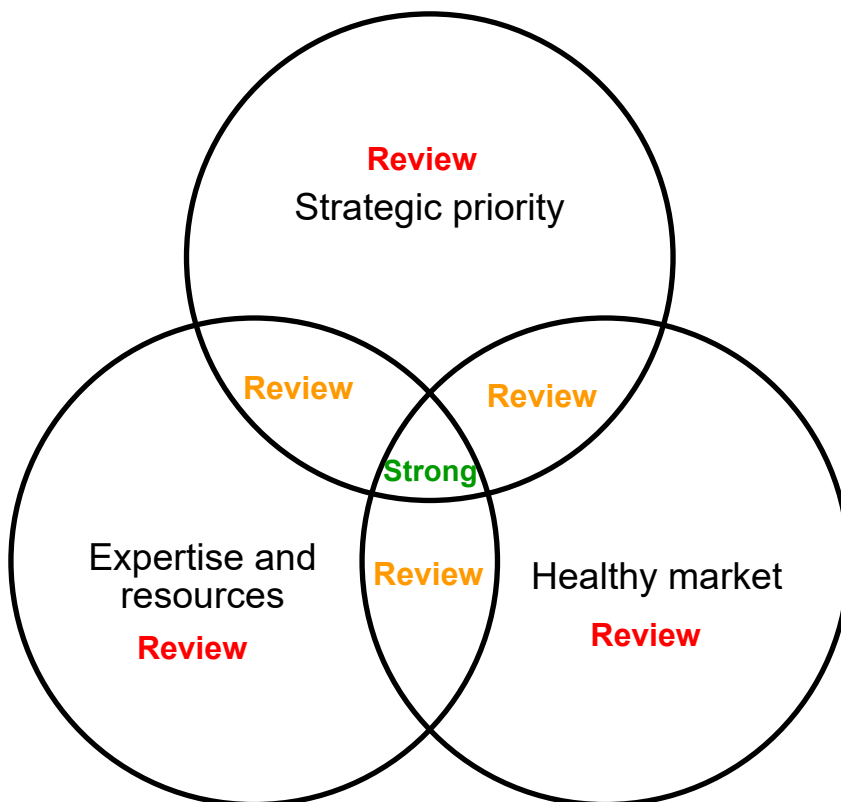


Figure 5: Invest/Divest Assessment Framework

Effective Practice Point 6

Weymouth College's approach to curriculum planning provides a fully integrated and well-established process for planning and reviewing the curriculum offer, designed to maximise the efficiency of staff deployment, and maximise the contribution from its relatively broad curriculum offer.

The Luminate Group's whole organisation delegated approach has been very successful for them and several other colleges. The system is sustained by significant training, support, and development of all managers by experts throughout the group.

Establishing a portfolio of courses will initiate thoughts around the type and style of delivery each will benefit from, together with the curriculum structure required to deliver a coherent and meaningful programme of learning for the students. To ensure the organisation has a clear understanding of the levels and types of physical and human resourcing required to deliver the plan, forecast learner numbers need to be attributed to each course. This data is often derived from historical performance and other market intelligence (for example the internal progression and current application trends) that can hone the accuracy of the targeted recruitment for the course. Reliable initial progression data will give a clear indication of existing students' intentions, informing the likely recruitment of internal students progressing from one year to the next, or one level to level two.

The combination of the course (learning aim funding and/or fees) together with the expected profile of learners (numbers, ages, etc.) can give an early indication as to the likely financial income generated by the course, which can determine the level of resources required to deliver the course. In the more sophisticated tools, the accuracy of resourcing can be attributed to specific teaching rooms and individual staffing costs based on specific rather than average salaries. In more basic models, a more generic figure is used to attribute costs.

Knowing the forecast income and costs should provide a basis for agreeing budgeting. This is particularly important if the college is to have sufficient time to prepare new resources, train staff and market the provision. Where a longer lead in time is required, colleges can extend the planning period to offer more time to gather intelligence, market provision and develop resources.

Appendix 2 provides a more detailed timeline of the stages in the curriculum planning and their possible timescales.

From the completed curriculum plan, courses and their allied resources can begin to be deployed through timetabling/scheduling. Effective timetabling and registering of activity will provide a future point of reference for monitoring and reconciliation of planned against actual.

The following diagram (figure 8) offers an illustration of a relatively common standard study programme planning cycle. It identifies a series of sequential related processes through which a plan can be developed. Starting with review, reconciliation, evaluation, and research based on the previous year's performance, planners can begin to formulate the basis for planning. From here a list of proposed courses for the forthcoming year can be developed and how they will be delivered, numbers can then be attributed, funding calculated, resourcing identified, a budget to reflect the income and resourcing profile, timetables to deploy the resourcing, and engagement of learners through the enrolment process, and then the cycle will begin again.

Standard study programme curriculum planning cycle

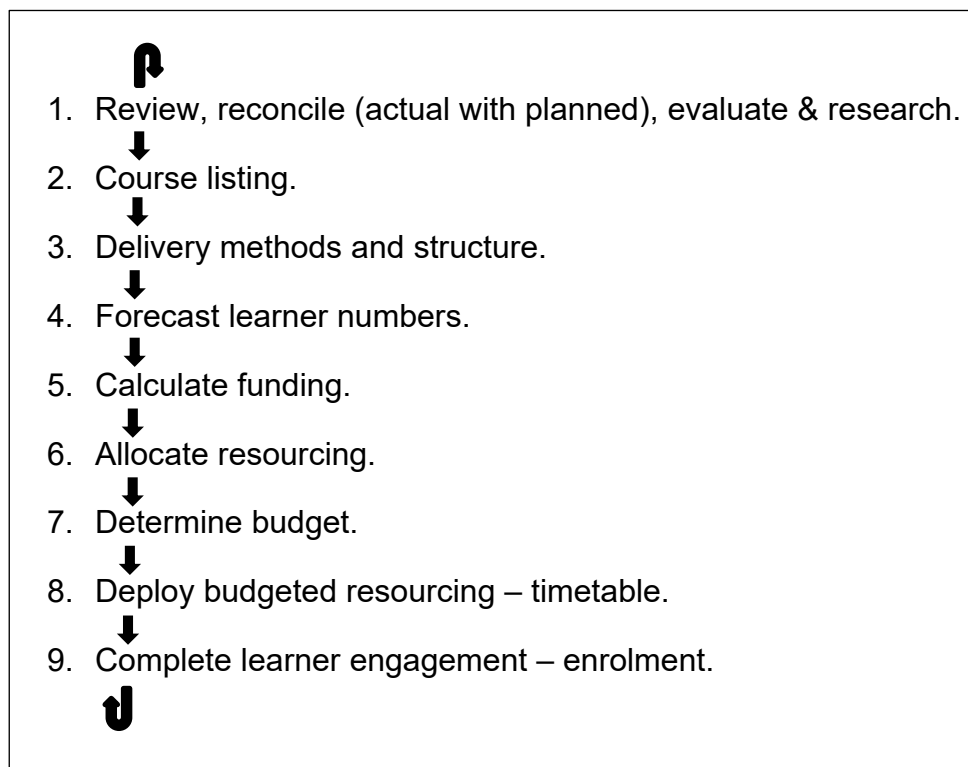


Figure 6: Standard study programme planning cycle

The next stage is recruitment against the agreed plan. Building on the expected learner progression numbers, new entrant learners will be forecast based on likely application to enrolment conversion rates, acceptances and forecast withdrawal rates by course prior to the funding threshold (for full time/long courses census is 42 days). Courses that historically have high early withdrawals will need targeted action to reduce premature leaver rates (*see appendix 4: research into pre-census retention strategies and techniques with further detail on the [Help and support for colleges](#) webpage*) and/or possibly be compensated by accommodating forecast attrition through over-recruitment to achieve targeted learner numbers.

Reconciliation early in the delivery cycle is essential to control resources and make in-year adjustments to maintain planned efficiency. Soon after the first meaningful individualised learner record (ILR) return (R04) is received, a full reconciliation between actual and planned resources needs to be completed. This will confirm where in-year adjustments to resourcing might be required and allow curriculum leaders to align resourcing with actual activity.

Simplified study programme planning cycle

For colleges with relatively narrow portfolio of courses and fewer complicated income streams, it may be more appropriate to follow a simplified version of the curriculum

planning cycle. Although the same principles apply, the processes involved can be shortened to reflect the nature, breadth and complexity of the curriculum offer.

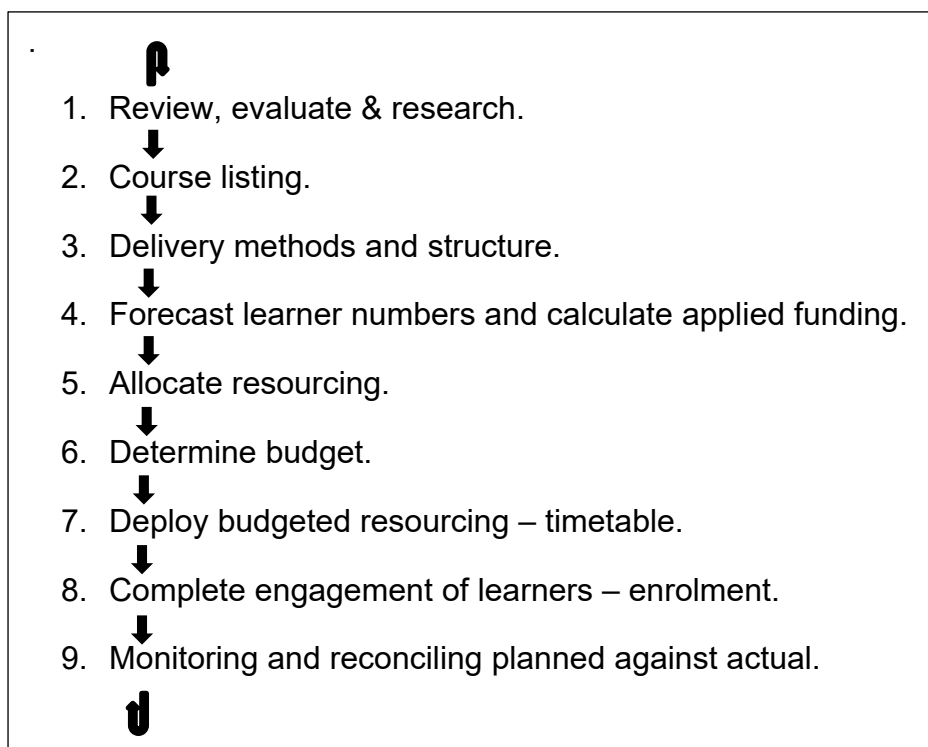


Figure 7: Simplified planning cycle

Influencers that guide curriculum planning

There are many sources of information, central policies and internal strategic preferences that will influence what and how curriculum is planned (reference to these is made earlier in the guide). It is for the college to decide to what extent each will influence the content and delivery of their curriculum. However, with the fluidity of funding methodology, curriculum policy and local circumstances often changing rapidly, it is important that each aspect of provision is reviewed annually through the planning cycle, to ensure any requirements associated with funding, meeting skills needs, opportunities to fill gaps in the market and address any performance issues are considered.

The following diagram (figure 9) illustrates a range of influencers that might be considered, but is not an exhaustive representation of the influencers that could inform a college's planning process.

The Skills and Post-16 Education Act (2022) sets out a series of expectations that could influence the way in which colleges undertake their planning processes in the future. There is the need to review the organisation's curriculum offer to ensure it contributes to meeting local skills needs and respond to the local skills improvement plan (LSIP). There is also the expectation that the annual planning cycle has a collaborative approach to planning and acknowledges the provision in other organisations serving the local area.

The following figure wraps the standard study programme planning cycle with key influencers that need to be considered as the planning team build their plan.

- Business and market intelligence
- Curriculum management structure
- Best practice across the sector
- Funding allocations including exceptional funding e.g. high needs.
- Financial and efficiency drivers
- Available skills – teaching and learning, technical, support
- Opportunities for collaborative projects
- Meeting local skills needs – LSIP
- Stakeholder priorities – MCA, LEP, Government policy
- Student recruitment trends (historical) and demographic forecasts (future)
- Previous performance – historical quality of provision

Figure 8: Influencers that guide curriculum planning

Average class size model

This document has not been developed to prescribe a curriculum planning methodology that will suit every organisation's business model. To the contrary, it seeks to represent the breadth of approaches working in the sector and describe how they are deployed using a common framework. The average class size model is an approach commonly used within the sector as a resourcing model for an organisation's curriculum.

Often using a decentralised approach to planning, this model builds on the principle that if resources are managed through allocation of provision to a devolved entity (faculty, department, school, curriculum manager) with effective controls on resourcing and agreed expected outcomes (set average class size, targeted learner numbers – income), then controls and efficiencies can be managed through meeting the average class size. For each, a cost centre is established and a level of authority over decision making agreed. Key will be to ensure all curriculum managers operate within their allocated resource.

There are, inevitably, variations on this principle, where a degree of planning autonomy along the lines of an average class size model can be built into a more centralised approach. Where the average class size model is particularly effective is where organisations have the following characteristics:

- Organisations with sufficient resilience to withstand unforeseen variations in recruitment
- Strong 16-19 recruitment trend
- 16-19 is the majority of provision facilitating early planning outcomes
- Leadership teams are very familiar with key performance indicators and business trends
- Excellent scenario modelling
- High staff utilisation
- Course tariff agreed, for example full time (FT) = 580 hrs
- Average group size agreed, for example 18
- Department allocated set resource, for example 10 groups of 18 students (180 students)
- Resource calculated at $580 \times 10 = 5,800$ contact hours
- Curriculum manager operates within an agreed allocated resource

FEC Comment: average class size can be a useful proxy for curriculum efficiency. However, increasing average class size is a common challenge for colleges in financial difficulty. This is particularly acute where organisations have large numbers of lower level learners and/or those requiring high needs provision, as in these circumstances, large classes may not be appropriate.

Timeline and key milestones

An important aspect of any planning process is to give sufficient thought to what is trying to be achieved, how will it be achieved and what are the risks involved at each stage of the planning process.

Effective Practice Point 7

The Luminate Group's senior leadership team as part of the cycle de-risk where targets are overly ambitious or unpredictable so that the Corporation approve a moderated budget particularly on income and pay which gives stability to longer term planning assumptions. The more ambitious targets remain with the budget holder to stretch them and their teams.

The management of risk including financial underperformance is therefore efficiently distributed throughout the college. Small amounts of underperformance are easily recognised and managed without destabilising the overall

To support accurate planning, **East Kent College Group** invest in targeted training of managers to progressively deepen understanding of their learners and their likely exit points to better inform curriculum planning and sequencing.

At **Wyke Sixth Form College** middle managers are expected to develop and test predictive models, drive processes and information flow between frontline teams and senior leadership aligns strategy with practice and supports iterative reconciliation in-year.

Although planning is a cyclical process, it is possible to identify critical points on the cycle where the progress can be sense checked (note appendix 2). We recommend that at the end of the annual⁸ cycle in November of the planned year (post R04), a review and reconciliation of actuals against planned is carried out. Working back from this point through, a) the start of the academic year when the plan becomes active, and on to b) the beginning of the strategic review of provision, offers a timeline of plus and minus months from September of the live year. The following timeline suggests that:

Review, evaluation, and research could commence up to 15 months ahead of the plan becoming active. This is particularly relevant where new provision is being planned, for example T Levels, where a significant amount of preparation will be required prior to

⁸ Where there is a more profound change to the curriculum offer that needs a longer lead in time, such as new provision, then the planning cycle could be longer for example, 12-15 months

going live. If there are no profound changes planned, then this period could be shortened to the standard 10+ months.

Using the simplified cycle to set out the timeline, it is beneficial to have the course listing completed around 8 months prior to the start of the following academic year, meaning January of the previous year. Over the next few months, the plan can be checked against strategic drivers and be populated with targeted numbers and resourcing requirements, which will provide an overall value and cost of delivery. Using this information to inform budgets will align the planned activity with available resourcing. One month after the plan becomes active, it is important to initiate the in-year validation, monitoring, and reconciliation process, which will then continue alongside the next year's planning cycle.

The following table (table 4) illustrates a possible headline planning cycle with key milestones that builds the curriculum plan from 12-15 months before the start of the relevant academic year, incrementally developing the plan through a series of activities that include governor oversight and stakeholder engagement. The sequence of activities can be adjusted to meet the specific needs of a college, giving the opportunity to provide more or less time to develop the curriculum depending on the complexity of the organisation's provision.

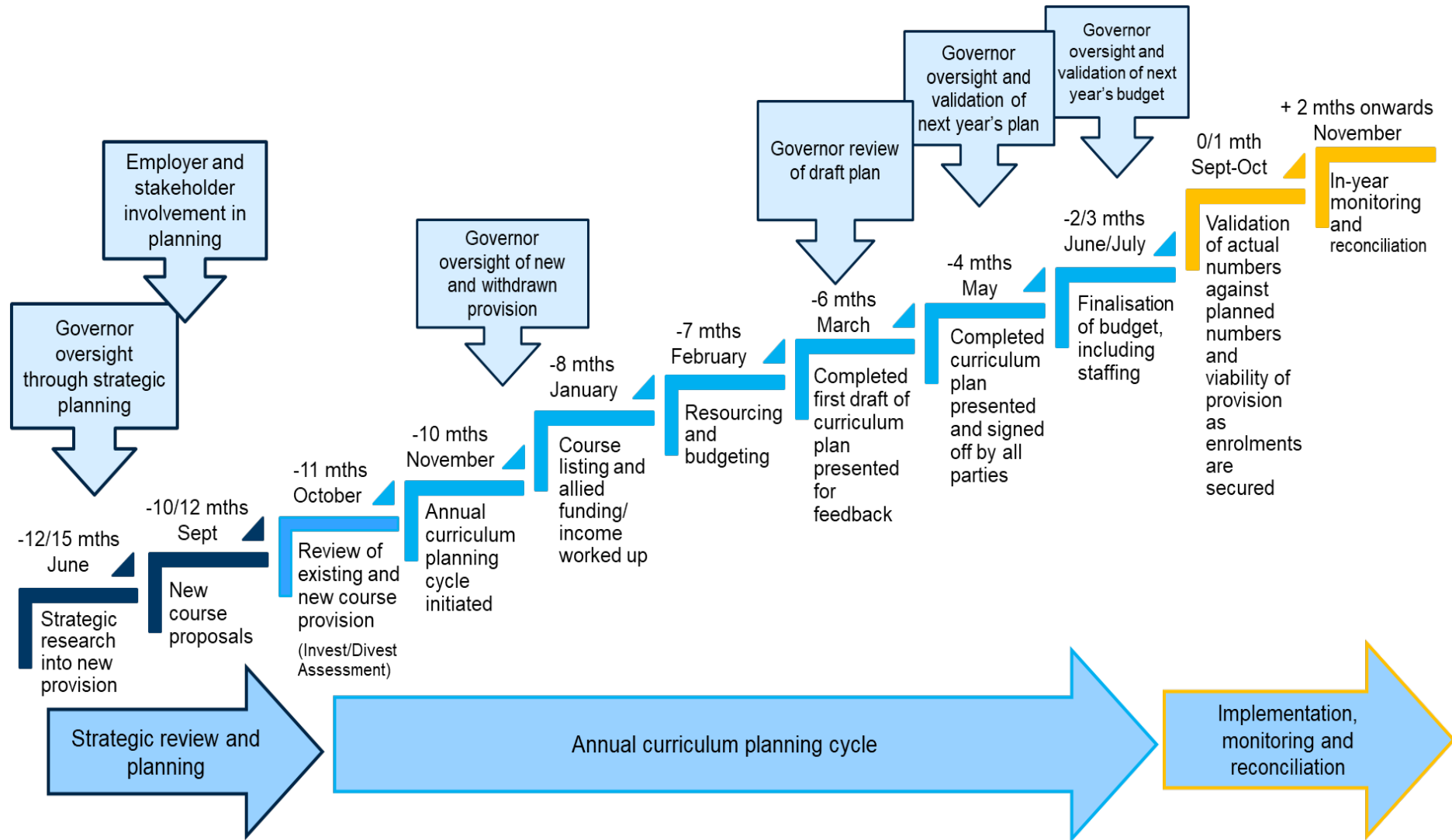
Figure 10 offers an alternative representation of the same process. Table 5 in appendix 1 provides a detailed planning cycle that unpacks the key milestones into clear actions that should be considered. It also offers the expected duration of the process. Whilst only an example, the planning cycle and key milestones have been drawn from common practices across the sector.

Stage	Months prior to implementation year	Activity	Governor oversight and Stakeholder Involvement
Strategic review and planning	-15/12 June	Strategic research into new provision	Governor oversight through strategic planning
	-12/10 Sept	New course proposals	Employer and stakeholder involvement in planning
Annual curriculum planning cycle	-11 Oct	Review of existing and new course provision (Invest/Divest Assessment)	Governor oversight of new and withdrawn provision
	-10 Nov	Annual curriculum planning cycle initiated	
	-8 Jan	Course listing and allied funding/ income worked up	
	-7 Feb	Resourcing and budgeting	
	-6 Mar	Completed first draft of curriculum plan presented for feedback	Governor review of draft plan
	-4 May	Completed curriculum plan presented and signed off by all parties	Governor oversight and validation of next year's plan
	-3/2 Jun/Jul	Finalisation of budget, including staffing	Governor oversight and validation of following year's budget
Implementation, monitoring and reconciliation	+0/1 Sept/Oct	Validation of actual numbers against planned numbers and viability of provision as enrolments are secured	
	+ 2 Nov onwards	In-year monitoring and reconciliation	

Table 3: Top level curriculum planning timeline

Figure 9: Illustration of the top level curriculum planning timeline

An example of a detailed timeline is illustrated in Appendix 1



In-year monitoring, reconciliation, and adjustment

Once the annual plan is signed off and becomes 'live' at the beginning of the academic year, the cycle must continue to monitor performance against the planned activity and adjust resources to match actual enrolments and retained learners. This should commence early in the academic year and throughout to ensure resources are deployed efficiently. The cycle will need to access data from 3 main sources to inform resourcing needs: 1) the curriculum plan, 2) the timetabled activity, and 3) the registered activity, for example actual staff/student ratios, average class sizes.

If the registered activity, particularly actual learner numbers, is not as planned, then this should be reflected in an adjustment to resourcing, which then flows into timetables and back to course registers.

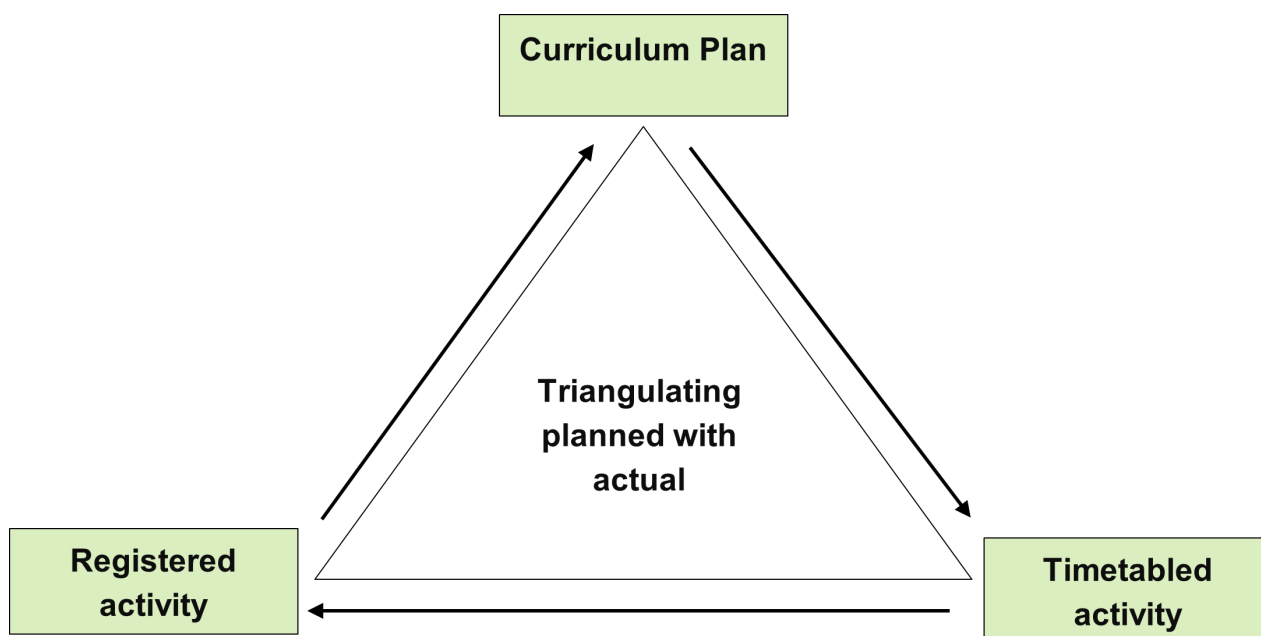


Figure 10: In year monitoring , reconciliation, and adjustment cycle

Case studies of effective practice: summaries

To illustrate curriculum planning practices that work effectively in the FE sector, 6 organisations from across the sector agreed to showcase their approach to curriculum planning. In each case, there is a short introduction to the college, an overview of the planning processes used, and a description of the approach the college takes to curriculum planning. This is followed by the planning model and a comment from each of the heads of the organisations involved.

The case studies have not been provided as comparative research and are not provided as examples of the only models used in the sector, but more a range of effective practice that works for them and could very easily be adapted to work for other organisations. The case studies are not presented in any order of priority but are listed alphabetically.

The key observations from the case studies that might be of interest to other organisations are summarised in this section. **The detailed case studies follow in Appendix 3.**

General

- Broad range of internal and externally sourced curriculum planning tools are deployed across the sector
- Course approval procedures are commonly used to assess and validate changes to provision for example new courses
- Most use contribution analysis to assess financial viability
- Investment in training those involved in curriculum planning is a key success factor in many models – particularly where authority is delegated to cost centre managers.
- There are many business/curriculum planning solutions. Some are highly centralised (top down) and systems based, others decentralised (bottom up) with greater reliance on the business acumen of cost centre leadership supported by strict oversight. Others are midway between the 2 whereby curriculum managers have the autonomy to decide what the provision is and how it is delivered, but with close oversight and within a specific framework. If there were a scale from centralised to decentralised there are likely to be colleges across the entire spectrum.
- All rely on a systems framework to support the process throughout the cycle

Basingstoke College of Technology

- A whole college approach to new course planning, including the views of relevant stakeholders for example employers, and input from relevant specialist college departments including Marketing, MIS and Finance.
- The use of technology (Google Docs) to ensure an open, transparent, and inclusive approach to new course planning.
- An integrated approach to curriculum and financial planning.
- Student number forecasts at course level are set centrally, with curriculum managers having the opportunity to challenge the assumptions made where they have local knowledge and/or evidence
- A clear resourcing model that includes robust and stretching expectations and targets for curriculum efficiency.
- A bespoke approach to planning apprenticeship provision to ensure effectiveness, efficiency, and contribution.
- Monitoring of actual performance against budget allocation to ensure the timely in-year servicing of additional need and/or growth, switching of resources and redeployment of staff.
- A formula framework based on student numbers that enables the timely allocation and reallocation of staff and non-pay resource to reconcile actual enrolment performance against plan.

East Kent College Group

- Clarity of purpose of a course and curriculum (set by senior leaders, communicated simply)
- Integration of quality, finance, and inclusivity into planning
- Investment in targeted training of managers to progressively deepen understanding of their learners and their likely exit points to better inform curriculum planning and sequencing.
- A 'Curriculum Blueprint' planning tool which sets out centrally controlled, realistic and prudent expectations and policies on critical factors such as course hours and group sizes and compares income with resources.
- An aligned curriculum with explicit links to local and regional needs, with well-resourced specialisms where they are needed (and reduction in duplication of courses where demand is lower).

Sparsholt College Group

- Curriculum strategy and plan aligned with strategic plan.
- Occupationally informed data used to guide curriculum planning.
- Strategic involvement of all board members at the initiation.
- Tactical overview and monitoring of college Curriculum Plan through a specialist committee of the board, the Community, Employer and Market Requirements Committee (CEMR).
- A bottom-up/top-down approach to the proposed revision of the 3-year plan with peer scrutiny.
- Regularly updated financial contribution analysis by curriculum area.
- College-wide timetable and framework of rules tied to the college budgeting timescale.
- Active deployment of the limited resource of specialist English and maths teachers at appropriate times of day to match learner focus.
- Compliance, consistency, and continuity achieved through oversight of detailed curriculum planning by senior leaders.
- Staff hours differentiated by task and cost as lecturer or instructor, where the mix can be agreed with senior leaders in accordance with timetabling rules and financial margin.

The Luminate College Group

- Whole organisation approach to planning driven by the student focussed strategy and the culture of the group.
- This planning and monitoring system is designed to drive department heads to be innovative, responsive, and ambitious in terms of student recruitment and growth and effectively plan and manage the balance between income and expenditure at individual Business Unit level.
- The system is sustained by significant training, support, and development of all managers by recognised experts.
- Managers and budget owners are clear on their responsibilities with a detailed understanding of both their contribution to the overall direction of the college.
- Income is recognised in the year it is earned at department level and therefore being resourced appropriately.
- The senior leadership team, as part of the cycle de-risk where targets are overly ambitious or unpredictable, so that the corporation can approve a moderated budget particularly on income and pay, which in turn, gives stability to longer term planning assumptions. The more ambitious targets remain with the budget holder to stretch them and their teams.
- The management of risk, including financial underperformance is therefore efficiently distributed throughout the college and is well understood. Small amounts of underperformance are easily recognised and managed.

Weymouth College

- The college's approach to curriculum planning provides a fully integrated and well-established process for planning and reviewing the curriculum offer, designed to maximise the efficiency of staff deployment, and the contribution from its relatively broad curriculum offer.
- The level of accuracy with which this enables the college to manage and control staff utilisation and staffing budgets is highly efficient and has helped to maintain high levels of staff utilisation and reduce the need for agency and sessional staff.
- A detailed and transparent process enables the college to consider carefully plans for new programmes and highlight provision where viability is in question.
- Automated links and data feeds from other college systems avoids time consuming manual data entry and cross-checking, thereby minimising the potential for inconsistencies and improving the reliability of data.
- Managers and staff across the college have a good awareness of curriculum efficiency that encourages and promotes innovative approaches to delivery in order to maintain viability on the premise that quality of provision is non-negotiable.
- The approach is sufficiently flexible to allow for continued delivery of some low-contribution provision that is deemed important to meeting local needs, but such decisions are taken in full awareness of affordability.
- For colleges of a similar size, geography and market, Weymouth's model for curriculum planning serves as a useful case study that combines the best of 4CAST with enhanced bespoke tools developed by the college.

Wyke Sixth Form College

- Curriculum planning has several distinctive features which leaders are happy to share.
- The distributed leadership of its key processes enable staff at all levels to understand curriculum planning, contribute ideas, offer sense checks, and take responsibility for systems and events.
- The model provides opportunities for leadership continuous professional development (CPD) and supports talent management across the organisation.
- SLT's role is strategic appraisal, challenge and support for the operational plans presented by middle leaders, teams, and frontline staff.
- The role of link **governor for curriculum planning** provides the board with active oversight of planning against the college's mission and vision, its 2 strategic priorities and its 5 core curriculum planning principles, and supports them in their role in shaping the college's direction.
- The role of a middle leader to develop and test predictive models, drive processes and information flow between frontline teams and senior leadership aligns strategy with practice and supports iterative reconciliation in-year.
- In-house development of software to digitise curriculum planning and ensure a live interface with curriculum planning, application and enrolment processes has significantly reduced workload and inaccuracy.
- System uses a strategic dashboard to track and test curriculum planning and assess progress against key metrics.

Section 2: Appendices, including detailed case studies

Table 4: Example curriculum planning timeline

Appendix 1: Example Curriculum Planning Timeline

Process	Lead	Duration	Team	Period/Quarter								
				Jun	Jul – Sep	Oct – Dec	Jan – Mar	Apr – Jun	Jul – Sep	Oct – Dec	Jan – Mar	
Initial planning meeting	VP Curriculum	1 day	Curriculum planning team	Jun								
Collation of data on existing provision	Head of MIS	14 days	Heads of curriculum	Jun								
Planning timeline discussed with governors	Governance professional	1 day	Governors and SLT	Jun								
Strategic review of existing curriculum and new provision	VP Curriculum	1 day	Governors, SLT & stakeholders	Jun								
Review of existing provision	VP Curriculum	45 days	Curriculum planning team		Jul							
LSIP analysis and employer consultation/involvement in course design and planning	VP Curriculum	15 days	Curriculum planning team		Sep							
New course proposals submitted	VP Curriculum	10 days	Heads of curriculum		Sep							
Create proposal in principle for curriculum plan, including review of provision, learner numbers, and contribution	VP Curriculum	25 days	Curriculum planning team			Oct						

Presentation by heads of curriculum	VP Curriculum	10 days	Curriculum planning team			Oct					
Sense check actual enrolments of the previous year against plan	Director of Finance	5 days	MIS, Finance team and Heads of curriculum			Nov					
Confirm resourcing tariff/blueprint by course	VP Curriculum and Director of Finance	10 days	Heads of curriculum, Finance team and MIS			Nov					
Refine proposals	VP Curriculum	15 days	Heads of curriculum			Nov					
Create marketing plan including market research	Marketing lead	10 days	Curriculum planning team			Nov	Feb				
Proposal in principle for headline plan reviewed by SLT and governors	Principal	10 days	SLT, Governance Professional and Governors			Dec					
Initial draft budget complete	Director of Finance	60 days	Finance team				Jan	Mar			
Feedback to employers and stakeholder groups via LSIP planning process	VP Curriculum	10 days	Heads of curriculum and SLT				Jan				
Share first draft of resourcing with governors	Governance Professional	1 day	Governors and SLT				Jan				
Plan for detailed staff resourcing	VP Curriculum	15 days	Heads of curriculum, HR lead and SLT				Feb				

Inform payroll budget with early draft of curriculum plan	Director of Finance	10 days	Heads of curriculum, MIS and Finance team				Feb				
Initiate recruitment and staffing adjustments to resource curriculum plan	HR Lead	100 days	SLT, HR and Finance team				Feb		Jul		
Plan non-pay costs in consultation with teams	Director of Finance	20 days	SLT and Curriculum planning team				Mar				
FIRST FULL DRAFT OF CURRICULUM PLAN	VP Curriculum	5 days	Governors, SLT and Curriculum planning team				Mar				
Compare draft plan with financial budget	Director of Finance	5 days	Curriculum planning and Finance teams				Mar				
Circulate draft curriculum plan for consultation and comment	VP Curriculum	10 days	Curriculum planning team					Apr			
Review plan following receipt of funding allocations	VP Curriculum & Director of Finance	5 days	MIS and Curriculum planning team					Apr			
Presentation of final plan to, and validation by, governors	Governance Professional	1 day	Governors, SLT and VP Curriculum					May			
Final adjustments to plan	Principal	5 days	Curriculum planning team					May			
Detailed comparison of final plan with financial budget	Director of Finance	3 days	Finance and Curriculum planning teams					May			

Finalisation of budget including staffing	Director of Finance	5 days	Finance team					Jun/ Jul			
Governor oversight and validation of next year's budget	Governance professional	1 day	Governors, SLT and Director of Finance					Jun/ Jul			
Review actual enrolments with plan	VP Curriculum & Director of Finance	40 days	Curriculum, Finance and MIS teams						Sep	Oct/ Nov	
Adjust in-year resourcing to match actual recruitment	VP Curriculum, HR Lead & Director of Finance	20 days	SLT and HR							Nov/ Dec	
In-year monitoring and adjusting of efficiency KPIs	VP Curriculum and Director of Finance	➔	Heads of curriculum, MIS, HR, and Finance team								➔

Appendix 2: Fault finding

Even the most experienced curriculum planners using the most sophisticated planning tools for a system that is highly developed will experience unknown results during the planning process. The following table (table 6) attempts to predict examples of possible faults and signpost to why they might have occurred

Table 5: Fault finding

ORGANISATIONAL WEAKNESSES	10 COMMON ISSUES IN PLANNING	POSSIBLE ACTIONS
Poor curriculum planning and control of resources. Underdeveloped income and resource management	Curriculum planning process and tools underdeveloped	Review curriculum planning tools to ensure they are fit for purpose
Underdeveloped planning outcomes and allied reporting	Insufficient training/confidence in system	Agree a reporting structure – dashboard Establish a curriculum planning user group
Inconsistent planning	Process over complicated	Review architecture of planning process to simplify
Poor financial and resource planning. Cyclical errors	Curriculum planning cycle not aligned with other key business cycles – budgets and staffing	Review planning cycle to build enough time to review and evaluate previous and planned activity Aligning all business processes
Missed targets	Too much emphasis on bottom up planning leading to poor forecasting.	Ensure all bottom up planning is sense checked/triangulated against other key influencers
Static curriculum with little year on year movement. Poor response to key initiatives. Curriculum failure	Research and review underdeveloped – reluctance to change	Review planning cycle. Ensure all influencers are given sufficient review and thought before detailed planning commences Review curriculum strategy

Missed targets and under delivery against plans	Over optimistic forecasting of learner numbers	Ensure all bottom up planning is sense checked/triangulated against previous performance and other key influencers
Curriculum failure. Expensive provision, poor control of costs	Working from inaccurate and/or misaligned data	Ensure one source of data with known sources. Review remission policy
Dual systems, incomplete planning, elements of curriculum missing planning and controls	Missing provision – apprenticeships, HE, full cost	Curriculum plan should include the organisation’s entire business portfolio
Poor overall planning and reporting. Not all costs included leading to loss of financial controls.	Outputs and efficiency indicators appear counter-intuitive	Planning sessions to review interim and final outputs against historical key performance indicators (KPIs), applications etc. Signing off by curriculum planning lead

Appendix 3: Curriculum planning case studies

Case Study: Basingstoke College of Technology



Name of Principal/CEO:	Anthony Bravo
Type of Organisation:	General Further Education
Geographical Location:	South East
16-19	1,489
AEB	1,730
Apprenticeships	948
Traineeships	0
Higher Education	79
Full cost	657

Table 6: Basingstoke College of Technology

Introduction

Basingstoke College of Technology is the main provider of technical further education in Basingstoke, attracting learners to its campus in the centre of town from the local and surrounding areas and providing apprenticeships in the region in partnership with local and national employers. The college delivers courses from entry level through to level 5 including professional qualifications. It offers a range of other provision including providing adult and community leisure courses, employability training and higher education provision, in partnership with several local universities. It also provides a wide range of apprenticeship standards, in partnership with employers, as well as construction training for full-time learners and apprentices at its Future Skills Centre in Bordon.

Stakeholder engagement is strong with effective partnership links with local schools, universities, the Enterprise M3 Local Enterprise Partnership, Hampshire County Council, Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, employers, the Chamber of Commerce and other agencies and organisations as part of its mission - Building Careers of Tomorrow.

The college's curriculum planning, and resourcing model is a robust process that encompasses a joint approach for curriculum and finance. In particular, the processes allow for quick and effective in-year responses to switch and reallocate resources according to demand and need. The process ensures that each department's curriculum provision in the round is financially sustainable and that departments can cross-subsidise courses to maintain a balanced portfolio.

Overview

The college has a well-established new course approvals process and a comprehensive planning approach to new courses that ensures employer views and needs are considered. The process incorporates a comprehensive review of course purpose and viability including a competitor and market analysis. All course approvals are scrutinised through a collective management meeting before sign-off.

The annual curriculum planning cycle is an integrated and joint approach between curriculum and finance. This ensures provision responds to local needs and that programme delivery is efficient.

The college targets an overall 50% contribution rate across the provision. Individual course contribution rates and department contribution rates are not used in resource management.

Curriculum departments are given a clear resource budget for the costs that they are directly incurring, and departmental managers have the ability to flex plans to fit changing circumstances within this envelope. For example, this might include 'nesting' groups for part of a timetable.

In-year, there is detailed monitoring of enrolment performance against budget, and centralised action to ensure additional needs are catered for, underspends are reallocated elsewhere, and staff are redeployed. A formula approach is used which allocates additional resource when student numbers increase (against plan), and reduced resource when they decline (against plan).

Approach

The college's course approvals process ensures all proposals are reviewed by a range of internal stakeholders. This is facilitated by the use of Google Docs, utilising technology to ensure all parties have access to all of the pertinent information and can input appropriately. In addition, this process accesses a very comprehensive employer engagement system which includes Employer Advisory Boards to ensure courses are matched to local need. All course approvals are then scrutinised through a collective management meeting before sign-off.

The annual curriculum planning cycle is an integrated and joint approach between curriculum and finance. Curriculum managers have a clear resourcing budget to work within, which is simple to understand. Their understanding of resource is directly related to how many students they enrol rather than income targets.

The resourcing model enables the comparison of teaching hours against budget spend and available staffing to ensure budgets are realistic. The college targets a 50% contribution rate for curriculum provision across the college. Individual course contribution rates are not used in resource management. The college reports that it has found these measures to be incomparable between courses and departments and too slow to be used effectively at key decision making times. Instead, the college reviews the overall financial viability and sustainability of a curriculum area as a whole rather than individual courses which can significantly vary year-on-year.

Curriculum managers have autonomy to plan courses with the resources allocated, within the college's curriculum delivery framework. Managers can vary hours of delivery, combine groups, and subsidise courses with low numbers with resources from high enrolling courses if they so wish, as long as they remain within allocated resources.

Centralised in-year monitoring and action is responsive in real-time, meaning that resources are increased or decreased as students enrol, according to a formula that allocates and reallocates staffing and non-pay resource according to volumes of students.

Staffing decisions are made throughout the year by reference to current requirements and future expected requirements using a resourcing model. This ensures that the college staff establishment stays in-line with delivery requirements.

Curriculum planning model

New courses

The college has a well-established new course approvals process. This requires new course proposals to be reviewed by a range of internal stakeholders. For example, Marketing undertake a market needs assessment and competitor analysis and MIS expertise ensures that funding is available and appropriate for the target audience. This internal collaboration, and comprehensive review of all aspects of course planning is facilitated by the use of Google Docs, utilising technology to ensure all parties have access to all of the pertinent information and can input appropriately. In addition, this process takes into account a very comprehensive employer engagement system which includes Employer Advisory Boards to ensure courses are matched to local need. All course approvals are then scrutinised through a collective management meeting before sign-off. The college operates a curriculum resourcing model which determines allocated resources at curriculum department level by direct reference to actual student numbers.

Curriculum planning

The annual curriculum planning cycle is an integrated and joint approach between curriculum and finance. Curriculum managers are not required to forecast student numbers, this is a centralised process, that facilitates the development of a consistent

and robust student number plan. Curriculum managers can challenge the assumptions and provide evidence to support an update to their planned numbers.

The resourcing and planning model controls allocated resources. It allocates resource and group size targets (defined by level for full-time courses). There are challenging but realistic average group size requirements which ensure the efficiency of curriculum delivery. For example, for full-time courses the standard average group size requirement at enrolment is 22 for 2-year level 3 courses, 21 for one-year level 3 courses and 20 for level 2 courses.

The resourcing model enables the comparison of teaching hours against budget spend and available staffing to ensure budgets are realistic. The college targets a 50% contribution rate for curriculum provision across the college. Course contribution rates and department contribution rates are not used in resource management. The college reports that it has found these measures to be incomparable between courses and departments, and too slow to be used effectively for key decision making.

Annualised teaching hours are 840. Course directors receive remission that is driven by the volumes of students. There is no remission granted for any other reasons.

The resource model is in 2 parts, one to determine teaching staff and one to determine non-pay expenditure. The staffing resource model uses 3 basic parameters to determine overall allocation: Firstly, an assumption that all teaching staff will deliver their contracted hours on an annual basis. Secondly, that average group size requirements will be met. Thirdly, that courses are resourced to be delivered in accordance with the college's study programme guidelines. The model recognises differences between full-time course delivery and part-time courses. Challenging but realistic target group sizes are set. When courses recruit below the target level the department can offset this with numbers above target on other courses in that area. Departments also have other options to address low recruiting courses, including merging groups for some aspects of the course and reducing the overall teaching time for the course.

Curriculum managers have autonomy to plan courses with the resources allocated but within the college's curriculum delivery framework. Managers can vary hours of delivery, combine groups, and subsidise courses with low numbers with resources from high enrolling courses if they so wish, as long as they remain within allocated resources.

Monitoring

In-year, particularly in September during the peak enrolment period, there is detailed monitoring of enrolment performance against budget, and rapid action to ensure additional needs are catered for, underspends are reallocated elsewhere, and staff are redeployed effectively. This allows the college to vary resources during the key enrolment period in early September in line with actual enrolment numbers.

A formula approach is used which allocates additional resource when student numbers increase and reduces resource when they decline. Because the staff hours and programme of study hours going into the model are known and fixed, the only variable is the number of students actually enrolled. As each student is enrolled it generates a staff hour requirement and non-pay budget for a curriculum to be delivered in accordance with the framework.

The college reports the following benefits which may be of interest to other colleges with a similar broad and diverse mix of provision:

- Curriculum managers have a clear resourcing budget to work within which is simple to understand. Their understanding of resource is directly related to how many students they enrol rather than income.
- The in-year monitoring and action is responsive in real-time, meaning that costs are increased or decreased as students enrol.
- The provision is planned and assessed each year in a balanced way, ensuring quality and financial factors are taken into account.
- It enables the overall financial viability and sustainability of a curriculum area as a whole to be assessed, rather than individual courses which can significantly vary year-on-year
- It is perceived as fair and transparent across the college. All areas are working to the same expectations regarding staff utilisation, course delivery hours and average group sizes.

Staffing decisions are made throughout the year by reference to current requirements and future expected requirements using the resource model requirement. This ensures that the college staff establishment stays in-line with delivery requirements, and has meant that enforced staff changes have been minimal over the last 5 years.

Apprenticeships

There is a bespoke approach to planning and resourcing apprenticeship provision to ensure effectiveness, efficiency, and contribution. This takes into account the variability of funding tariffs, delivery hours, assessing hours, training coordinator caseload, material costs and travel costs. The approach requires a 50% financial contribution after allocation of all direct delivery costs and a share of department management, technician, and administration costs. It calculates the number of apprentices required to achieve the 50% contribution. End point assessment income and costs are outside the contribution calculation.

English and maths

English and maths delivery costs are budgeted separately and are outside the model. The college does not make a distinction between those students resitting GCSEs and those with passes, although it recognises this can make a significant difference to the financial outcomes of a course. It does this to avoid year-on-year variances which can

occur depending on the intake cohort in an area, and to ensure the important decision about course enrolment for a student is free from financial bias associated with maths and English resit delivery

CEO/principal's comment

The college has a well-developed curriculum planning model that drives both curriculum and finance requirements to create a resource model that is responsive, flexible and ensures financial viability. This approach ensures that the curriculum we deliver is aligned to the skills needs of the region, supports learners to progress to their next steps, operates in a financially efficient way, and gives flexibility to quickly respond to fluctuating markets and demands.

Case Study: East Kent College Group



Name of Principal/CEO:	Graham Razey	
Type of Organisation:	General Further Education	
Geographical Location:	South East	
Annual Turnover:	circa £60 million	
16-19	2021/22	6,124
AEB	2021/22	3,106
Apprenticeships	2021/22	970
% of available teaching hours targeted to be used		100%
Contribution made to overheads by curriculum		45-60%
Average number of students in each class		15

Table 7: East Kent College Group

Introduction

The EKC Group encompasses 6 colleges across 6 local authorities in the South East of England. Recent exponential growth through acquisition and increased market share has increased the importance of effective curriculum planning. The college offers a wide range of provision including 16-19 study programmes, apprenticeships, higher education, academic and technical courses, full cost/commercial and specialist learning services. Most students at The EKC Group are on full-time study programmes. The college also has bespoke provision for students in receipt of high-needs funding.

Overview

The college has established a set of values-led principles upon which business planning is set. This means that the principles of inclusion, student, and community needs are considered in all aspects of the planning, as well as financial efficiency. To support this values-led approach, the college has developed a comprehensive and innovative 3-year rolling schedule of training for curriculum managers that allows managers to develop and refresh planning skills.

The college has established a formal planning cycle to ensure all courses, including new provision, are carefully planned. This allows time for proper planning and encourages innovation as staff have time to think ahead of formal planning.

All planning and provision are recorded and enabled by the 'Curriculum Blueprint' and Business Planning spreadsheet that collates and sets out courses, teaching hours, staffing budgets, class size, contribution levels etc.

Approach

The planning process starts with 3 questions:

1. Where will the learners come from?
2. Where will they go after the programme?
3. What will be needed to get them there?

The key performance measures that are prioritised are destinations and progression.

To support this values-led approach, the college has developed a comprehensive 3-year rolling schedule of training for curriculum managers to develop and refresh planning skills. The training is intended to deepen managers' planning ability and understanding and is further reinforced by links to manager job descriptions and standards which set out clear expectations for curriculum planning.

The college has established a formal planning cycle to ensure new courses are carefully planned. The window for new course proposals opens between October and March each year. The following diagram describes this process.

A Curriculum Commissioning Group (CCG) approves new courses based on robust empirical evidence. Membership includes all key leadership functions of the college including MIS and marketing. Following approval, the course team then have a circa 13 month planning period to ensure the appropriate resources, training and staff are in place. The benefits to this 'lagged planning' are reported to be an enhanced ability to

plan. This model also allows time and opportunity to recruit new teaching staff and an ability to pro-actively source funding opportunities in advance of the start.

Responsive provision such as adult education budget (AEB) and full cost is planned on a more responsive basis. Departments are allocated a target that they then have autonomy to use in response to immediate needs and opportunities. The CCG group pulls these together to 'commission' activity where there may be gaps.

All provision and planning are recorded and enabled by the 'Curriculum Blueprint' and business planning spreadsheet which sets out courses, teaching hours, staffing budgets, class size, contribution levels based on centrally controlled targets driven by realistic trends and empirical evidence.

Figure 11 provides a listed flow of the stages involved in validating new and existing course provision.

Figure 12 illustrates the combined planning and quality processes that ensure each course meets a minimum standard in its design, delivery, and outcomes.

Figure 11: East Kent College Group New Course Approval Process

START

1. NEW PROGRAMME

- a) Yes? – move to full cost.
- b) No? – move to existing programme process.

2. Full cost?

- a) Yes? – move to BU leadership.
- b) No – continue.

3. Consider intent, market share and resources needed.

4. Complete course request

5. Signing off by Principal and agreed 4-year plan and check funding.

- a) No? – back to consider intent...
- c) Yes? – continue.

6. Agreed at Curriculum Commissioning Board

- a) No? – back to consider intent...
- b) Yes? – continue.

7. Any significant capital or resource costs required?

8. Resources covered by CCO fund or not required?

- a) No? – central capital request to Strategy Group agreed?
 - a. No? – back to consider intent...
 - b. No? – Cost out and market considered
- b) Yes? – update business pack and develop course.

1. EXISTING PROGRAMME

- a) Yes? - continue

2. BU leadership

3. Cost out and market considered?

4. Any changes in funding?

- a) Yes? – back to BU leadership
- b) No? – continue

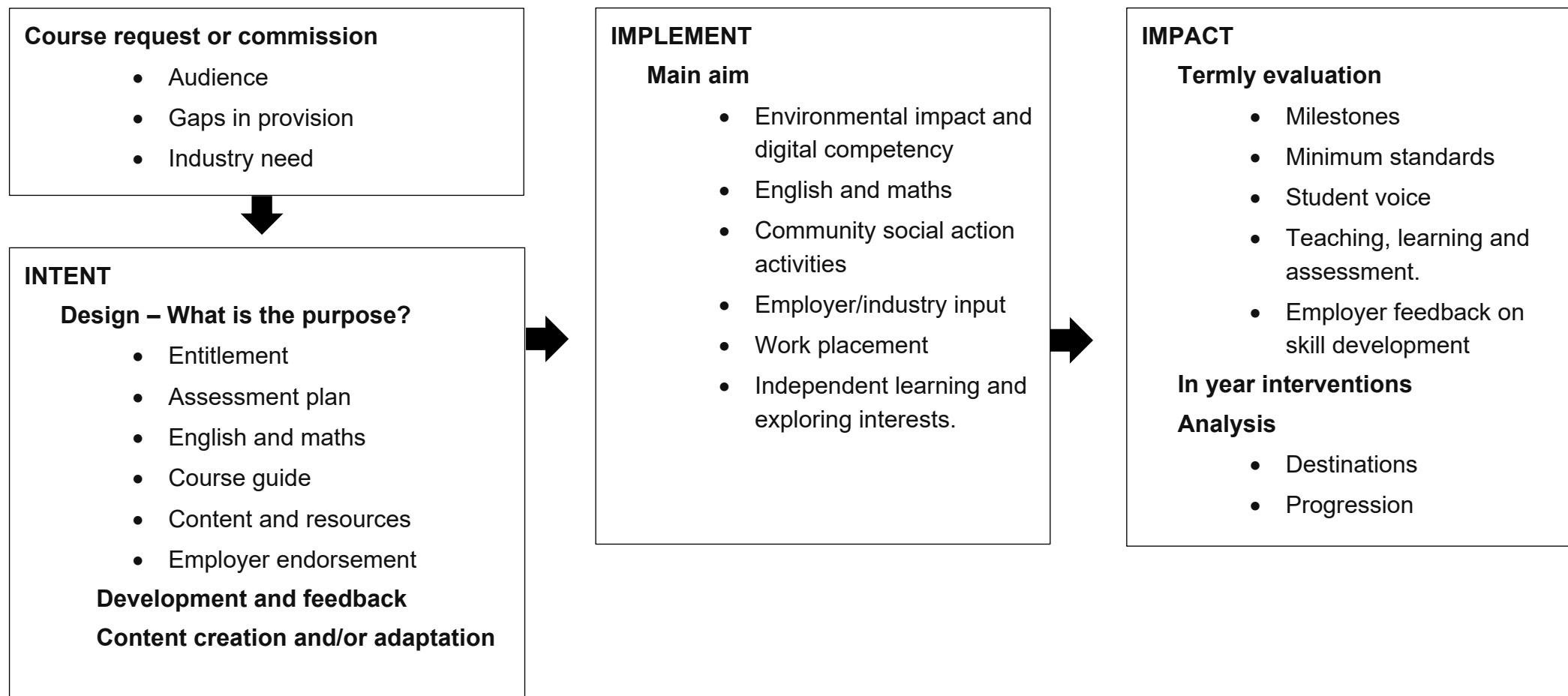
5. Any capital resources required in including software?

- a) Yes? - central capital request to Strategy Group agreed?
- b) No? – continue.

6. Update business pack and develop course

Figure 12: East Kent College Group Course Planning and Quality Cycle

COURSE MODIFICATION PLAN



Curriculum planning model

New courses

A defined process for the design, development and validation of new programmes is applied that includes a series of review stages (figure 12). Each course is presented to the Curriculum Commissioning Group (CCG). The group receives a completed form that sets out the rationale and empirical evidence that supports the needs, the market, and the purpose of the proposed course. Once received, the group meets with the relevant programme director to review and investigate the evidence that supports the proposal. The process begins at least 13 months before the programme can be launched. At pre-determined stages during the development of the programme the relevant evidence is both investigated and challenged before approval is granted by the CCG. Once approved, resourcing to support both detailed business plans, curriculum development and delivery is allocated.

Any remission for planning for new programmes is scrutinised by the CCG and agreed for the following academic year so it can be timetabled to be used in the most effective way.

Critical to this approach is independent research, industry need, development in government policy and funding, and an aligned property strategy. This includes validation that the course contributes to meeting skills needs. The Curriculum Blueprint ensures that learning programmes are strategically aligned with the business strategy and that learning delivery across the organisation provides expected return on investment.

For example, the college planned specialisation at Level 3+ across the group of colleges to ensure high quality experiences for learners, with access to local and regional industry to inform curriculum. This was informed by independent empirical research, which was challenged and checked by a supportive governing body to ensure the values of the group and its educational character were upheld.

Curriculum planning

The Curriculum Blueprint incorporates agreed course hours for programmes and a realistic expectation of critical measures such as group size, based on previous trends. The Blueprint is a pivotal document to ensure course designers do not plan to deliver hours that are not being paid for. Adherence to the Curriculum Blueprint removes the risk of over-teaching against the course funding.

The Business Planning model captures any mismatch between the teaching hours required by the curriculum plan compared to the available teaching hours from the staffing establishment. This ensures shortfalls and vacancies are identified early to improve timelines for the recruitment of more teachers but also ensures a fairness of fully utilised teachers and clearly shows over-staffing that can also be addressed. The approach ensures that the learning design is cohesive, with consideration of finance, quality, and student inclusion.

The Blueprint and Business Planning Tool allocate learner numbers (based on previous performance) and numbers of groups to heads and programme directors to act as a guide for planning for the following year. Curriculum departments only receive budget for the costs that they are directly incurring, and departmental managers have genuine control over spend, which includes teaching staff, technicians, work placement officers (and any departmental administration if applicable), teaching resources and staff travel. For ease of control and monitoring, some central costs remain unallocated such as exam costs. A range of internal policy factors are applied with a controlled approach to their application including staff utilisation, average class sizes. Staff remission is apportioned to departments based on numbers of students.

Benchmarking and monitoring

The approach to planning income, costs and benchmarking is deliberately uncomplicated. Planned 16-19 income is allocated based on the overall factors, with no adjustments for programme weighting. This approach recognises that differences in tariff often relate to facilities and equipment costs rather than staffing, and it ensures that the planning approach is simplified and meaningful.

Class sizes are only measured against full-time programmes where the study programme funding determines a level of hours in the study programme, therefore group size is the pivotal cost-effectiveness measure. For part-time and fully costed provision, there are opportunities around reduced direct teaching and other blended learning models of delivery that can lead to a smaller group size that are still economically viable. Full-cost courses are also be priced to be cost-effective with smaller groups.

The financial assessment of contribution is undertaken based on a flexible model where a curriculum department's contribution rate is determined by the type of provision contained therein. For example, the lowest target contribution might be the Supported Learning department where high needs students are taught in small groups and Construction/Building Services might have a lower contribution due to the need to deploy technicians in workshops and higher teaching resource. The contribution analysis includes high levels of allocated costs to curriculum delivery leaving little to be centrally allocated. Average contribution rates are used to account for the volatility in individual course contribution and ensure that provision is not curtailed or changed unwisely. Income targets for 16–18-year-olds are apportioned to departments based on an average amount per head.

In-year, the finance business partners undertake a full quarterly re-forecast exercise with local college principals and heads of department to reconcile actual delivery against planned (figure 13). Staff utilisation is monitored through reports and triangulated against the business plan. Any identified shortfalls in income and profitability are addressed through realistic and impactful action planning. The budgeting exercise is very detailed, and the accuracy and realism of this process is pivotal to being able to apply leadership focus on matters other than financial ones. A culture of getting the budget right first time is essential.

Work experience is included in the Blueprint and also used to further enhance learners' programmes when other aspects of curriculum are not required for example, English and maths on level 2 programmes.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeship hours are treated as 'servicing out' from the curriculum departments to deliver the off the job elements of the apprenticeship programme. This means that curriculum departments are credited with the hours they deliver on behalf of the apprenticeship department. Apprenticeships are expected to deliver a lower contribution rate than other programmes due to the funding model. Apprentice trainers have a caseload of 40 apprentices which provides time for a monthly visit to each apprentice. Off-the-job training is delivered by college-based departments for the apprenticeships that this applies to and there is a payment to these departments at a fixed hourly rate that includes some margin to incentivise these departments financially plus a transfer of funds to cover the teaching resources used by the apprentices during their off-the-job training. The apprenticeships budget covers the end point assessment fees. The college reports that these fees are an expensive form of assessment that have reduced contribution rates since the introduction of standards.

CEO/principal's comment

An effective curriculum provides lecturers, students, leaders and stakeholders with a measurable plan and system for delivering a quality education that meets its pre-determined intent. This needs to be empirically driven to enable informed decisions that meet the needs of each region and ensure colleges deliver relevant and responsive skills provision that advances the economic and social prosperity of the overlapping communities they serve. It is imperative that any curriculum planning process provides assurance that it is affordable, joined-up, fair and inclusive or colleges will quickly find themselves in some difficulty, which will inevitably impact upon the student experience and their ability to deliver their outcomes.

Name of Principal/CEO:	Julie Milburn
Type of Organisation:	Specialist land-based college
Geographical Location:	South East
Annual Turnover:	£29 million
Number of SSAs provided by the college	15
16-19 2021/22	2,571
AEB 2021/22	622
Apprenticeships 2021/22	416
Higher Education 2021/22	483
Full cost	571
Total taught hours	2,250,000
Numbers of teaching staff employed - FTE	238
Contribution made to overheads by curriculum	59%
Average number of students in each class	14.9

Table 8: Sparsholt College Group

Introduction

Sparsholt College is based in Hampshire and is one of the largest specialist land-based colleges in the UK. In 2007 the college merged with a small tertiary college in Andover, 15 miles from the Sparsholt campus close to Winchester. The land-based campus (which includes substantial student residential provision) provides specialist courses which attracts outside Hampshire particularly in highly specialised FE and HE provision with a national profile.

The specialist facilities, particularly those providing on-site land-based industry practice, which is supervised by specialist staff, are a major constraint in planning the curriculum as is the need for very small groups for highly specialised and potentially dangerous practical work with machinery, equipment, and animals.

The college has a well-established annually renewed 3-year rolling strategic plan. This plan is formulated jointly by the board of governors and the strategic leadership team (SLT) through a process which involves external analysis of the operating environment concerning skills needs of specialist industries and employers, government policy on education and skills, and all other key factors required for the successful oversight of a £28 million turnover business employing 722 staff, of which 238 are academic. The strategic plan includes the key strategic aims and objectives relating to curriculum strategy, though the strategic elements are given further definition within the '3-year Curriculum Plan' which presents a 3-

year view of development and objectives by level, by sector and by year of the courses which are to be offered. These elements are specified in the manner of 'being developed for delivery' in the next year or 'being researched with a view to delivery in subsequent years. The 3-year Curriculum Plan is monitored by a separate committee of the board which advises the Board concerning the financially efficient and sustainable delivery of the curriculum and that the curriculum is fulfilling the strategic ambitions set by the board to meet the needs of specialised industries and employers (land-based industries in particular) in line with the ambitions of the Skills and Post-16 Education Act (2022).

Overview

The focus of this case study is largely on the specialist land-based campus at Sparsholt, where land-based comprises circa 85% of the offer to students and where the Sparsholt campus represents circa 66% of all long course enrolments (FE all ages and HE).

The college uses its curriculum planning process to ensure the maximisation of efficiency of use of facilities and of the availability of specialist staff. The college uses a differentiated cost contribution analysis to identify contribution to overheads by campus and by curriculum so that curriculum managers, SLT and board members can see the relative financial contribution of each curriculum area to the costs of running the college. This assists with decision making concerning the curriculum mix, minimum number thresholds and monitoring of performance. There are curriculum areas which are permitted to operate at less than cost, though governors, SLT and curriculum managers are aware of these and the strategic and tactical reasons why this is appropriate.

The average class size of 14.9 is high for a largely specialist land-based college, given that many specialist skills are required to be delivered in very small groups for reasons of health and safety. This results from a clear set of rules mutually agreed at SLT and those rules are overseen by 2 vice principals (VPs), one for the largely land based Sparsholt Campus and the other for the tertiary campus in Andover. The rules ensure that the learner entitlement is delivered against a backdrop of past cost contribution analysis, which is further tested during the year of delivery to adjust any rules for the year after.

Approach

The college has a long-established rolling 3-year curriculum plan which is updated annually, and this is initiated at the January strategy day for board members. However, the board of governors has a committee, the Community Employer and Market Requirements Committee (CEMR) which is separate to the Quality and Standards Committee. The terms of reference

of CEMR ensure it scrutinises labour market information (LMI) from the local enterprise partnership (LEP) (including the LEP Skills Action Plan) and other sources together with student destination data, the specific EMSI Occupational reports which are undertaken on a rolling 3-year basis, and summaries of the 'Industry Curriculum Boards' which meet 3 times per annum and have representation from specialist businesses and occupations relevant to the scrutiny of that board.

This ensures that the annual update to the 3-year curriculum plan matches sectoral needs of employers and business, both locally, regionally, and nationally. This is especially important with the large land-based campus where 85% of the provision is Sector Subject Area 3 (SSA3) and where 'local' occupies a much larger geographic footprint.

Each assistant principal (AP) is asked to present their formative proposed update to the 3-year curriculum plan (relevant to their area of specialisation) to their peers. APs work with their reporting curriculum leaders to produce these. The content of the plan from APs includes full time, part time and substantive full cost offer with links to the apprenticeship standards relevant to those specialisations. However, the deputy principal has direct line management of the head of apprenticeships and the VP for HE and inputs directly to the process, particularly linking the external employer intelligence of those 2 teams to the curriculum plan. The discussion arising from the presentations by the APs and SLT assists in the fashioning of the penultimate curriculum plan ready to present to governors. The resource implications are considered on a 3-year basis, especially where these have implications for estates and capital investment. The finalised curriculum plan is presented by the senior leadership team to the CEMR of the board of governors which considers this together with intelligence from the Quality and Standards committee concerning quality of provision, before recommending the curriculum plan to the board. The CP is described by HE, 16-19, 14-16, adult, apprenticeship, and full cost.

Curriculum planning model

The curriculum delivery plan leading to timetabling for the forthcoming academic year commences at the start of the spring term of the current year. Training is offered to any managers and leaders new to the college-devised in-house developed online curriculum planning tool.

The 2 VPs (one on each campus) calculate the total delivery hours available, taking account of:

- a) the SLT agreed policy on contact hours per learner,
- b) the numbers of learners/group for practical work, (where often there are safety restrictions on group size),
- c) the analysis of learner recruitment trends forecast to enrolment numbers, based on MIS historical data and modelling. The modelling for this also accounts for learner domicile, given that this land-based college particularly see applications from far outside the local geographic area but where there is a negative correlation (more

especially in new start 16 year-olds) between conversion of applicants to enrolment, based on distance from home to college.

The figure of total delivery hours is used to generate the learner entitlement as a 'course footprint', comprising maths and English, technical subject content (theory hour and practical teaching hours, tutorial, and work simulation/experience on college practical teaching units as appropriate to the specialism.

The college uses benchmarks internally between curriculum areas at the level of class sizes for practical work and by legal ratios driven by health and safety regulations. Total study hours per curriculum area and the financial contribution of different curriculum areas. These benchmarks are used by VPs/APs to inform decision making, though not as inflexible templates. The nature of different specialist land-based programmes necessitates flexibility of interpretation, though VPs are clear they need to account for variations when reporting to the principal and the board. Total delivery hours are differentiated by task and cost as lecturer or instructor, where the mix is agreed with the VP in accordance with timetabling rules and referenced to financial benchmarks.

The contracted teaching hours for staff are based on 850 per annum, though remission of 150 hours is given for those staff delivering HE and those FE staff who are acting as curriculum leaders or senior practitioners. The overall contribution rate in the college across all provision is 59%, and average class size is 14.9.

The VPs, together with their APs, monitor the recruitment patterns of learners and the enrolment process which occurs in mid-August. This allows planning for any alterations to the curriculum plan for specific curriculum areas, dependant on likely or actual enrolments. Curriculum leaders and APs can make a case to the VP to run a course with learner numbers below the minimum threshold, where parts of their timetable are able to be amalgamated with other courses to generate an acceptable overall financial contribution. VPs and AP's keep a close handle on Pro Monitor to look for patterns of learner withdrawal throughout the year to apply remedial action. If learner retention falls below accepted thresholds, group amalgamations can reinstate efficiency criteria.

With full cost courses, the decision on 'go' or 'no-go' entirely depends on cost contribution and fees. There is a simple supplementary spreadsheet tool for Full cost work which requires a 50% contribution to proceed, though where discretion is used down to 40% when agreed by the relevant VP. The college offers full cost courses in subjects such as the use of chainsaws, where course numbers are restricted to only 4 learners per instructor and where the use of a numeric benchmark for average class size would be meaningless.

Table 9: Sparsholt College 2021/22 Curriculum Planning Cycle

Holidays	Month	Week	Activity	Responsible
	Jan	18-22	Training FT and PT curriculum planning tool via SPARS	MIS
		25-29	Launch Curriculum Planning / Heads of Faculty Week 1 planning	MIS/HoF/AP
	Feb	1-5	Heads of Faculty/Assistant Principals Week 2 planning	HoF/AP
		8-12	Heads of Faculty/Assistant Principals Week 3 planning	HoF/AP
Feb Reading Week		15-19	Reading week	
		22-26	Heads of Faculty/Assistant Principals Week 4 planning and IQR check	HoF/AP
	Mar	1-5	Heads of Faculty/Assistant Principals Week 5 planning and IQR check	HoF/AP
		8-12	Heads of Faculty/Assistant Principals Week 6 planning and IQR check	HoF/AP
		15-19	Heads of Faculty/Assistant Principals Week 7 planning HoF sign-off	HoF/AP
		19	Close down of curriculum planning	SLT
		22-26	SLT curriculum review, sign off plan and confirm PT fee structure	SLT
2-16 Easter break	Mar/Apr	29-2	FT – Work on FT course file starts – establish course file in proSolution	MIS
		29-2	PT course file exported into PT Guide format. Sent to HoFs for validation	MIS
		5	FT courses established in ProSolution	MIS
		5-9	Amendments to PT information, where identified by HoFs	MIS
		12	Prechecked PT Guide format sent to marketing	MIS
		12-16	PT course listing established in ProSolution	MIS

Table 10: Sparsholt College 2021/22 Timetable Planning Timeline

	Apr		23	Previous year's early template supplied	MIS
31 May – 4 Jun Reading Week	Apr/Jun		19 - 11	Deputy Principal and Assistant Principal timetable reviews	DP/HoF/AP
	Jun		11	Final sign off Pre-Summer full day review	DP x 2 Director of Funding

CEO/principal's comment

Given the complexities of delivering a financially viable land-based curriculum offer (in particular the necessity to operate with an average class size in some areas considerably below that which would be seen as viable in a typical general FE college), the complex contribution analysis has been fundamental to the college's ability to be both financially efficient and resilient. The process provides clarity on which areas of learning are making a positive contribution, and most importantly which areas are operating at less than cost, allowing the Strategic Leadership Team to set minimum thresholds in the curriculum planning cycle as part of the feasibility review into their short, medium, and long-term viability. This approach provides assurance to governance, via the termly CEMR committee, that the college can continue to deliver its strategic curriculum ambitions, whilst maintaining its strong financial health position.

Case Study: The Luminate Education Group

Name of Principal/CEO:	Colin Booth OBE
Type of Organisation:	Group – GFES/HEI
Geographical Location:	Yorkshire
Annual Turnover:	Group £109 million, FE £93 million
Number of SSAs provided by the College	15
14-16	190
16-19	7811
AEB	9821
Apprenticeships	1990
Traineeships	0
Higher Education (university Centre + Leeds Conservatoire)	2600
Total taught hours	Not formally monitored
Total permanent teaching hours available	Variable - No contractual contact hours
Numbers of teaching staff employed – FTE (all staff who work with students are classified as teaching staff)	1250
% of available teaching hours targeted to be used	Not formally monitored
Contribution made to overheads by curriculum	43% before support costs fully allocated
Average number of students in each class	Not monitored

Table 11: The Luminate Education Group

Introduction

Luminate Education Group is one of the UK’s largest FE and HE establishments, with income of over £109 million. It offers a diverse curriculum at all levels across a wide geographical area within Yorkshire. It is made up of FE Colleges in Leeds (with a separate sixth form and university centre), Keighley and Harrogate, as well as the specialist HEI Leeds Conservatoire and the employment agency White Rose Resourcing Limited. It has expanded significantly in recent years, whilst simultaneously improving the quality of education. Demographics and labour market intelligence indicate the opportunity for further rapid growth.

The FE curriculum is delivered at all levels and across all curriculum sector subject areas (SSAs). The academic offer, by comparison, is small at 650 A level students. Half of the FE students come from the 10% most deprived communities in England, based on the national Index of Multiple Deprivation.

The group has a high number of students with high needs (740 students). The HE offer has a split of around 1,400 each shared between 'traditional' college based higher education and Leeds Conservatoire, which is a small HEI specialising in music and performing arts.

Leeds City Region is the largest city region in the country, with 3 million residents and 120,000 businesses. A lower proportion of the population in the region are qualified to level 4 and above than in the rest of England. Forty per cent of students attending Leeds City College come from wards that are among the most deprived in the country. A high proportion of students enrolling on study programmes at the college have no GCSEs in English and mathematics.

Overview

The group's delegated business planning methodology is tried and tested and produces detailed accurate budgets at the same time as driving innovation, growth, and a positive staff culture (as evidenced by their Investors in People and Ofsted reports).

All the systems and processes are designed to promote and support the plans being developed and responsibility is taken by all staff and by each course team upward. This allows the group to plan across a wide range of subjects, levels, funding streams and locations, with expert background knowledge and a clear framework for accountability.

The business planning cycle includes rigorous in-year performance monitoring reviews to ensure the wide range of targets are being met, barriers to performance removed and mitigating actions are rapidly taken. A broad curriculum strategy is agreed at group and at individual college level. For example, introducing and growing T Levels is a current priority across the group. Each curriculum department plans new courses and areas of potential growth. There is central quality assurance and support but there are no rigid top down central controls in terms of departments selecting new courses to develop or areas of growth.

Approach

The approach to business planning, of which the curriculum offer is a building block, is designed to support the organisational culture whilst servicing the financial strategic principals which are:

- Spend all the money we have available each year for the benefit of our students.
- Grow student numbers to meet demand from all the communities that we serve.
- Invest so that we can recruit and retain staff who are able to provide outstanding teaching & learning and support services.
- Invest over the long term to ensure that all our students and staff have access to good resources and accommodation.

The process uses few of the traditional measures (class size, staff utilisation) to plan or monitor the budgets. Deliberately there are no rules, guidelines or staff contracts that use these measures.

Planning is built up from distinct 'business units' (usually departments). Business units, led by a core budget holder, plan their own detailed income and expenditure budgets related to their short- and longer-term plans. The business units are split into 'income generating departments' and 'support departments'. All departments are asked to plan their overall budget, including all income and expenditure.

Departments can choose to spend their income on a balance of staffing, non-pay and capital equipment and can easily move priorities between all types of expenditure. They can also decide how much they want to spend on leasing space (classrooms, workshops, and other space) from the central estates service. Finally, income generating departments discuss and agree with the executive leadership team (ELT) and service departments how much of their income they should be charged to pay for each support service.

Services get their income from the sum of the charges made to income generating departments. The main planning imperative is to provide excellent value for money and customer service within the budgets they have available. When these service areas want to increase their expenditure, decisions are made considering the feedback they have from their customers. These departments get to increase their budgets based on promising and delivering higher levels of service to their customers. Governors are invited to join any meeting and receive an update at each stage of the planning and review process.

Curriculum planning model

The business planning (BP) process starts in January with staff teams forming ideas about new courses, areas that might grow or contract and anything they want to change or develop to support the group strategy.

Round one of BP meetings is where each 'business unit' presents their early big ideas and plans alongside a first draft budget to their linked ELT member, this is followed up with a

consolidated budget meeting between the director/principal and the whole of ELT. Consolidated round 1 meetings are scheduled for **February**. Round 2 BP meetings are in **April** and Round 3 in **June**. BP round one and round 3 meetings are aligned with Performance. Review period 6 and period 9 meetings for the current year for each business unit which highlights trends and risks.

A key principle is that, outside of iterative discussions in business planning meetings, no member of ELT or other senior member of staff can tell core budget holders what targets or other detail to put into the business plans. It is a bottom up approach, not top down.

This performance budget is consolidated and reviewed at the end of each round. There are 'income leads' on the senior leadership team and they go through each income line in the budget and 'de-risk' wherever total income targets appear to be overly ambitious or unpredictable. The main overall income lines that are unpredictable at the moment, and are therefore de-risked significantly, are apprenticeships, project income and HE income. All of these areas are currently experiencing a high degree of external change in terms of government policy and funding. How unpredictable each line is, and which lines need de-risking and by how much will change each year.

The de-risked 'performance review budget' creates the final version of the 'governors' budget' with slightly lower income and expenditure by early July. The governors' budget also moderates for 'lagged funding'.

The performance review budget is the main budget that is monitored by the executive leadership team via formal departmental and quarterly performance review meetings throughout each year - all elements of the performance review budget can be drilled down to granular departmental plans.

These plans that departments "sell" to ELT are very detailed and compiled bottom up.

- Funded income and fees are planned in 4cast, but costs are not attributed to individual courses. Lagged funding methodology is ignored and later moderated centrally.
- Each department includes a detailed and fully costed monthly establishment list including vacancies, but their contact time is not formally calculated. The pay scales used for the teaching staff are not traditional. Shorter pay scales help to stabilise and control overall pay costs. We have a wide range of staff with different job descriptions delivering teaching and learning in a variety of ways and circumstances.
- A detailed phased non pay and routine capital equipment schedule is proposed.
- Departments then 'bid' for a share of the Innovation Fund for major capital funds to improve existing or introduce new curriculum or projects. A simple example of the use of the Innovation Fund would be an 'Artists in Residence' project working with students to create artwork and related projects in the community and across college sites.
- The recharge for each shared service is included in each plan.

Each curriculum department is usually expected to produce a differentiated surplus unless otherwise agreed. However, many of the decisions about the use of the resources to support income, growth and innovation is delegated although visible to ELT. It is about affordability for the business unit and that team making choices between more staff/capex/non pay/space against the background of expectations of improving students' experience and outcomes. For example. budget holders make their own decisions on the mix of teaching and other staff on different pay grades that they need and can afford. This model of working encourages new and innovative ways of delivering the curriculum in different departments alongside effective control of pay costs.

CEO/principal's comment

The 'business planning' and 'performance review' system described in this case study was first developed at Newcastle College starting more than 20 years ago and then developed further at Barnsley College and at The Luminare Education Group. The same or similar systems are used successfully in a small number of other colleges or college groups, particularly where there are principals/CEOs who have worked closely with this approach. The 'engine room' of this system is based on highly autonomous and well-trained departmental core budget holders.

Senior managers using this approach are (at first) always very surprised at the amount of time that the ELT spend in formal departmental business planning and performance review meetings and react by saying 'when will I have time to do the rest of my job'. The answer is that, if the departmental business planning and performance review meetings work well and are sufficiently detailed, much of the work traditionally done by the executive or senior team in colleges is either dealt with by the core budget holders or simply does not exist.

In order to ensure that responsibility and authority are always delegated we always function with a relatively small ELT - Luminare Education Group currently works with a team.

Case Study: Weymouth College



Name of Principal/CEO:	Julia Howe
Type of Organisation:	General FE College
Geographical Location:	Weymouth, Dorset
Annual Turnover:	£13.8 million
Number of SSAs provided by the College	14
16-19	1,382
AEB	579
Apprenticeships	445
Higher Education	116
Full cost	483
Total permanent teaching hours available	68,076
Numbers of teaching staff employed - FTE	114
% of available teaching hours targeted to be used	97%
Contribution made to overheads by curriculum	60% / Minimum required 45%
Average number of students in each class	13.5

Table 12: Weymouth College

Introduction

Weymouth College is a small coastal general FE college delivering a wide range of academic, technical, and vocational programmes. The college also offers a range of HE courses and employability, maths, English and ICT programmes for adults. The college has good grades for both Ofsted overall effectiveness and financial health, and maintains tight control of costs in order to be able to sustain a relatively wide curriculum offer, despite its relatively small turnover.

Overview

In 2014/15 the college adopted Drake Lane Associate's 4CAST as its main curriculum planning tool to help achieve a step change in operational efficiency and address past operating losses. Financial efficiency remains a key focus for the college. The approach to curriculum planning has been underpinned by 3 key principles:

Reductions in staffing levels and expenditure should not compromise the core student experience or jeopardise quality

Curriculum staffing should be resource-based and should recognise growth in specific subjects and priority areas

Strategies where group sizes are unviable with limited potential for growth should include options for curriculum re-design as well as rationalisation or removal

Mapping of the curriculum offer against local enterprise partnership (LEP) priorities has previously confirmed that the college's curriculum offer is well aligned to meeting local needs, though priority areas for expansion of Apprenticeships in health and social care and automotive remain work in progress.

Approach

Curriculum planning at Weymouth College follows a 4-stage process:

Stage 1: Strategic Direction (**November/December**)

Forward assessment of challenges, opportunities, and broad intent / direction for the curriculum for the next academic year. This takes into account forward expectations re. funding allocations/targets and feedback from employers.

Stage 2: Planning Steers and Planning Preparation (**December/January**)

Finalisation of planning steers for curriculum managers taking into account the stage 1 process and review of existing course delivery from previous years.

Stage 3: Detailed Curriculum Planning (**February/March**)

Preparation of detailed curriculum plans by curriculum managers who populate forecast with course details, planned student enrolments, staff resource requirements, exam fees/end-point assessment (EPA) and consumable costs to feed into staff and budget planning for the next academic year

Stage 4: Finalisation and Approval (**April/May**)

Finalisation of the curriculum offer and associated resource requirements with a detailed report to the board of governors. Governors receive a report at the conclusion of the annual curriculum planning process (typically May) seeking approval of the plan for the year ahead including decisions to retain or remove provision where the planned contribution rate falls below the 45% target set by the college.

CEO/principal's comment

The planning tool 4CAST, initially implemented at Weymouth College in 2014/15, has been further enhanced through the development of an additional layer using bespoke software. These planning tools are fundamental to achieving accurate management information for both monitoring and decision-making purposes. With the recent review and incorporation of a more robust cost base, the tools allow the college to review the plan against actual, ensure maximisation of resource utilisation linking workforce planning, financial performance with detailed timetabling for curriculum managers. Through an agreed framework, contribution rates are analysed, and the viability of curriculum is reviewed, and recommendations submitted for approval to both Curriculum and Quality & Finance and Resources Committees of the board.

Weymouth College curriculum planning process

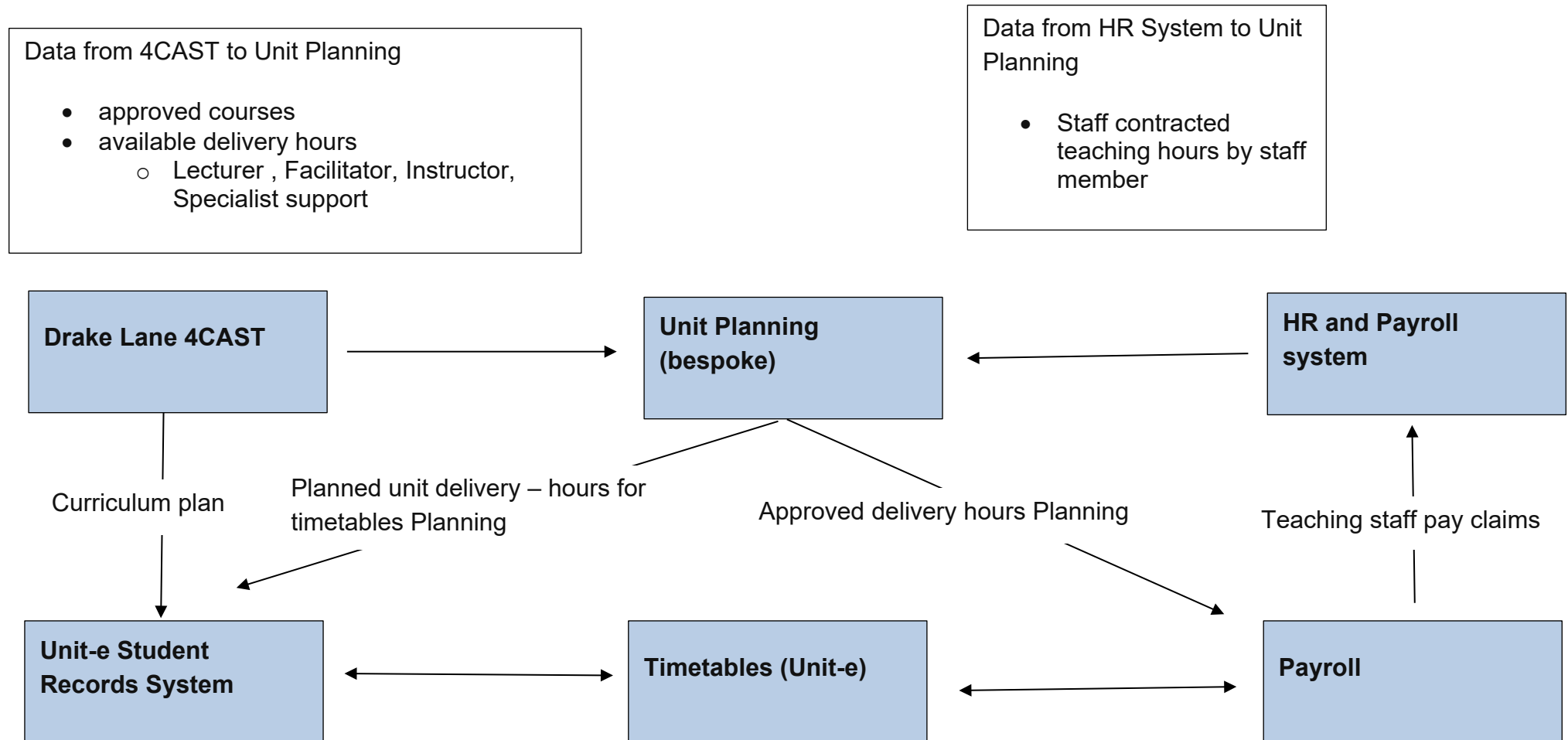


Figure 13: Weymouth College curriculum planning process

Case Study: Wyke Sixth Form College



Name of Principal/CEO:	Paul Britton
Type of Organisation:	Sixth Form College
Geographical Location:	North East
Annual Turnover:	£12 million
16-19	2150
Total taught hours	82986
Total permanent teaching hours available	75696
Numbers of teaching staff employed - FTE	87
% of available teaching hours targeted to be used	100%
Contribution made to overheads by curriculum	41%
Average number of students in each class	20

Table 13: Wyke Sixth Form College

Introduction

Wyke Sixth Form College is a high performing college in Hull, delivering level 3 qualifications to 2,150 full time 16-19 students drawn from across the Humber region. The college's annual turnover is 12m, £10.7m is ESFA funding. Student progress and achievement exceed both local and national rates and the quality of teaching is recognised nationally. The college delivers A levels, applied general qualifications, GCSE English and maths and a range of additional qualifications to support the academic and progression goals of its students. The rising demographic in the areas served by the college is having an impact on student numbers with a predicted 25% increase between 2019 and 2028. A successful application to the post-16 capacity fund is enabling work on campus to provide an additional 350 places.

Over half of Wyke's students reside in the city of Hull, which is among the 10% most deprived areas in the country. Educational attainment at all levels is well below national rates and Attainment 8 at key stage 4 is in quartile D. The student profile reflects the city's socio-economic context. 50% of students come from some of the most deprived wards in the country and the student population is predominantly White British. Over the last few years, the college strategy to transform the nature of student progression has had demonstrable impact, with positive destinations 10% above national rates and 14% above local rates. Over half of Wyke's university applicants are "first generation" and the achievement of 1st and upper 2nd degrees from students progressing to university from the lowest HE participation areas is 6% above national rates. (HESA 2021).

The college is making a significant contribution to social mobility and the 'levelling up' imperative and leaders recognise the part played in this achievement by curriculum planning which allocates resources efficiently to deliver its vision for student achievement and progression. In recent years, college leaders have started to interrogate the detail of curriculum contribution to overhead costs in order to develop a model which is financially sustainable. The case study shows the college developing a more sophisticated approach with the setting of key metrics and the development of a strategic dashboard for curriculum planning.

Overview

The college has 2 overarching strategic objectives which underpin curriculum planning. The first of these is the progress and achievement of students, and the second is the development of skills and qualities to enable successful progression to study, employment, and adult life. These 2 student-centred priorities drive the curriculum planning process and are the touchstone for its integrity at every stage. At the same time, the curriculum plan must be financially sustainable and support the college's business planning. The following guiding principles are the starting point for a curriculum plan which will deliver efficiently and successfully.

First Principles: strength of the key components, first class teaching, well-structured learning, expert pastoral provision, individual support, careers advice both national and local, and rich opportunities for personal development

Financial sustainability—: costs of sixth form college contracts, along with other costs including subsidised travel, necessitate full staff utilisation and class sizes set at a minimum of 20.

Distributed leadership: Many of the key processes in planning are devolved to middle leaders and curriculum teams.

Liaison with partners and stakeholders: students, local schools, universities, employers, and labour market intelligence.

Scanning the horizon: local and national initiatives, (in Hull, green energy, digital and healthcare) are used to inform T Level delivery and science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) expansion.

Enabling: mixed programme provision and individualised 'extras' are a key enabler of HE and high quality employment, and support achievement of the vision for social mobility. An example of this is the practice of 'working backwards' to establish a clear line of sight from the student progression goal to their study programme. Some students will re-sit a GCSE to achieve the grade needed for a specific progression route. Other students will study core maths, and the extended project may be added to a student's programme to provide cultural capital and support progression to university.

Approach

Wyke's curriculum planning inverts a conventional SLT-driven approach, and adopts a distributed leadership model, with middle leaders and teams driving and checking the information flow and co-ordinating significant events. The curriculum director, a middle leader, drives the key processes of tracking, modelling, and information liaison, and brings

together key cross-college groups, such as “Starting Wyke”, a cross-college group of middle leaders and frontline staff. This group is at the forefront of key processes of curriculum timetabling and enrolment. The curriculum director presents the work of the group to a monthly curriculum and quality SLT using the new strategic planning dashboard.

Link Governor role

A recent initiative for robust scrutiny, support and challenge is provided by the link governor for curriculum planning. This role will be key as the college develops a curriculum planning model which is integrated with the overall business model. The link governor’s role is to support and challenge curriculum planning and also to ensure that the curriculum maintains a clear line of sight to its core principles and beyond these, to the college’s strategic objectives.

Efficiency metrics

Staff utilisation and class size targets are essential aspects of curriculum planning to ensure financial sustainability, given the high costs of sixth form college contracts. Staff utilisation is over 98%, staff costs to income are 65%-68% and the college sets an average minimum class size of 20, backed by an evidence-based approach ([evidence around reduced class sizes indicates low impact on student progress for high cost](#)).

Digital systems

Digitisation of curriculum planning has demonstrably reduced workloads and timescales and improved compliance including the reduction of staff required for data processing, the elimination of timetabling errors and the ability to run various iterations of potential models to establish the best outcome. Reconciliation is therefore iterative with in-year adjustments bringing additional efficiencies. An example is the adjustment in October 2022 to the Health and Social Care timetable, bringing strong class sizes and freeing up leadership time for the delivery of the T Level qualification. The development of 3 inter-related in-house systems enables a live interface between curriculum planning, application and enrolment which is completely digital. Student information from application and interview is captured in APPLY and feeds into TARDIS, the automated timetabling software which then inter-operates with EMBARK, the enrolment system. The systems are designed for all relevant staff across the college to use them with almost no prior training including all interview staff, all involved in the enrolment process and subject leaders for timetabling.

Student voice

This has always informed curriculum planning, but current students are being consulted on more far-reaching proposals to amend the curriculum planning model to support a proportion of online, remote learning. Wyke’s students have experience of both synchronous and non-synchronous remote learning, and it will inevitably feature in their further study and employment. College leaders are keen to hold onto the benefits and opportunities for learning presented by the events of the last 2 years and plan to explore a fully costed blended model which is shaped by student feedback.

Curriculum planning model

This model allows ownership to be held at the appropriate level, with decisions and checks made by those directly impacted. It is also a rich source of continuous professional development (CPD) and supports talent management. In this model, the SLT function is to scrutinise, challenge, and support regular data reports from the curriculum director using the strategic dashboard.

The positive impact of distributed leadership can be evidenced in a range of ways, including the improved accuracy of identifying additional support needs, and the success of allocating responsibility for curriculum change to curriculum teams. Over the last 4 years, recruitment to 8 new qualifications including T Levels is the result of curriculum team groundwork and research.

The development of bespoke systems to operate a digital, data-informed, decentralised, and iterative approach to the planning cycle enables a seamless process in which the curriculum plan is developed, tested and implemented. Staff costs have been maintained over the last 4 years at 65%-68% of income, and prediction modelling has been accurate to within one full time equivalent (FTE) in the same period. The application of guiding principles throughout the curriculum planning process ensures fidelity to college vision and curriculum intent.

Areas for development

College leaders recognise the opportunities and benefits in developing an integrated curriculum and financial planning model as a significant tool for supporting financial sustainability and ensuring informed decision-making.

The role and involvement of the link governor for curriculum planning will be assessed at the end of the 2022 planning cycle and decisions made on its impact.

Summary

Over the last 4 years the college has aligned business and curriculum planning processes to achieve efficiency targets whilst maintaining fidelity to strategic objectives. Organisational processes in curriculum planning are designed to maintain a focus on the students – their goals, their achievement, and their progression. There are some innovative features which will be interesting to impact assess at the end of the first cycle.

CEO/principal's comment

Our curriculum is key to ensuring Wyke can deliver exceptional education that ensures our diverse body of students are well prepared to play leading roles in society. We have a rich offer that delivers both the qualifications and experience that students need. This offer must be financially and organisationally viable, and effective curriculum planning ensures this is the case. Our process is clearly mapped out through the academic year and is supported by

robust, college developed, systems. The process is owned across all aspects of the college and this distributed approach ensures that decisions are made at the appropriate level and deliver significant efficiency. Furthermore, staff at the college understand their role in curriculum plan; being included and informed means they can demonstrate the flexibility required to make it all fit.

Wyke Sixth Form College curriculum planning process diagram

Process listing for curriculum model showing significant events and processes, together with embedded distributed leadership, system interface and critical checks.

TERM ONE

- 1. ILR informs metrics and targets. Strategic priorities, curriculum intent and core principles.**
2. Key teams start 5 stage student recruitment and events.
3. Initial interviews.
4. Initial curriculum modelling presented to SLT using strategic dashboard.
- 5. Link governor scrutiny, support, and challenge.**
6. Case for change prepared by curriculum teams.

TERM TWO

- 7. Strategic priorities revised.**
8. Case for change presented to SLT by curriculum teams.
9. Decision made on curriculum changes.
10. Staff utilisation and recruitment plan Staff
11. Student interviews complete. Application window closes. Accommodation and travel strategy complete.
12. Draft curriculum model presented to SLT using strategic dashboard and showing achievement of key metrics.
- 13. Link governor scrutiny, support, and challenge.**

TERM THREE

14. System interface to feed curriculum plan into enrolment plan.
15. Curriculum timetable drafted and sense checked.
- 16. Strategic priority check**
17. On-line remodelling to ensure alignment of amendments with key metrics.
- 18. Link governor, scrutiny, support, and challenge**

RESPONSIBILITIES

Distributed leadership responsibility

Senior leadership team and governance

Figure 14: Wyke Sixth Form College curriculum planning process

Appendix 4: pre-census (42 day) retention strategies and techniques

Introduction and background

During the Curriculum Efficiency and Financial Sustainability Support (CEFSS) pilot, 7 key themes were identified that would enhance the CEFSS programme as it transitioned from pilot into established support activity. These were:

1. Improving annual planning cycles
2. Review of sector benchmarking tools
3. Standardising contribution analysis
- 4. Strategies for pre-census (42 days) full time (FT) learner retention**
5. Accounting for commercial income
6. A short adaptable training presentation template to engage governors in the curriculum planning cycle.
7. Sharing effective practice of integrated curriculum and financial planning – including this ‘Guide to Effective Practice in Curriculum Planning’

This is a summary of the findings of theme 4 – strategies for pre-census (42 day) full time (FT) learner retention.

Research methodology

To support colleges in improving early (pre-census) retention the FEC team explored the following key sources of information:

- National data for the 2021/22 academic year (*source: RCU & AOC*)
- A review of retention strategies from 10 colleges across the sector to capture techniques used to improve pre-census retention.
- Analysis of specific strategies and techniques used by the case study organisations to improve pre-census (42-day) retention.

The data is all 16-19 study FT enrolments based on the following filters:

- Learners with active courses in the academic year
- 16-19 funded learners
- Core aim only
- Learners starting in the relevant academic year
- Exclude colleges with small numbers of 16-19 funded learners
- Exclude transfers
- Learners on long courses (24+ weeks)

More detailed analysis of the data and findings can be found on the [help and support for colleges](#) web page.

Pre-census retention strategies and techniques – Case Studies

Key retention strategies and techniques

Summary

Findings from the 10 college case studies identified a series of strategic and operational techniques that are believed to have a significant impact on the pre-census (42-day) retention of full time learners. The national data identifies that the overall national average in 2021/22 for withdrawals during their first 42 days of their course is 5.7%.

The range of colleges included in the case studies is 2% – 9.1%, Whilst some are above the national average, all bar one are at or below the national average for their type of organisation and have achieved significant improvement in this area of retention since 2018/19. Only one college is significantly above the national average but shows an impressive improvement trend.

Other key findings/techniques can be summarised under strategic and operational approaches.

Principally the approaches colleges are taking to improve early retention of learners fall into 2 categories, systems and support. Support generally focuses on the human element of the student's initial experiences and involves enhancing the level of individual support afforded to students during the first 42 days of their course. Systems, on the other hand, tends to look at how the college manages the learner's experience from target setting to compliance – for example establishing corporate targets: the creation and ownership of a “master target file” containing all the college's key targets for the year including a specific target for retaining students at day 42, signed off and agreed by the board, the senior leadership team, and each member of the college management team – a structure through which to both drive, monitor, review and improve the performance of the organisation. Combined with the human aspects of supporting students, it can form the basis of an improvement framework.

Strategic techniques

Collaborative relationships

- Investment in fostering **strong relationships with feeder schools** for every aspect of the college, offers significant benefits in ensuring the transition between school and college. In the best examples this started at year 8, with many inter-organisational activities being arranged to inform the teachers, parents and careers advisers, and to provide careers advice and options for the young people to consider. Effective taster activities were particularly highlighted. In one college the principal/CEO was spending between 30 and 40% of their time in this type of activity. Formal relationships with SLT members becoming board members of local feeder schools are also highly effective in understanding the challenges and needs of transitioning learners. Data sharing agreements between schools and colleges can also significantly improve the preparation for transition on a learner by learner basis.
- The development of a strong working relationship with the local authority to support those at risk of becoming NEET has proved to be very effective . Supported by a very tightly adhered to a set of KPI's that trigger responsive intervention based on a framework of strategies. KPI's are triggered following 24 hours without contact with the learner.
- **College Ready Programme:** The college works with feeder schools to identify young people for the programme. This is essentially a supported 2-week transition programme for year 11. This high-risk cohort are kept in touch with by the college during year 11, providing enhanced transition activities prior to the start of the college ready programme
- **Effective tracking** of learner/pupil participants in collaborative activities provides useful intelligence that can be used to further engage the potential learner. In one college, 4CAST was being used to track learners as a customer relationship management (CRM) tool. The information is then used to keep the learner engaged and tailor their transition package. Later, during the first 42 days, the information is further enhanced and used to guide the learner onto the correct course, including where a transfer might be needed.

Investment in Early Personal Support

- **Understanding why students might leave early** gave many colleges the knowledge to be able to address the issue before it became a reality. In most cases the reasons for leaving stemmed from 3 main challenges: change of personal circumstances, transport concerns including costs, and employment or an alternative provider. In each case, the successful colleges had put in place processes that supported the learner to stay in college. The most effective was the

use of personal tutors/champions/ambassadors, or something similar, to have a direct contact with the learner.

- One college felt that the length of time needed to process **bursaries** adversely impacted learner attendance and retention. It set a target of 14 days for checking and approval of learner bursaries on the 'pay my student' online portal. The faster turnaround provided much needed **financial support** during the early stages of their course.
- **Super tutors:** to ensure effective support is always available, colleges are investing more resource in personal tutors, with ratios of circa 140:1.
- **Risk red/amber/green (RAG) rating** features in many colleges. In one college the current process is to RAG rate all students at 5 weeks under the following categories:
 - a) doing very well and should pass the course
 - b) doing fine but may need support
 - c) concerns and maybe on the wrong course/level
- A weekly case conference for all students rated 3 at course level, including input from maths and English, led to learners being reviewed and, where appropriate, considered for transfer between courses.
- **Enhanced interview process:** In this case the college overhauled its interviewing process to offer a taster experience and provide IAG around college support services. The process has a clear emphasis on making any necessary adjustments and support applications at the stage of interview. The college also pro-actively encourages those students who have made multiple applications for different courses to interview for each course so that they get a well-rounded understanding of their options and the support available to them.
- The use of sophisticated tools to risk assess students and provide support is becoming a more well-established procedure. In one college, a **RONI** (Risk Of NEET (not in education, employment or training) Indicator) uses a series of risk related categories to score the risk of the learner not staying, and signposts actions to support the student. RONI uses indicators such as: travel to learn, young carer, home schooled, young parent, in-residence, looked after child, late starter, free school meals, education, health and care plan (EHCP), special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), known mental and/or physical health issues. The tracker has a point score for each field – some are weighted, and learners are then RAG rated according to risk. This enables leaders at the college to plan effective support for learners as soon as possible and prioritise the deployment of staff, including a

team of progress coaches, who have a case load of approximately 150 learners each.

- **Swap, Don't Drop:** college-wide promotional campaign, signpost learners to a dedicated named contact for support to transfer programmes. Applies to all FT students and enables movement between study programmes and apprenticeships at all levels. The process considers 5 categories of learners from those who enrol but never attend following phone, email, text, and letter and if the learner is under 18 a call to the parents, right through to learners who wish to transfer around the day 42 period. The 5 categories are:
 - a) Learner with no register marks
 - b) Learners requesting to be withdrawn who have attended
 - c) Learners being withdrawn due to behaviour
 - d) Learners who are not attending sufficiently
 - e) Learners who express a wish to transfer.

Under each of these headings the system provides a comprehensive set of criteria and processes to be followed and recorded to support the learner.

Culture

- A **philosophical belief** that learners have chosen the college as their preferred learning organisation so would want to stay. A withdrawal is a failure to meet the learner's expectations.
- Using **college values** as the basis of induction. The college has made a conscious decision to use the values of the organisation to drive conversations and activities for learners during recruitment and induction. Various activities focus on the meaning and implementation of the values. For example, rather than discuss attendance with students they discuss the importance of punctuality and respect for others and resilience (making sure you can always get here) and make the use of these values a common college language.
- **Right Learner, Right Course:** during the critical 42-day period, learners are not kept on courses that do not meet their needs – instead a strategy for pre-census retention is based on extended careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) and support to effectively place applicants on the right programmes and, on a curriculum that is personalised.
- **Recruiting with Integrity:** learners are not asked about the course they wish to study but what their aims and aspirations are and then they are matched to most appropriate course both in terms of curriculum and level.

Curriculum design

- Differentiated by individual need and historical experience, colleges enhance the early experiences of learners by front-loading their courses with enrichment activities designed to settle, build confidence, create friendship groups, and develop resilience in the new learners. The additional 40 hours and tuition fund are key sources of resourcing.
- In one example the curriculum had been reviewed to recognise that exposing learners too early in their experience to difficult tasks and situational scenarios can be too daunting and lead to learners being put off the course before support can be implemented. Investing in the learner before the course was a key to addressing this particular concern.
- Alternative learning options are in place in some colleges, including in one, a Positive Intervention Programme (PIP), where more specific and targeted interventions are planned and an Alternative Learning Programme (ALP), which is designed to support those who find the rigor of the study programme a challenge and require learning at a differentiated pace.

Operational techniques

Frequent monitoring of student behaviours during 42 days

The more detail that is known and understood about all students, but particularly those assessed as being high-risk, provides a better basis for responding to their individual need in a timely fashion – almost predicting what their behaviour will be to facilitate preventative interventions

Simple models work best

Many colleges have built highly sophisticated systems through which to monitor and manage learner behaviours. However, in the diverse and complex landscape of the further education college, it appears that the simplest systems are those that gain traction, are widely understood by all parties and corporately adhered to. Reviewing systems to improve all parties experience is critical to a successful outcome.

Continuous reinforcement of expectations

The first 6 weeks of a course are when learners are at their most receptive and vulnerable. Things are new and they are seeking structure through which to explore their new environment. This is the time to establish expectations of the learner to influence their behaviours including confirming what is expected of them. This establishes their feeling of being a part of the college and what they need to do to succeed – for example attendance, assessment deadlines, respect, ambition.

Teaching and learning

- An emphasis on teaching and tutorial staff investing the necessary time to get to know their learners, understanding their aspirations and using the principles of trauma informed teaching, and ‘connect before correct’.
- The time taken to understand learner needs as early as possible is attributed as a key strategy to retaining beyond day 42.
- To help with lost learning and aid retention, one college has established a new internal ‘School of Academic and Vocational Support’, using trained and specialist teachers to provide interventions and additional delivery of learning, through timetabled acceleration classes.

Assessment

- In several organisations assessment processes are used to enhance the learners’ feeling of achievement and self-worth. Assessments are set for between 2 and 4 weeks to review and assess how the learner is coping with their course. It provides valuable intelligence to the support services but is primarily used to celebrate achievement and guide next steps.

- **20% Curriculum:** in one college, curriculum teams have a target to complete 20% of the learner's programme (around 1 unit) by the 4-6 week point, this motivates learners as they can see early progress

Personalised Induction

- Where learners need enhanced personal support, many colleges have personal progress tutors or similar roles in place. In one college they provide tours with very anxious applicants and their parents at quiet times over the summer, they meet learners at a side gate when they start, go to first lessons with them and coach them until they feel more confident.
- Another offered a minimum of 2 keeping warm summer activities to include information about learner life, sports clubs, debating society and community activities.

Involvement of employers

- Involving employers in project activities at an early stage in specific vocational areas and levels that have a history of early attrition can sharpen learner engagement and commitment – construction, engineering, hairdressing and so on (weekly visits, guest lectures, site visits).

Appendix 5: Benchmarking staff/pay costs as a % of income

The current FEC guidance recommends that staff/pay costs as a percentage of income should be:

General further education college	<65%
Sixth form college	<70%

Staff/pay costs

Total staff costs (teaching and support, including contract tuition services but excluding restructuring and FRS102 pensions adjustments) as a percentage of adjusted income (excluding franchised provision income)

Benchmarking calculation for staff/pay costs as a % of income

Staff Costs	Total staff costs excluding restructuring
Adjustments – Less	FRS102 adj. current service costs
Divided by	Income used in ratio analysis (adjusted income)
Adjustments - Less	Franchised provision income
Equals	Total staff costs as a percentage of income (excluding franchised provision income)

Table 14: Calculation used for benchmarking staff/pay costs as a percentage of income

For further information regard financial benchmarking based on the latest returns from colleges, please refer to the latest version of the Financial Benchmarking Tool for Colleges (2020/21) which can be found at [Financial benchmarking tool for colleges - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/92421/Financial_benchmarking_tool_for_colleges_-_GOV.UK.pdf)

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Project Research Team and Contributors

College	Contributors
Further Education Commissioner Research Team	Nigel Duncan Amanda Exley Pauline Hagen Tim Jackson Jo Pretty Andrew Tyley Dr Kate Webb Esme Winch
Additional FEC Contributions	Meredydd David Becky Edwards Anna Fitch Steve Hutchinson
Department for Education Project Leads	Alison Firth Nick Chomyk
AoC	Theresa Frith David Hollingsworth

Table 15: Project research team and contributors

Curriculum Planning Case Studies

With thanks to sector colleagues for expert contributions:

College	Contributors
Weymouth College	Julia Howe Phil Templeton Kelly Bush
Basingstoke College	Anthony Bravo Lorraine Heath David Moir
The Luminate Education Group	Colin Booth Gemma Simmons-Blench
Sparsholt College	Julie Milburn Mark Treagust
East Kent College Group	Graham Razey Nick Holbrook-Sutcliffe Chris Legg
Wyke Sixth Form College	Paul Britton Al Robinson Julie Peaks Tracy Parker

Table 16: Case study contributors

Pre-census Retention Strategies and Techniques Case Studies

With thanks to sector colleagues for expert contributions:

College	Type	Region
Bradford College	GFE	North
Cambridge Regional College	GFE	Midlands and East
Eastern Colleges Group	GFE (inc. SFC)	Midlands and East
Hartlepool College	GFE	North East
Hull College	GFE	North East
Newham College	GFE	London and South East
Northampton College	GFE	Midlands and East
Riverside College	GFE/SFC	North West
Sparsholt College	Land Based	South and South West
Trafford College Group	GFE (inc. SFC)	North West
Walsall College	GFE	Midlands and East

Table 17: Pre-census retention strategies and techniques case study contributors



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