CONFIRMED

The Corporation of New College Durham

Minutes of the Education Quality Curriculum and Students meeting held on 19 March 2026 Online via MS Teams

Present:
Stephen King (Meeting Chair)
Helen Golightly
Rhiannon Hiles
Nigel Harrett
Kathryn McCloghrie
Mark Gomersall
Matthew Gamsby
Hayley Farrell

Apologies:
Suzanne Slater
Andy Broadbent
Adele Dowson

In attendance:
Alison Maynard (Deputy Principal)
Andy Stephenson (Vice Principal)
Colleen Peters (Vice Principal)
Peter Morrison (Vice Principal)
Rob Grainey (Vice Principal)
Bob Metcalf (Executive Director, Finance & Corporate Services)
Suzanne Crane (Assistant Principal)
Marie O'Brien (Director of
Caroline Winter (Head of Governance & Corporation Secretary)
Chloe Freeman (Administrator)

Action

26/01 Chair's introduction and starred items

Members were advised that Suzanne Slater, Committee Chair, was unwell and that a temporary Chair was required for the current meeting. The Committee agreed to appoint Stephen King to chair the meeting.

Members were reminded to declare their interests in any item of business to be discussed. No interests were declared.

Helen Golightly lost connection with the meeting.

Members **confirmed** they did not require any discussion on Paper J, the Curriculum and Quality Monitoring Information Report.

26/02 Apologies for absence were received from Suzanne Slater, Andy Broadbent and Adele Dowson.

Helen Golightly rejoined the meeting at 4:04pm.

26/03 Minutes of previous meeting (Papers A1 & A2)

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 November 2025 (including confidential minutes) were agreed as an accurate record.

26/04 Matters arising not appearing elsewhere on the agenda

25/23 – the slides on HE teaching and learning were circulated shortly after the previous meeting. Andy Stephenson provided further details on the NCD Enhanced Learning Model and elements of the approach to activating hard thinking.

25/24 – information on disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged learners would be covered under Paper G4 - Inclusion Approach later in the meeting.

25/28 – a discussion on the College's approach to artificial intelligence (AI) would be included in the programme for the Corporation Strategic Review in April.

25/37 – it was confirmed that details on access to counselling services and other additional information would be included in the next update on the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

26/05 Curriculum Presentation – Qualification Reforms (Presentation)

Rob Grainey and Marie O'Brien delivered a detailed presentation on qualification reforms. Rob re-capped the policy context for the reform proposals outlined in the Curriculum Assessment Review, Skills White Paper and 16-19 pathways consultation and advised that the DfE was aiming to simplify the confusing landscape of over 900 qualifications for young people. Members noted the key principles underpinning the case for change, the proposed pathways and different options for school leavers, subject areas across each type of qualification, details of the proposed V Levels, refinements to T Levels, the introduction of the new 'stepping stone' qualifications for Level 1 English and Maths and the timeline for rollout across each of the reforms. Marie O'Brien outlined the key areas of concern for the College as a result of the proposals, explained the initial thoughts on the transition plan and set out next steps to support implementation.

Members thanked Rob and Marie for a helpful summary of the changes and asked about the financial impact on the College. It was noted that whilst a significant drop in T Level income was anticipated due to the band change, the position was uncertain at this early stage and financial planning was underway. Members asked about plans to engage with feeder schools as well as current students to ensure they understood what the options would be in future. Rob explained that given the significance of so many changes occurring simultaneously it was important that the College had digested the implications. Work would progress with internal staff to clarify the changes and enable them to support students attending open nights and with the school liaison team to communicate the changes in their work with schools. The reforms would also be discussed at the forthcoming Employer Advisory Board meetings.

In response to a member's query on the timeline for V Levels and T Levels, Marie confirmed that whilst full details were still awaited it was expected that there would be an overlap where existing qualifications were taught out.

Members emphasised that the reforms represented a significant sector-wide change with implications for curriculum, staffing, employer engagement and school liaison. It was agreed that the reforms should remain a standing agenda item, with further discussion and understanding required at both the Committee and Corporation. Alison confirmed that the implications were being worked through in relation to key curriculum areas and the College's strategy, enablers and curriculum planning process. NCD was well placed to respond to the changes and further detail of the proposals and the College's approach would be brought back for consideration as the position evolved.

Marie O'Brien left the meeting at 4.47pm.

26/06 HE Curriculum Update (Paper B)

Peter Morrison presented Paper B, the HE Curriculum Update and explained that the report combined updates on the HE Quality Development Plan (QDP) and wider sector developments.

Peter reported that progress had been made across all five QDP development areas of recruitment, attendance, continuation and completion rates, staff development and teaching quality, which had strengthened significantly. Members noted further recruitment activity was planned over the Easter period and were briefed on quality assurance, the forthcoming Open University (OU) re-approval visit, updates from the Office for Students and international activity as part of the Erasmus+ scheme and a proposed new partnership football academy programme.

In response to a member's question about the reason for the decline in partner completion rates, Suzanne Crane explained this related to specific cohorts. Some students were removed for fee sanctions due to being ineligible for funding and others had opted to repeat their year to secure an additional year's funding. Measures were now in place to address these issues including improved checks at interview stage. Recent cohort performance was strong, indicating that the issue had been temporary. Members asked about the impact of these cohorts from an OfS perspective and Suzanne advised that whilst the College would monitor the detail of individual cohorts, the OfS would look at the overall data. This would average out to reduce the impact of some partner cohorts, and the rate would still be above target.

Members queried the high level of partnership drop-ins classed as developing. Suzanne explained that whilst partners had very established teams, many staff were new to teaching and a new appointment had been made to provide development support including mentoring and CPD.

Members asked about opportunities for learning from the OU approach to oversight that could be adapted to the College's oversight of its partners. Peter confirmed that the College would strengthen its own processes to reflect any good practice and that there would be an opportunity to implement this at the partnership mid-contract review point.

Members highlighted partnership attendance as an ongoing area for improvement. Peter explained that whilst there was no suggestion that the OfS would introduce an attendance KPI, the College had discussed attendance at the partnership meeting earlier in the week. The position would continue to be monitored to drive alignment with the Durham position and reviewed at the end of the year.

Members noted the update and confirmed they had received sufficient assurance of progress and improvement from the actions outlined in the report.

26/07 HE Partnership Risks (Paper C)

This item is recorded confidentially under confidential minute 26/07a.

26/08 Academic Board minutes (Paper D)

Members received Paper D and noted the content of the minutes of the Academic Board held on 2 December 2025.

26/09 Update on 2025/26 Strategic KPIs (Education & Training, Apprenticeships and Higher Education) (Paper E)

Andy Stephenson presented Paper E, which updated on the latest performance against the curriculum and quality strategic KPIs.

Members noted that the College remained in a strong position compared to national benchmarks, although some KPIs were below the College's own internal aspirational targets.

Members discussed Functional Skills performance and emphasised the importance of maintaining the significant achievement of the previous year. Andy explained that whilst maths at Level 1 had sustained the improvement, there were ongoing challenges with the entry level cohort and at Level 1 in English. Members noted the measures in place to ensure progress through performance monitoring meetings and targeted student-level analysis to ensure learners were making sufficient progress.

Members agreed to note the positive progress against the College's Curriculum and Quality KPIs at February 2026, particularly strong retention, improved attendance, continued improvement in apprenticeships, and secure Higher Education performance when adjusted for legacy partnership factors.

26/10 Update on FE Quality Development Plan (Paper F)

Members **agreed to defer** the item to a future meeting due to time pressure in the current meeting and the need to prioritise later agenda items.

FE and Apprenticeships Curriculum Updates

26/11 Emerging themes (Paper G1)

Rob Grainey presented Paper G1, which summarised key developments in relation to the new Ofsted Inspection Toolkit, SEND reforms and the annual update to Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE).

Rob reported that there was a strong focus on learner progress in the early inspection reports issued under the new Ofsted framework, with insufficient progress acting as a limiting factor in inspection outcomes. Members noted that the College had effective approaches to tracking progress but was reviewing data tools to strengthen analysis, particularly for disadvantaged learners. It was clear that strong headline achievement would not ensure a strong grade and that English and maths remained central themes within the initial inspection reports.

Members discussed the increasing use of data and AI across government including as part of inspection frameworks and emphasised the importance of building internal capability to analyse and respond to data effectively. Andy Stephenson updated on the College's work in relation to Ofsted data tools and advised that building data confidence and maturity would enable identification of patterns within data and to effectively utilise the information. Discussions were also taking place with colleges that had already been inspected to understand their experience.

Members observed that the new framework may place greater emphasis on progress for lower-level learners, potentially disadvantaging high-performing colleges. Alison Maynard explained that articulating how learners had been supported on their journey would be important and work was ongoing to collate these examples.

Rhiannon Hiles left the meeting at 5.29pm.

Rob updated on the proposed SEND reforms, which had received significant attention following their recent publication. Implementation was expected by 2030, providing time to fully understand the changes. Members noted that the reforms included a shift away from EHCP-led funding and support towards a more layered support model. A key risk related to transition points in young people's lives, with potential reputational risks if parents challenged changes to EHCPs that they had worked hard to secure. It was expected that the reforms would impact funding, and the College would continue to monitor developments closely. Members noted that the College was well positioned due to its inclusive approach.

Members discussed the question of reviewing the College's current SEND provision and noted the pressure in relation to foundation courses. The need to understand the implications of the reforms before making decisions was emphasised. Andy Stephenson advised that whilst there may be a transfer of costs and responsibilities from local authorities to educational institutions, the College could not change its provision. It was agreed that the reforms should be explored further at a future meeting. **AM / CW**

Members reviewed the changes to Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) and commented that safeguarding arrangements at the College were very strong.

Alison Maynard emphasised that the College was currently managing a wide range of developments across both FE and HE. Members **agreed to note** the alignment between emerging themes within the sector and NCD's current strategic response, and to endorse continued preparatory activity for the implementation of forthcoming FE reforms and inspection.

26/12 Enhanced Learning Update (Paper G2)

Andy Stephenson presented Paper G2, the Enhanced Learning Update. Members were briefed on the impact of learning drop-ins, learning visits, continuing professional development (CPD), coaching and priorities for the remainder of the year.

Members noted the College position for Enhanced Learning for term one of academic year 2025/26 and the ongoing priorities for the academic year.

26/13 Employer Engagement (Paper G3)

Colleen Peters presented an overview of employer engagement activity, noting that the report provided a snapshot of a significant amount of work taking place across the College.

Members noted that employer engagement was embedded within curriculum design and aligned to regional priorities. A skills and employer engagement working group had been established to further strengthen this work and members noted examples of strong practice, including engagement with major employers at events such as the recent North East Food and Drink event, providing hands on experience and direct interaction with employers. External initiatives included the Fire Futures programme, the Wind Academy and training delivered to over 600 learners with AESC. Colleen emphasised that employer engagement was intentional, provided meaningful learner experiences while supporting employer skills needs. Members commented that corporate education programmes appeared to present an opportunity for growth that should be considered further given the current risks to contribution levels.

Members commended the breadth and variety of programmes, praising both large-scale and smaller initiatives, engagement with the creative sector and congratulated Colleen on the enthusiasm in approach and quality of the report. Alison Maynard provided an update that the College was planning to develop provision in heritage skills, specific to County Durham, focusing on maintaining and supporting heritage buildings and related skills development.

Members agreed to:

- Note that the examples presented represent a selected snapshot of activity undertaken across the College during the current academic year.
- Recognise the strategic role of Employer Advisory Boards in ensuring employer insight informs curriculum strategy, development and continuous improvement.
- Endorse the continued development of employer-led curriculum models and workforce partnerships aligned to regional and national skills priorities.

26/14 Inclusion Approach (Paper G4)

Andy Stephenson presented Paper G4, which outlined the College's approach to inclusion. It was noted that inclusion was central to the College's core strategies, values and mission, and embedded throughout its work. The approach aimed to ensure that all learners, regardless of background or circumstances, are able to belong, thrive and achieve.

Andy talked through the local context of County Durham as an area of deprivation, which directly impacted the barriers faced by learners and shaped the support provided. The most common areas of need related to autism spectrum conditions, dyslexia and mental health difficulties and the College had prioritised its approach in line with Ofsted criteria, focusing on four key learner groups. Andy advised that the College was seeking to strengthen relationships with partners and make greater use of RODI data, while continuing to develop a more complete understanding of the learner experience. Members noted that inclusion was a complex area requiring a whole-college approach. Multiple teams worked closely with curriculum areas to ensure staff had detailed information about learners, enabling effective use of performance data and monitoring across all groups.

Members commended the report and asked about the potential for a systematic approach to reasonable adjustments and querying whether some adjustments could be applied more universally to enhance inclusivity for all learners. Andy confirmed that the College was working with external consultants to apply an inclusion lens across its provision, identifying opportunities to embed inclusive practices more widely, and that the College was committed to this approach going forward.

Alison Maynard stressed the importance of this aspect of the College's work and the need for Governors to be familiar with the approach to inclusion. The Chair commented that the report told a strong and evolving story and that based on external discussions, the College appeared to be ahead of the sector in this area, taking a proactive approach rather than responding solely to Ofsted requirements.

Members noted the report and commended the effectiveness of the College's whole-college approach to equality and inclusion in supporting positive outcomes for learners.

26/15 Accountability Agreement Mid-Year Update 2025/26 (Paper H)

Members **agreed to defer** the item to a future meeting due to time pressure in the current meeting and the need to prioritise later agenda items.

26/16 FE/HE Student Forum feedback Overview of issues raised and progress update (Paper I)

Matthew Gamsby and Peter Morrison presented feedback from the FE and HE student forum meetings, outlining the key themes raised.

It was noted that the forum had taken place at half term and a number of issues were still being progressed. Matthew updated on positive feedback from HE students, particularly in relation to the quality of teaching, social work provision and the student experience. Students reported that assessment results were returned on time, with clear feedback that supported improvement and grade development.

A small number of concerns were raised, including issues relating to attendance challenges resulting from caring responsibilities and Peter explained that due to the requirements of the awarding body, distance learning could not be offered. Lecture slides were being uploaded after teaching sessions to assist these students and other options such as reviewing timetables were being explored.

Feedback from FE students highlighted students were very positive about teaching staff and the quality of assessment. Concerns regarding behaviour were discussed with students encouraged to report issues via a new QR code system. Canteen pricing was also raised as an issue, and a meeting was being organised to explore this further. A Personal Development group had been established to work with the Head of Personal Development to provide structured opportunities for students to share feedback.

Members queried the canteen pricing concerns and asked whether any benchmarking had been undertaken. Peter Morrison confirmed that benchmarking has previously been completed and found pricing to be competitive. It was suggested that students present evidence to support their concerns when discussing the issue in the forthcoming meeting.

Members commented that overall feedback from both forums was positive and it was noted that none of the concerns related to resources or teaching and learning.

Members noted the report.

26/17 FE and Apprenticeships Curriculum Update – Information report (Paper J)

Members received and noted Paper J, the Curriculum and Quality Information Report, which provided an overview of Learner Surveys, the Learner Support Fund and student discipline and competitions.

26/18 Any other business – none.

26/19 Date of next meeting: 18 June 2026