

# Guidance for Inspectors

## What we inspect

Independent specialist colleges

September 2022

This document is also  
available in Welsh.



Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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<b>Introduction to ‘what we inspect’</b>	<b>1</b>
Evaluating each inspection area	2
About the college	2
Overview	2
Recommendations	3
What happens next?	3
The evidence base of the inspection	3
<b>Inspection areas</b>	<b>4</b>
1 Learning	4
2 Well-being and attitudes to learning	6
3 Teaching and learning experiences	7
4 Care, support and guidance	9
5 Leadership and management	11

## Introduction to 'What we inspect'

This handbook sets out what inspectors need to consider when evaluating the five inspection areas in further education colleges. It explains 'What we inspect'. It should be read in conjunction with the document '[How we inspect](#)', which sets out our approach to inspection in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The guidance is essential reading for reporting inspectors and all other members of the inspection team, including the nominee. It may also be useful for colleges to support their understanding of the inspection guidance. There is a separate handbook that explains the inspection process and methodology, '[How we inspect](#)'.

The five inspection areas are set out below.

### Inspection areas

#### **IA1 – Learning**

1.1 Standards and progress in learning and skills

#### **IA2 – Well-being and attitudes to learning**

2.1 Well-being

2.2 Attitudes to learning

#### **IA3 – Teaching and learning experiences**

3.1 The breadth, balance and appropriateness of the curriculum

3.2 The quality of teaching and assessment

#### **IA4 – Care, support and guidance**

4.1 Personal development

4.2 Safeguarding

#### **IA5 – Leadership and management**

5.1 Quality and effectiveness of leaders and managers

5.2 Self-evaluation processes and improvement planning

5.3 Professional learning

## Evaluating each inspection area (IA)

Inspection teams will not give overall grades for each inspection area. However, they will make a robust and thorough evaluation of the college's provision and its impact on learners' learning and well-being.

Inspectors will always include clear evaluations in relation to the reporting requirements in each inspection area, as exemplified in this handbook. However, what inspectors report on within each inspection area may differ depending on the relative significance of what they find in each college. Inspectors may report 'by exception'. This means that they may report on some aspects only where there are particular strengths or weaknesses.

## About the college

This section of the report will be brief and contain only factual background information about the college and will not contain any evaluation of the provision. The reporting inspector normally agrees the content of this section with the college during the inspection and during the college's factual check of the draft report prior to its publication. If there is disagreement about the content of this section, the reporting inspector will make the final decision about what to include in the report.

This section will contain brief information on:

- the size, nature and location of the college
- the profile of additional learning needs (ALN)<sup>1</sup> that the college provides for
- the background and circumstances of the learners
- the linguistic background of the learners
- the range and levels of learning programmes offered
- any important changes since the last inspection
- the date of appointment of the principal
- the month/year of the college's previous inspection

## Overview

This section of the report should:

- contain a short overview of the main findings (200-300 words), outlining the key strengths and any important weaknesses that require improvement
- make the link between learners' outcomes, the quality of provision and the effectiveness of leadership
- be consistent with the findings in the body of the report

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<sup>1</sup> We have used the term 'additional learning needs', but we acknowledge that the terms 'learning difficulties and/or disabilities' and 'special educational needs' may also be used in this context during the period of implementation of reforms.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations should:

- link closely to the main evaluation areas of the inspection guidance, with the weightiest recommendations reflected in the overview
- give the college a clear and specific indication of the area(s) that require improvement
- help the college to understand clearly what they should do to make the necessary improvements
- be written in order of priority, not in the order of the guidance

## **What happens next?**

The 'What happens next' section will set out what the college needs to do following the inspection. In all cases, leaders will need to respond to the recommendations by putting in place the actions needed to make the improvements identified by the inspection team.

It should exemplify any interesting or innovative practice case studies that we have invited leaders to share.

## **The evidence base of the inspection**

Inspectors will use a wide range of evidence to make sure that their findings are valid, accurate and reliable. This section of the report will explain the sources of evidence that inspectors used as well as the range of activities that they carried out during their visit.

## Inspection areas

The following section explains what each inspection area covers and what inspectors need to keep in mind when evaluating each one.

The inspection areas are numbered 1 – 5, but they are equally important. Within each inspection area, the report will not always cover the aspects in the order they appear in this handbook. Inspectors may choose to sequence the aspects differently in order to reflect their findings. For example, in Inspection Area 3 – Teaching and learning experiences, inspectors may write about teaching before the learning experiences and provision if this makes the findings of the team clearer or they may combine elements of teaching and the provision to explain their findings where appropriate.

The report on each inspection area will normally be around 500 to 700 words.

There is supplementary guidance on the inspection of various aspects of the work of colleges on our website: [www.estyn.gov.wales/inspection/supplementary-guidance](http://www.estyn.gov.wales/inspection/supplementary-guidance).

### Inspection area 1: Learning

#### 1.1 Standards and progress in learning and skills

Inspectors should evaluate the standards reached by learners overall and judge whether these are appropriate to learners' abilities. Inspectors should recognise learners' progress, especially their progress since starting college, from one phase to another, and during the college year..

Inspectors' evaluation of learners' achievement and progress should be based on first hand evidence, for example from observations of learners in sessions, learning walks, scrutiny of learners' work (including work created digitally) and discussions with learners. Inspectors should evaluate how well learners recall previous learning, develop thinking skills, acquire new knowledge, understanding and skills, and apply these to new situations.

Inspectors should consider the achievements and attainments of learners against baseline information. They should consider whether learners are making as much progress as they could, given their starting-points and their age and ability. For example, inspectors should consider how well learners with more developed skills achieve and the extent to which the work they undertake stretches them fully to achieve as well as they could.

Judgements about achievement should take account of these in relation to agreed learning goals. Inspectors should consider evidence in learners' individual learning plans, individual development plans, and education, health and care plans when making a judgement on the rate of progress learners make.

Inspectors should be aware that it will not always be possible or appropriate to compare results of learners in independent specialist colleges with other colleges. However, it is important to form a view on the extent to which learners are fulfilling their potential.

Where appropriate, inspectors will consider the number and range of accredited qualifications that learners achieve and whether these are in line with their ability.

Inspectors should consider whether learners move on to courses, training, employment or specialist provision that are appropriate for their ability, interests and previous performance. They should consider the proportion of college leavers not in employment or who are not engaged in education and training (NEETs).

Where possible, inspectors should evaluate the progress of particular groups of learners, for example, learners with English as an additional language (EAL) and those from minority ethnic groups. However, this will not always be appropriate.

It may be appropriate to report on differences between the progress of learners with different needs, for example autistic spectrum condition (ASC) and profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). This should only be if there is a significant difference between the progress of the two groups.

Inspectors should consider whether specific groups of learners are making as much progress as they could in relation to their starting-points and their age and ability.

Inspectors should evaluate to what extent learners develop the skills required to access the whole curriculum and to learn effectively throughout their lives. Inspectors should report clearly on learners' standards in literacy, communication, numeracy and digital skills. When inspecting skills, the focus should be on how well learners use their literacy, communication, numeracy and digital skills appropriately in their work across the curriculum and outside the classroom. Where available, inspectors should consider the results of other relevant assessments, such as those of learners' reading ability, when coming to a view about learners' literacy skills.

Inspectors should judge standards in skills based on first-hand evidence, for example from observations of learners in sessions, learning walks, scrutiny of learners' work and discussions with learners. Careful observation of learners in sessions and talking to learners will provide evidence of their speaking and listening skills, their numeracy skills and their ability to think. Scrutiny of work will provide evidence on how well learners can write clearly and read for understanding, and how well they can use their literacy, numeracy and digital skills at appropriate levels across areas of learning.

Inspectors should consider the extent to which the level of learners' communication and thinking skills support or hinder their progress in classroom interaction with teachers and with other learners. They should consider how well learners develop their creativity and their physical skills, in the classroom and outdoors, and how enterprising they are.

Where relevant, inspectors should consider the extent to which learners develop their fine and gross motor skills, their mobility and their independent living skills. They should consider the extent to which learners develop the skills they need to prepare them for future life. Inspectors should evaluate how effectively learners develop their social skills, including their ability to relate to other learners, staff and visitors to the college.

## **2 Well-being and attitudes to learning**

### **2.1 Well-being**

Inspectors should consider the extent to which learners feel safe and secure, and free from physical and verbal abuse. They should consider the extent to which learners understand how to keep themselves safe within the college, in the wider community and online.well-being

Inspectors should consider how well learners are becoming healthy, confident individuals and understand, for example, how to make healthy choices relating to diet, physical activity and emotional well-being. They should consider how well learners use this understanding in their own lives in college and respond positively to opportunities to undertake physical activity, for example during lessons, at break and lunchtime and through other clubs and activities.

Inspectors should consider the extent to which learners are ready to take on leadership roles and responsibilities and to play a full part in the life and work of the college, for example as members of the college council. They should consider whether learners feel that the college listens to their views and takes them into account in decisions that affect them.

Inspectors should consider responses to the pre-inspection questionnaires from learners, staff, and parents carefully in relation to learners' well-being and develop emerging questions, where appropriate. Inspectors should also consider evidence from observations of learners interacting with their peers, teachers and other staff, as well as evidence from discussions with individuals and groups.

Inspectors should consider how well learners show confidence and resilience in their lives, for example in the way they interact with new people and with their peers. Inspectors should consider how well learners are developing as ethical, informed citizens, for example through their awareness of fairness, equality, sustainability and tolerance and young people's rights.

### **2.2 Attitudes to learning**

Inspectors should evaluate to what extent learners are developing the key attitudes and behaviours required throughout their lives. In particular, inspectors should evaluate the extent to which learners are ambitious, confident, capable and independent learners. They should look at how well learners engage with new, unfamiliar experiences and ideas. They should judge learners' interest in their work, their ability to sustain concentration and to avoid distractions. They should consider how readily learners engage in tasks and bring them to completion. They should evaluate how well learners persevere and remain purposeful when they face difficulties or seek other solutions when their first approach to a problem is unsuccessful.

Inspectors should consider to what extent learners are ready to learn at the start of lessons and whether they move easily between different sessions and activities. Inspectors should consider to what extent learners are able to work in a range of ways, for example independently or in small groups. Inspectors should consider how well learners demonstrate team working skills, including respect for the contributions

of others, for example by allowing others to speak or by remaining calm when others disagree with them.

Inspectors should consider the extent to which learners demonstrate good behaviour in lessons and around the college. They should look at how well learners move between activities and classes and how well they behave during activities such as whole-college gatherings. They should observe whether learners are considerate and relate well to each other, teachers and other adults.

When evaluating participation and enjoyment in learning, inspectors should consider the evidence from teaching or training sessions, scrutiny of learners' work (including work created digitally) and interviews with learners. They should consider to what extent learners develop confidence and are motivated to learn.

When evaluating attendance as evidence of learners' participation and engagement in learning, inspectors should report by exception, i.e. where there is a clear trend of weak or very strong attendance or where it has significantly improved. Inspectors should consider the trends in the overall college attendance rate and the most up-to-date information available, including any notable variations between particular groups of learners and others. They should focus particularly on the rate of persistent absence and consider how many learners have absence rates well above others in the college. However, inspectors should also consider significant mitigating factors, where there is robust evidence to support them, for example in relation to attendance at health clinics or hospital appointments. They should consider the extent to which learners with a history of poor attendance in their current or previous school/college/PRU demonstrate improved attendance.

Inspectors should consider how the COVID-19 pandemic, and any interruption to learning caused by the pandemic, has impacted on learners' well-being, participation and engagement with learning.

### **3 Teaching and learning experiences**

#### **3.1 The breadth, balance and appropriateness of the curriculum**

Inspectors should evaluate the extent to which learning experiences across the college stimulate and challenge learners so that they engage fully in their learning and make the best possible progress.

Inspectors should consider the college's strategic approach to planning the provision and the extent to which it helps learners to become ambitious, confident, aspirational and well-informed individuals. Inspectors should consider the extent and appropriateness of arrangements for learners to undertake sufficient, relevant and high quality work related experience. They should consider the extent to which learning programmes prepare learners for their chosen destinations.

Inspectors should approach innovation and flexibility of approach in a positive way when colleges have tried to be creative and imaginative in taking forward well-considered curricular initiatives for the benefit of learners.

Inspectors should evaluate how well the curriculum builds systematically on learners' existing knowledge, understanding and skills as they move through the

college. They should consider to what extent the college provides learners with a suitably wide range of experiences to develop their interest and skills across a range of subjects and areas of learning.

Where relevant, inspectors should consider how well the college caters for specific groups of learners, for example, learners with English as an additional language.

Inspectors should consider the extent to which leaders use the funding for learners with high needs so that their individual learning programmes challenge learners to: develop their independence; improve their communication skills; make relevant personal choices and decisions; and prepare themselves for adult life.

Inspectors should consider the ways in which the college develops a programme of learning activities that reflects the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity of Wales.

Inspectors should consider the nature and extent of additional learning opportunities. For example, educational visits, participating in occupational skills competitions, achieving additional qualifications and charity and fund-raising events.

Inspectors should evaluate the extent to which the curriculum arrangements ensure that learners acquire the necessary skills in literacy, communication, numeracy and digital skills to support their work. Inspectors should consider how well the college has taken account of the development of learners' literacy, communication, numeracy and digital skills in the planning of learners' vocational, academic or wider skills experiences.

They should look at the evidence in learners' books, online folders and in classes to consider the extent to which the planning is helping to deliver purposeful opportunities for learners to develop their skills across the curriculum.

Inspectors should consider the extent to which the curriculum enables learners to develop skills that they will require for future life, for example independent living skills.

Inspectors should consider the extent to which the college provides learners with opportunities to apply their skills in a range of formal and informal situations.

The main evaluations, context and summary should not report directly that the college has achieved any named awards, including those that are publicly funded. However, there may be reference to named awards in the evidence base, particularly where the award has had an impact on improving standards or provision.

### **3.2 Quality of teaching and assessment**

When evaluating teaching, inspectors should note that there is no preferred methodology or fixed template that teachers and other practitioners should follow, and teachers may use a range of different approaches over time. The key consideration is whether the teaching is successful in engaging learners' interest and how well it develops their literacy, communication, numeracy and digital skills, vocational or wider skills, and knowledge and understanding to an appropriately high level as they move through their programme.

Inspectors should evaluate the extent to which teachers and other practitioners have high expectations of all learners. They should consider the quality of planning and

how well their planning meets the needs of the learning programme. They should consider the extent to which teachers have clear objectives for learners' learning and use a range of approaches and resources to engage learners' interest and to challenge them to achieve as well as they can.

Inspectors should judge how well teachers and other practitioners use various questioning techniques to draw out and further develop learners' responses and gauge their understanding. They should consider the clarity of instructions and explanations and how well the learners develop their skills, knowledge and understanding as a result. They should evaluate how well the teachers motivate and direct learners and make their sessions stimulating and engaging places in which learners can learn productively. Inspectors should judge how successfully support staff support learning.

The focus on assessment in this inspection area is on the assessment of skills relevant to the learning programme. Inspectors should evaluate how well learners develop and apply a wide range of skills and knowledge appropriate to their qualifications or agreed learning goals. Inspectors should also evaluate the verbal and written feedback from teachers to help learners to know how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve. They should consider how well learners understand how to assess their own performance.

Inspectors should evaluate the extent to which teachers analyse the outcomes of their assessment of learners to inform their future planning of lessons and the next steps in learners' learning. They should consider how well teachers ensure that their assessments are valid, accurate and reliable.

Inspectors should evaluate the extent to which the senior management and staff track and keep records on the progress of each learner and report on these clearly to meet the needs of learners, parents and carers and placing authorities. They should consider how well teachers ensure that their assessments are valid, timely, accurate and reliable.

Inspectors should evaluate whether learners regularly review their own learning, understand their progress and are involved in setting their own learning targets, including the use of person-centred approaches for learners with additional learning needs.

In coming to evaluations on teaching and assessment inspectors should use the full range of evidence available to them. This is likely to include evidence from learners' files or portfolios, schemes of learning, assessment records, and information on learners' progress, session observations, and discussions with learners. Inspectors should not allocate a judgement to an individual session or teacher, but should report on the strengths and weaknesses in the quality of teaching and assessment across the college.

## **4 Care, support and guidance**

### **4.1 Personal development**

Inspectors should evaluate the effectiveness of impartial guidance and advice provided to learners before the start of their programme from the college and other external agencies.

Inspectors should consider the overall coherence and effectiveness of the provision for personal and specialist support, including the availability of services from specialist agencies.

Inspectors should evaluate how well the college's provision helps learners to develop skills, knowledge and understanding to make healthy lifestyle choices, for example in relation to healthy eating and drinking, substance misuse, sex and relationships, online safety and so on. Inspectors should consider how successfully the college's provision helps learners to understand the impact of lifestyle choices and behaviours on their present and future mental and physical health and well-being. Inspectors should report on whether the college has the appropriate arrangements to promote healthy eating and drinking. They should consider the extent to which the college helps learners understand how to keep themselves safe both within the college and in the wider community.

Inspectors should look at how well the college helps learners to understand issues relating to equality and diversity, and develops the values of tolerance and respect. They should consider how well the college develops learners' knowledge and understanding of harassment, discrimination, identity-based bullying and extremism. They should also consider how well the college responds to and manages any incidents relating to bullying, harassment and discrimination. They should consider to what extent the college challenges stereotypes in learners' attitudes, choices and expectations.

Inspectors should evaluate the extent to which learners, including those from different groups take on responsibilities and play a part in the wider community.

Inspectors should consider how well the college's provision prepares learners to become active citizens, for example by making decisions about the life and work of the college. They should consider how well the college's arrangements help learners to participate in decision-making at a college level, including the opportunities they have to influence what and how they learn, and the effectiveness of the college council and other learner groups. Inspectors should evaluate how well the college's provision helps learners to develop an understanding of their culture, the local community and the wider world.

Inspectors should consider how well the college:

- makes provision for learners' additional learning needs in relation to their individual needs and abilities
- supports all learners' emotional and social needs so that they can enjoy their learning and benefit from the opportunities that it offers
- provides well-considered support for learners' physical and mental health and well-being, for example in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic
- helps learners to develop an understanding of their culture, the local community and the wider world
- tracks and monitors learners' progress and well-being, including attendance, engagement and behaviour
- uses this information to consider the progress of specific groups, where appropriate
- identifies relevant issues and responds appropriately to the outcomes of tracking and monitoring, for example through the provision of appropriate support and

challenge, the use of intervention strategies, the mentoring or coaching of individuals or groups

- uses partnerships with others to provide effective support for learners

## **4.2 Safeguarding**

Inspectors will report on whether the college's arrangements for safeguarding learners meet requirements and give no cause for concern. Where arrangements are a serious cause for concern, inspectors should include a recommendation in the report and Estyn may advise Welsh Government to send a letter to the college asking them to outline how they will address the shortcoming(s).well-being

Inspectors should evaluate to what extent the college's safeguarding arrangements ensure that all learners are protected, whether on site, off site or online. Arrangements should include the identification of learners aged under 18 and vulnerable adults in need or at risk of significant harm, safe recruitment practices and having appropriate arrangements for safeguarding referrals. Inspectors should also consider how well the college promotes safe practices and a culture of safety. The Welsh Government has issued specific statutory requirements and guidance about these safeguarding matters and colleges should have in place policies and procedures that comply with them.

Inspectors will look at how effective college's arrangements are for preventing and addressing bullying, harassment and discrimination. They should consider how the college keeps learners safe from the dangers of radicalisation.

Inspectors should consider whether the college has robust procedures for checking the suitability of staff and others who are in contact with learners and that the college maintains a record of these checks. Inspectors should check that all staff know what to do to respond to safeguarding issues and that the designated lead officer and lead governor, and other staff where appropriate, have received relevant safeguarding training. Inspectors should check whether the college has appropriate policies, procedures and reporting arrangements in relation to physical interventions and withdrawal. Inspectors will examine any areas used for withdrawal.

In considering safeguarding matters, inspectors should take into account the security of the college buildings and site.

Inspectors should evaluate how well the college uses its intelligence about safeguarding matters, both within its own provision and that of any sub-contractors, and how well reporting processes are used to quality assure safeguarding by senior managers.

## **5 Leadership and management**

### **5.1 Quality and effectiveness of leaders and managers**

Inspectors should evaluate the extent to which leaders and managers have established and communicated a clear vision and appropriate aims, strategic objectives, plans and policies that focus on meeting learner needs. They should consider the priority that leaders have given to ensuring that all staff understand and promote the college's safeguarding culture.

Inspectors should reflect on how well leaders and managers at all levels set high

expectations for staff, learners and themselves. They should consider how well leaders and managers develop an effective, engaged team of staff. They should consider to what extent leaders and managers model and promote professional values and behaviours that contribute positively to college improvement and effective collaboration between staff and with other providers. They should consider how well staff at all levels understand and discharge their roles and responsibilities and how well they collaborate in driving forward strategic priorities and improvement.

Inspectors should consider a wide range of evidence when evaluating the quality of leadership and management, for example minutes from a range of recent meetings, interviews with staff, improvement action plans and reports on their implementation, recent self-assessment from leaders and managers and the analysis of information on learner performance.

Inspectors should consider how well leaders and managers act in accordance with the principle of sustainable development and how well they make decisions and set priorities for improvement that balance immediate, short-term needs with the long-term needs of learners, the local community and Wales.

Inspectors should look at the extent to which leaders and managers sustain high quality or improve weak aspects of provision. They should consider how well leaders and managers prevent problems from occurring in the first place and how quickly they bring about any remedial action required.

Inspectors should consider how well leaders have established a clear, strategic rationale for the curriculum in terms of its benefits for learners in preparing them to learn throughout their lives and to play a full part in society.

Inspectors should consider how well leaders and managers share positive features of provision with staff and collaborate with other education providers and partners within the sector to achieve improvements locally, regionally and nationally. Inspectors should focus on how well the college uses strategic partnerships and collaboration with other agencies to help to build its capacity for continuous improvement.

Inspectors should evaluate how well governors<sup>2</sup> understand and discharge their roles and responsibilities. They should consider how well they know the college's strengths and areas for development and the degree to which they have participated in setting the college's strategic priorities. They should consider whether there is an appropriate balance between support and challenge in the way the governing body holds senior leadership to account.

Inspectors should consider how well the college uses its resources efficiently and proportionately. They should consider the extent to which the college's spending decisions and broad financial planning link appropriately to its strategic priorities and its improvement planning. In relation to spending decisions, inspectors should consider how well the college balances its short-term needs alongside the long-term needs of learners.

Inspectors should consider the extent to which leaders and managers know the costs

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<sup>2</sup> We have used the term 'governors' throughout this guidance, but we acknowledge that colleges may refer to different terms for the governance and supervision of the college

of existing learning programmes and activities, keep them under review and question whether they are cost-effective.

Inspectors should consider whether there is an appropriate level of staffing and learning resources to deliver the planned provision effectively. They should consider how well the college promotes the welfare and well-being of its staff.

Inspectors should consider whether the college uses its indoor and outdoor environment effectively and efficiently. They should consider how well the learning environment supports or detracts from teaching and learning of high quality and how well it maximises the physical and mental well-being of learners.

## **5.2 Self-evaluation processes and improvement planning**

Inspectors should evaluate how accurately leaders and managers know the college's strengths and weaknesses. They should consider how well leaders and managers gather and analyse first-hand evidence of standards and provision, including teaching and assessment. They should consider how well the college involves a wide range of partners, including learners and parents, in identifying its strengths and weaknesses.

Inspectors should consider the impact of improvement planning processes and how well identified priorities for improvement link to the outcomes of the college's self-assessment. Inspectors should consider how well leaders and managers ensure that priorities are supported by the allocation of resources. They should evaluate how well leaders and managers define relevant and measurable actions for improvement in specified and realistic timescales and allocate responsibility for their delivery.

Inspectors should investigate the college's track-record in making improvements and the extent to which they have led to a positive impact on learners' learning and well-being, for example through improvements to the quality of teaching and training. Where appropriate, inspectors should consider how well the college has responded to recommendations from previous Estyn inspections or from strategic partners and whether the college's actions have led to improvements.

## **5.3 Professional learning**

Inspectors should evaluate to what extent leaders have created a culture and ethos to support the professional learning of all staff, including the arrangements to support the active engagement of all staff in increasing their professional knowledge, understanding and skills. They should consider the extent to which staff participate effectively in professional learning experiences, appraisal and performance management.

Inspectors should evaluate the impact of leaders in the way they manage the performance of staff in order to help staff to improve their practice. They should also judge whether leaders and managers address issues of underperformance robustly and directly where necessary.

They should consider professional learning undertaken by staff and its impact on learners' progress and well-being and their own practice. They should explore the extent to which staff have shared professional development outcomes with other

staff. They should look at how well leaders have identified good practice within the college and ensured that other staff may benefit from it. They should also consider how well staff work with other providers of professional development to help them develop their professional practice.