

## Written evidence submitted by Colleges West Midlands

### The House of Commons Education Committee - Impact of Covid19

The House of Commons Education Select Committee is undertaking a wide ranging inquiry in to the impact of COVID-19, and how the Department of Education is dealing with it. You can see the webpage for it [here](#).

### Summary

Colleges West Midlands (CWM) is an umbrella organisation funded by, and supporting, the 21 colleges in the three LEP areas within the West Midlands Combined Authority. The member colleges are:

|   |                                     |  |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| Birmingham Metropolitan College                   | Burton and South Derbyshire College | City of Wolverhampton College                            |
| Coventry College                                  | Dudley College of Technology        | Fircroft College   |
| Halesowen College                                 | Heart of Worcestershire College     | Hereward College   |
| Joseph Chamberlain College                        | Kidderminster College               | National College for Advanced Transport & Infrastructure |
| North Warwickshire & South Leicestershire College | Sandwell College                    | Solihull College & University Centre                     |
| South and City College Birmingham                 | South Staffordshire College         | Telford College  |
| University College Birmingham                     | Walsall College                     | Warwickshire College Group                               |

The colleges see benefits in working collaboratively and through CWM can have an interface with other key stakeholders like the WMCA and Education and Skills Funding Agency.

The colleges are at the heart of their local communities and operate out of 96 campuses. The national shutdown put into effect by the UK government in March 2020 to tackle the Covid-19 outbreak has had a profound effect on colleges and their students. Media and language suggests colleges are closed which is

far from the truth. The majority of buildings may be but education has continued online and, for a few students, in person. They have led a positive response in their communities including, donating their own PPE, making PPE, offering their facilities and carparks for testing sites, NHS parking, ambulance staff training and donating their food supplies to food banks.

Colleges have worked flexibly to support all learners and engaged with family and carers to do this as effectively as possible with a particular focus on the more vulnerable or disadvantaged learners. This has at times meant trips to college sites to collect various items of equipment (IT, Musical instruments etc.) and delivering them to learners at home. A time consuming and costly process.

Colleges are proactive and need to plan their actions as they are large employers in their own right with all of the attendant responsibilities for their own work force. The communications and decisions have at times hampered planning and swift action; decisions on closure, opening and award of qualifications to name a few.

Colleges are not homogenous and CWM covers the range GFE's, Sixth Form and a National College. Funding income and risk presented by Covid-19, varies depending on the delivery profile of a college. Those that have responded to Government policy and requests to diversify and grow areas of provision like apprenticeships and HE are suffering more of a negative impact. Employers are more focused on survival of their own organisations which seems to be resulting in the cessation of apprentices and decisions to stop recruitment until an economic recovery is visible. College income will be severely affected and as a consequence their ability to retain their specialist teaching resource. It is possible that without some form of intervention to the existing system key sectors like engineering and construction will find colleges are not in a position to respond to employers and support local economic growth when employers are ready. Similarly, HE will be affected by reductions across the board and especially international students.

The funding pressures and financial resilience of the sector are real. Colleges support a something for something approach. The funding mechanism is complicated by the different requirements for each programme. Colleges would appreciate an ability to replace lost activity (Apprenticeships and FE) by delivering to the increase demand from young people not accessing university or apprenticeships and using redirected apprenticeship/HE staff to do this. This will reduce the burden of lead in times in realigning staffing with new delivery models including redundancy and recruitment costs. Also any response that eases cash flow at this time is also helpful, either by reviewing the funding profile or paying 16-18 growth in year and not on a lagged funding basis.

Colleges are at the heart of their communities and want to remain so. The uncertainty and risks associated with income and the increased costs of delivery associated with Covid-19; building reconfiguration and signage as well as PPE, cleaning and hand sanitisers/soaps are creating real pressures for the sector. The response sets out more detailed evidence across these areas.

## Introduction

Colleges West Midlands is an umbrella organisation funded by and supporting the 21 colleges in the three LEP areas within the West Midlands Combined Authority. The colleges see benefits in working collaboratively and through CWM can have an interface with other key stakeholders like the WMCA and Education and Skills Funding Agency. This collaborative approach has been in development over several years but led to the development of two bids to the national DfE College Collaboration Fund to address issues that had arisen or were escalating as a consequence of the pandemic to share practice and experience in trialing approaches to track and intervene to reduce NEET and to support staff CPD in developing synchronous learning techniques to enhance the delivery to learners in a more blended delivery model.

The colleges are at the heart of their local communities and operate out of 96 campuses. The national shutdown put into effect by the UK government in March 2020 to tackle the Covid-19 outbreak has had a profound effect on colleges and their students. Media and language suggests colleges are closed which is far from the truth. The majority of buildings may be but education has continued online and, for a few students, in person. They have led a positive response in their communities including, donating their own PPE, making PPE, offering their facilities and carparks for testing sites, NHS parking, ambulance staff training and donating their food supplies to food banks.

CWM would like to contribute to the evidence base for the Committee in pertinent areas to ensure FE is appropriately supported.

### **The implementation of the critical workers policy, including how consistently the definition of 'critical' work is being applied across the country and how schools are supported to remain open for children of critical workers**

Colleges have offered to accommodate the children of critical workers and have used the definitions flexibly to ensure that key workers are able to work. This has generally been offered together with the arrangements for students with an EHCP. Most colleges have contacted parents and provided options to them. In view of the age of college students (over 16 for most colleges) there has been a mixed picture of take-up. There are many colleges with campuses open for these students but many colleges have made provision for on-line and home study and have only kept buildings open where needed.

### **The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people.**

N/A

### **The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to:**

- **Children's early development**
- **The early years funded entitlement and the childcare market**

N/A

### **The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment**

Cancelling examinations, whilst understandable, has created serious difficulties for very many colleges. Ofqual passed the task to the Awarding Organisations which has been problematic. They then took some time to determine their approach and whether certain qualifications would be calculated grades or still require students to attend assessments. There have also been instances where Awarding Organisations have amended required assessment methods with very little notice to colleges. This resulted in very tight timeframes for completion of activity in order to not jeopardise timely achievement and progression for the learners.

The challenge was exacerbated by the sheer volume of examinations assessments and grading and the fact that individual teachers have had to undertake a very significant amount of work individually with limited scope to be assisted due to the lockdown. This ‘emergency’ approach on this scale creates a challenge to benchmark across individual staff and ensure the outcomes are fair for learners.

It also disadvantages poorer students who do not have the facilities and equipment to study at home and therefore often do less well in their work during the year but are supported to revise and improve for exams.

Whilst GCSEs and A Levels, although requiring considerable work, are more straightforward to provide estimated/assessed grades, this is far more difficult with many vocational courses. Many courses cannot be assessed or awarded and still require examinations and competency, skills assessments.

The majority of students should be able to progress with their award into further study or employment. However, for some college students having missed some key elements of their studies (especially practical skills based elements) there will have to be an additional input of work to support them at the beginning of the year otherwise they may struggle at the next level.

We would suggest that lessons are learned through this period for any future emergencies and a comprehensive and agreed communication plan is put in place to ensure a managed approach for colleges, especially for technical and vocational qualifications where there are a large number of awarding organisations and qualifications.

## **Support for pupils and families during closures, including:**

### **The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning**

Colleges were quick to move to online delivery models which have gone very well, with some innovative approaches developed. A recent CWM survey for the CCF bid evidences variable levels of engagement across different levels of qualification and curriculum areas.

Many colleges noted that for many more vulnerable students (especially those with mental health issues) engagement on line was better than face-to-face.

CWM colleges serving inner cities have large numbers of students at all ages that have little access to on-line resources for a number of reasons:

- No internet access
- Either no equipment (PC) or families sharing a single laptop
- Insufficient English language
- Insufficient basic IT skills
- Cramped living conditions not conducive to study

Colleges have been providing IT kit but this situation severely inhibits the ability of colleges to provide the required teaching and learning support when colleges are closed and when there is a need to provide substantial elements on-line in order to enable social distancing within buildings.

Most colleges have been increasing their capacity and provision of on-line courses and materials and is an area of investment that will assist even when lockdown ends fully. However, there needs to be investment to make internet access more available to low income families. A recently published Capital Prospectus from CWM developed the idea of and costed a digital entitlement to ensure all learners were in a position to study remotely with the regard to IT equipment.

College websites have updates for students, parents/carers, applicants and employers.

## Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education

Colleges have worked hard to maintain contact with all students who they define as vulnerable (as opposed to how the DfE have defined vulnerable). They have continued to provide access to counselling and other pastoral services remotely and in some instances they have provided wider support opportunities for parents and families. Colleges have used their regular communications with students to promote positive mental health and activities to support students remotely. They have also used their social media channels effectively and highlighted local and national support organisations available to students.

They are conscious of safeguarding within online learning and the importance of ensuring learners and parents /carers are clear about the increased risk (grooming, radicalisation and risk taking behaviour etc.), awareness of the signs to look out for and the best ways to protect themselves around staying safe online. Colleges have supported parents and young people with signposting and advice on this area very well. In addition, learners need to be made aware of, and understand, how to detect the dangers and influences of fake news as they navigate through their lives.

Colleges have also increased careers advice and support mindful that year 11 learners will likely not have had the same level of careers support considering that the majority left in March/April. Misinformation can be confusing. Clear routes, from trusted sources like colleges, can provide vital impartial sign posting and support to learners and channel them towards high quality, local tailored IAG services. Preferably a face to face element complements support that CEC offers on line.

Colleges have developed closer links with LA colleagues that have worked well to support young people. This has enabled colleges to influence cross-agency working and build strong relationships which have cut across the normal 'red tape' and targeted specific issues related to Covid-19 and the welfare of young people in their care.

Colleges are concerned with transition both into and out of college and providing support to students who this impacts on. In addition to this, colleges are supporting bereaved students and families and preparing for dealing with the impact of traumatic bereavement on members of their college community.

CWM have established a group with Transport for West Midlands to discuss the planning for the safe return of learners in greater numbers. This has supported sharing of information on aspects like face coverings, student questionnaires with the intention of using the detail (staggering start times, moving bus stops etc.) to maximise the utilisation of the resources available whilst keeping students safe.

## The effect on apprenticeships and other workplace-based education courses

The effect of Covid-19 on employers and the workplace have been and remain severe. This has huge ramifications. Large numbers of employees have either been furloughed or dismissed; this applies to apprentices. Very few new apprentices have been taken on. Employers are more focused on retaining existing staff than recruiting, with some sectors not expecting to recruit until late 2021. Young people will be disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and NEET numbers will increase.

Colleges have complex finances with many different income streams with different funding requirements. They have needed to contact every apprentice and their employers to determine the position of each learner and then determine a plan to support that learner through the next months. The outcome of this has a knock on effect to the income the college can earn and the cost associated with the delivery. There are

emerging concerns that the new Kickstart programme will further displace, or replace, new apprenticeship starts because the incentives for employers are more attractive.

CWM would like to see a principle of ‘no apprentice left behind’ in response to the crisis and believe that it should be possible to see most apprentices being able to finish their learning with a positive outcome. This would need further flexibilities within the funding to allow for easy transfer of learning between employers and providers and from apprenticeship to alternative provision where this is required. The priority should be for every apprentice to achieve a positive outcome and recognition of what they have achieved during their work and study.

Changes required to best support apprentices include:

- **Mirror changes implemented within other parts of FE where this is practical to do**  
We would be keen to see some of the flexibilities being applied to, or considered for, other FE learners being made available to apprentices. We are pleased to see that teacher assessment of functional skills (FS) will be applied. We feel a degree of equity for learners across FE should be sought.
- **Some relaxation of end point assessment (EPA) for learners who have gone through, or are close to gateway in suitable areas**  
We are concerned that insisting on a full, yet potentially modified, EPA for all learners will create serious bottlenecks in the system moving forward. Apprentices that are ready to graduate (and are not operating in highly regulated or dangerous professions) will be stifled in their ambitions to move forward through no fault of their own. We are keen to see more reliance on the gateway process in less sensitive subject areas which could potentially be supported by a form of EPAO ‘external verification’ process. We would like learners who cannot undertake a full EPA currently to gain their apprenticeship without undue delay.
- **Funding on profile is extremely helpful as applied in other areas of government funded delivery. Consideration could be given to adopting a similar approach for apprentices of non-levy employers who are being paid through the college’s allocation.**  
Such an approach would give colleges the stability to support these learners and employers throughout a difficult period, if a break in learning has to be undertaken, these are the learners who are most likely to be lost if contact is broken. Colleges remain genuinely concerned that breaks in learning are extremely damaging to the successful completion and subsequent progression of apprenticeships. Colleges wish to ensure that all learners achieve a positive outcome, even if this cannot be a full apprenticeship and funding needs to be flexed to allow for this.
- **Flexibilities around the delivery of 20% off-the-job**  
We are mindful to support the continuation of 20% off-the-job to ensure apprenticeships remain a substantial programme of learning. We would like to see some flexibilities considered within the delivery and funding of this, particularly where learners are experienced a prolonged absence from work, but are still in a position to learn. Colleges would be keen to explore how they might front load off-the-job training for apprentices who are awaiting the resumption of their old employment, or even where they are waiting to take up alternative employment that will allow them to complete their studies. We recognise that such a flex might create some complexities in how the funding might work, but it would mean colleges can continue to allow learners to progress in ways that they would otherwise not have access to. We are also keen that there is some recognition in the way that learning hours are calculated that to reflect the additional cost of one-to-one delivery.
- **Support for change should be considered**  
It is highly likely that many apprentices will find themselves having to shift employer and/or training provider when we are over this crisis. Colleges could play a key role in helping to ensure

that the impact on apprentices are minimised by coordinating local efforts to re-home apprentices, as they have in the past when an employer and/or a training provider are no longer able to support existing learners. Funding support to achieve this would be helpful to support the associated costs.

- There is a real danger that colleges will react to substantial drops in apprenticeship income resulting in cuts in staffing and provision in exactly the areas that will be needed when the country starts to recover. So when employers want apprenticeships again the offer won't be there. Whilst protection of allocations would be desirable it is unlikely. An alternative could be a 'something for something' approach. For every 16-18 apprentice who can't find a job, put them on an equivalent full time course instead and pay colleges in-year rather than on the lagged funding basis. For every adult apprentice who loses their job, allow colleges to finish off their qualification for them so they are not doubly-disadvantaged. And pay fund the activity. This repurposes apprenticeship delivery staff in to doing what is needed now and they can gradually be returned into apprenticeship delivery as demand increases. This results in no loss in provision, the region gets the support it needs now and colleges stay financially stable.
- **Pre-apprenticeship Programme**

The data suggests that the economic impact of Covid-19 on young people aged 16-24 will be significant so it is essential that FE develops 'steppingstones' to get young people into an industry of their choice. We currently have two routes that can help to improve existing skills and pave the way for employment or learning that will support further studies:

- Traineeships are a demand led programme which can benefit young people if they are within 6 months of being able to get sustainable employment or an apprenticeship.
- A pre-apprenticeship course where people undergo a longer Study Programme of preparation and training before an apprenticeship to prepare them for the working environment in their selected industry.

It is critical that the guidance and employer incentives reflect the benefits of these opportunities for young people and enable colleges to deliver programmes that enable are flexible and responsive to individual need.

- **Transition from frameworks to Standards remains problematic in an uncertain market**

The uncertainty around COVID-19 means employers and individuals are more comfortable remaining with Frameworks and avoiding further change at this point. This coupled with reduced numbers and smaller group sizes impacts on the viability for providers.

- **Work based education and T levels**

It is already becoming well recognised that work placements for employers will be a challenge nationally. Colleges welcome the flexibilities around the number of industrial placements for CDF funding and the second year loading. But we may want to consider the other asks being placed on employers and the fact that incentives (such as £1k for traineeship) may mean employer appetite for offering 'free' placements for CDF and T-levels may be affected.

**The financial implications of closures for providers (including higher education and independent training providers), pupils and families.**

College financial viability, already fragile will suffer severe impact from a number sources.  
Reduction in college income if not in 19/20 most certainly in 20/21 due to:

- Much lower volumes of apprenticeships, due to withdrawals of existing learners but in particular due to fewer new apprenticeship starts, resulting from individual employer circumstances.
- Lower numbers of international students coming to the UK and reduced demand for international business.
- Loss of income from catering and other commercial facilities such as salons.
- Increased costs of operating in a safe socially distanced way including reconfiguring premises with screens, floor markings, thermal imaging, hand sanitisers, soaps and PPE, where needed.
- Increased costs of delivery resulting from smaller group sizes.
- Increased costs of enhancing the IT infrastructure to continue to deliver at volume remotely including additional staff training costs to improve the quality of delivery and spread good practise across all curriculum areas.
- Loss of HE income as HEIs will increase competition to address their shortfalls in international students, as well as capping the number of HE learners an institution can recruit next year.
- Loss of Full cost commercial business with employers. Learners (and staff) may be reluctant to travel back to college on public transport and there is a real risk of a sharp increase in NEETs.
- Reduced tuition fees for FE courses as learners may have a lower household income and be unable to afford tuition fees.
- Vulnerability of work placements and hence associated funding as employers impacted by Covid-19.
- Costs associated with reconfiguring the curriculum to respond to new sectoral requirements and new cohorts of learners.
- Subsequent costs and significant lead in times in realigning staffing with new delivery models including redundancy and recruitment costs
- A lagged funding methodology for 16-18 learners driven by guided learning hours which does not fit with a blended course delivery approach to sustain social distancing.
- Many students seeking to progress to HE may opt to defer for 12 months and hence a reduced level of income from student loan and fees.

The situation varies by college and continues to change week-by-week. Uncertainty about future income and concerns about financial viability will result in colleges making redundancies and some have already taken that step. As already referenced redundancies in apprenticeship and commercial delivery could then hamper economic growth of the region by removing capacity to quickly restart when it is ready to start and expand again.

All colleges are regularly reviewing their financial positions and some are in close discussions with banks on the impact on banking covenants. Some colleges have sought support from the relief schemes available by furloughing staff and accessing the Provider Relief Scheme. Colleges although seen as community assets have not been recipients of the simple grant relief schemes that has replaced lost income available in other sectors.

At the moment, all post-16 funding systems involve paying in arrears with early April being the lowest point in the year. Adjustment to the funding profile could have a positive effect on college solvency.

Perversely those colleges who have responded to the government requests to evolve and diversify by growing apprentices, working more with employers, growing HE and technical disciplines are the ones feeling the financial pain the worst.



## **The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)**

Colleges have gone to great lengths to ensure FSM entitlements are met either payments into bank accounts or by delivering meals to learners.

Colleges have many students with EHC plans and receiving High Needs Funding. About half are being supported on mainstream courses and half on special courses for students with learning difficulties. These students are of course particularly vulnerable to missing out on education.

Colleges have been supporting these students in a variety of ways. A small number, likely to increase gradually, are coming into college or another specialist site. Many others are being supported at home with home learning packs, video sessions and very frequent telephone or skype contact with students and their families.

Colleges are conscious about the risks associated with the return of some learners. Some of these students find social distancing very hard, some require personal care and staff should be able to access PPE, and some have other conditions making them particularly vulnerable to Covid-19.

There are also concerns that students with EHC plans and complex needs who are in their final year at college might well need some extension programme - e.g. some one-to-one sessions, an additional term or half term, if they are to make a good transition to their next placement. This would require a coherent response from Local Authorities and sufficient capacity for the college to provide this additional support.

There are many other groups of vulnerable students in college including young people with mental health difficulties, high anxiety etc. and also those young people who might be at risk of abuse or of being drawn into gangs, online extremism etc.

There has been a strong push from government that these young people should be in college and a few are. However, the reality is that this is a cohort whose attendance is not the best in normal times and are unlikely to attend if their peers are not. There is also a danger of further stigmatising an already stigmatised group.

These challenges are likely to be exacerbated for the current year 11 students who will join colleges in the autumn term. Many of these students will have had little or no exposure to teaching and learning since school closure on 20 March. Colleges, seen as the last chance for many do support lower achieving learners especially on maths and English re-sit programmes. These learners are likely to have even greater attainment gaps as a consequence of Covid-19.

There are concerns that these young people will need considerable support to help them return to college and also about the transfer of similarly vulnerable young people from school to college. This will require outreach work, increase in youth workers attached to colleges and also resources for enrichment programmes such as sport and music.

Colleges are also concerned about the current and ongoing impact of Covid-19 on student well-being and mental health due to lack of social contact and isolation, lack of routine and additional caring responsibilities.

Students from more disadvantaged backgrounds are also more likely to be within family groups which will be hit hardest by the economic impact of the pandemic.

Colleges have been attending the AoC webinars to share good practice both for those working with SEND students those working with students with mental health difficulties and those working with disaffected young people.

## What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency

Any actions that mitigate the uncertainty are helpful particularly in relation to funding requirements and income. Therefore, plans for funding assurances and clear guidance on future funding to enable adequate planning supports financial resilience. If principles can be agreed which maximises the certainty of income from funders, including apprenticeship and commercial income, to enable colleges to make rational decisions for the medium term and not knee jerk reactions. The £96 million just announced is most welcome and colleges await the details. Other examples include:

- Continuing to pay on profile and clarity over any reconciliation expectations.
- Flexibilities to deliver second level 3s to ensure individuals unable to get employment are still actively engaged and able to enhance skills.
- In apprenticeship increased flexibility for the delivery for 20% off-the-job, including requirements in a socially distanced model and audit arrangements.
- Finalisation of apprenticeships through alternative robust models when near completion.
- Update of the funding methodology to reflect the new ways of delivery.
- Government funds any gap in post Covid-19 apprenticeship income based on a comparison with 12-month income pre-Covid-19, to ensure colleges maintain the infrastructure to deliver apprenticeships during economic recovery and to avoid making specialist staff redundant.
- Government funds any gap in post Covid-19 HE income based on a comparison with 12-month income pre-Covid-19, to ensure colleges maintain the infrastructure to deliver HE during economic recovery and to avoid making specialist staff redundant where learners may wish to defer enrolment to 2021.

Colleges have changed their mode of learning delivery in a rapid time frame, exponentially escalating their strategic plans for digital delivery and blended learning. There is an opportunity to capitalise on this to further enhance the delivery model which will require investment in infrastructure and staff CPD.

CWM colleges are very proactive and support a something for something approach. The recent CWM Capital Prospectus undertook a detailed review of the digital environment and need for investment. It is envisaged that the Capital funding will provide investment in these areas. The key findings were: Colleges broadly assessed their digital infrastructure as 'fit' for the present but 'not fully fit' for the future. There was a narrow range in the self-assessed 'fitness' of colleges' digital infrastructure. This suggested all colleges have prioritised digital updating in recent years.

The self-assessed 'fitness' of colleges' digital infrastructure varied between the elements assessed in the survey. End devices, connectivity, internal infrastructure and Wi-Fi were the 'least fit' elements in the collective college infrastructure. The survey found that relatively high priority was given to all elements of curriculum delivery and support when prioritising investment in digital and education technology. Pleasingly teaching was the highest priority when considering investment.

Recognising the emerging need for investment in staff resources CWM submitted an application to the College Collaboration Fund to support the development of synchronous learning and roll it out across the participating colleges and improve staff ability and confidence of teaching in this way.

July 2020