



Children, Young People & Family Support Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee Monday 18th July 2016

Report of: Children, Young People & Family Support Scrutiny & policy Development Committee

Subject: URGENT ITEM – A Level Provision in the South East of the City, Sheffield College

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Summary:

This is added to the agenda as an URGENT ITEM.
The Sheffield College have written to the Committee on the closure of A-levels at Peaks Campus – the letter is attached - Paul Corcoran, Chief Executive Officer and Heather Smith, College Principal and Executive Director of The Sheffield College will attend the Committee.

Type of item: The report author should tick the appropriate box

Reviewing of existing policy	
Informing the development of new policy	
Statutory consultation	
Performance / budget monitoring report	
Cabinet request for scrutiny	
Full Council request for scrutiny	
Community Assembly request for scrutiny	
Call-in of Cabinet decision	
Briefing paper for the Scrutiny Committee	
Other: e.g. Scrutiny Committee- draft Report and recommendations	X

The Scrutiny Committee is being asked to:

- Consider the letter from The Sheffield College

Background Papers: n/a

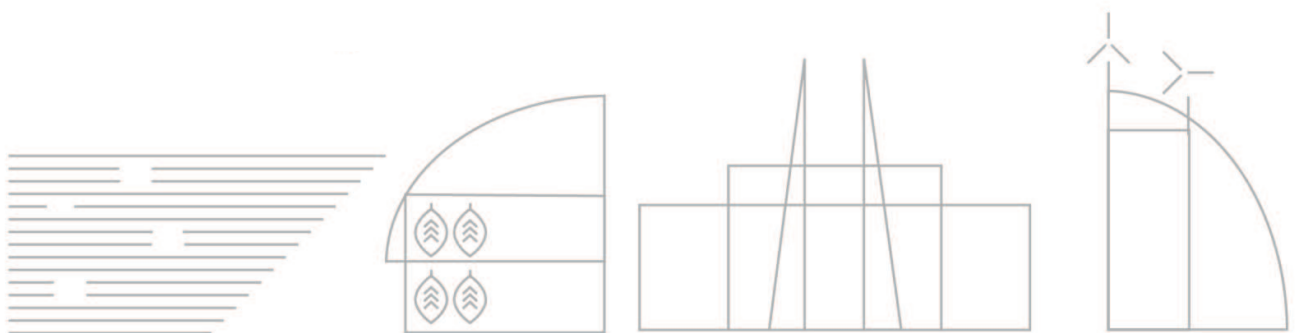
Category of Report: OPEN

Most reports to Scrutiny Committees should be openly available to the public. If a report is deemed to be 'closed', please add: **'Not for publication because it contains exempt information under Paragraph xx of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).'**

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**Letter to the Scrutiny and Policy Development
Committee on the closure of A-levels at Peaks
Campus of The Sheffield College**

Author: Paul Corcoran, CEO



Dear Panel Member

There are times when, as a College, we find ourselves taking difficult decisions about the depth and breadth of our provision. These decisions affect many stakeholders, not least our students, our potential students, and their families. In a demand-led environment we need to respond to demand changes from employers and students.

Our decision to withdraw the A-level courses was due to a shift in demand in student applications. Over the past two years our A-level intake at the Peaks campus has significantly reduced. Despite a proactive and high-profile marketing campaign across the City this year, the number of applications for places at Peaks had fallen to 55. Our previous experience of application to conversion ratios suggests this would have resulted in between 25 and 35 students enrolling in September across the 10 A-level courses on offer. Furthermore, given previous data on retention and progression rates from Year 1 to Year 2, the cohort might be expected to be reduced to maybe under 30 students in Year 2.

This would make us, by some way, the smallest provider of A-levels in the City and this size of cohort is not viable for two reasons.

- The quality of the A-level learning experience would be undermined by the small group sizes. It is an established fact that at this level of study, a high quality teaching and learning experience needs a certain critical mass in class, especially where the subject matter is best delivered through group projects, assignments or discussions.
- Courses with so few learners are not financially viable. The average class sizes and additional cost of running higher level programmes are not sustainable, a situation which is exacerbated by real-term reductions to national levels of funding in the Further Education sector.

What we have found is that students in the Peaks area are opting for vocational routes to university. Learner numbers studying Vocational Science and subjects such as Games Development have grown significantly over the past three years. These are excellent routes to university and are growth areas for employment in the City.

Given the above, our Governing Body, on 16th May, approved the decision to discontinue the A-level provision at the Peaks campus and focus our efforts on growing high quality A-level courses at our Hillsborough campus.

Given that the timing of the decision would be in the middle of many applicant's examination period, we also agreed to keep the decision confidential and that we would not inform the students of the decision until after their examinations had finished. To do otherwise would have most likely been to the detriment of their examination performance. We now acknowledge that, in the interim period between having made the decision and informing students, it would have been better to inform key stakeholders of our plans sooner, including local schools, MPs, and the Local Authority.

We have, at all stages, and following what was a difficult decision, considered the interests of the students in the forefront of our plans. As such, we treated the issue of confidentiality as a high priority.

On 21st June 2016, we initiated a plan that included the following:

- All of the applicants who wanted to study A-Level courses at The Sheffield College from September 2016 were offered places at Hillsborough campus. All applicants were also offered alternative vocational courses at the Peaks campus if they did not want to travel to Hillsborough.
- All applicants wanting to study at Hillsborough were offered free travel passes for the duration of their study.
- The A-level students who are part way through their courses at Peaks campus were informed that their study would be unaffected and they would still be completing their A-levels at the Peaks campus.
- Local schools were contacted to inform them of the decision, and to begin working with them to provide students wanting to study A-levels with identical offers. All of the local schools have continued to work with us, although I acknowledge that they remain very anxious about young people's access to A-level provision in the South East of the City.
- Our staff were briefed so as to alleviate any concerns regarding the continuation of activity at the Peaks Campus. We were proactive in communicating to staff that the course provision at the Peaks campus would continue to be developed in order to strengthen and grow our vocational and higher education access course offer, and that their jobs were safe.
- Local stakeholders were contacted to inform them of the decision.

Of the 55 students that have been affected, 19 have accepted A-level course offers at the Hillsborough campus, 6 have accepted alternative course offers at the Peaks campus, and 5 have accepted offers at alternative providers in the area. We are working with the local schools to contact the remaining students and the position described above changes on a daily basis.

On the wider point regarding provision of post-16 study in the City, I have been in contact with Jayne Ludlam at Sheffield City Council and offered our full support in a review of the planning of post-16 education.

As highlighted by the recent Area Based Review of further education provision across the Sheffield City Region, the relationship between the colleges, sixth forms and schools needs to be considered as a whole. Overall capacity needs to be matched to demand to avoid zero-sum competition for learners, and of equal importance, the balance between academic and vocational provision needs to be reviewed. The region needs more learners and apprentices studying vocational subjects to address the skills shortages that are holding back economic growth, and the College is working closely with the Local Enterprise Partnership, employers and the City's universities to address this challenge. With this in mind, the College has for some time been focussed on prioritising learner outcomes such as securing employment, progression to further study, and progression onto Apprenticeships.

I would like to make it clear that we are committed to the future development and extension of both our vocational courses, and higher education access courses, at the Peaks campus. This decision only affects our A-Level courses at the Peaks campus. At the same time, we also acknowledge the importance of local schools in the South East of the City being able to offer young people academic study routes to match demand.

Given the concerns raised regarding this matter, I recently attended a meeting with local Headteachers to discuss A-level provision in the South East of the City. I would like to emphasise that we are committed to supporting these schools to ensure that their young people can access high quality academic post-16 provision as well as vocational routes, and we have agreed a number of action points to work collaboratively on this going forward.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Paul Corcoran". The ink is dark and the signature is written in a fluid, connected style.

PAUL CORCORAN
Chief Executive Officer