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Re-thinking Further Education College Property Strategies

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Re-positioning for the future

Further Education Colleges are large and complex businesses. They are often one of the largest employers in their locality and make a significant impact on the prosperity of the town and region in which they are located.

In common with many businesses in the UK, colleges are facing a difficult future with rising costs and falling government revenues. The emphasis going forward is for colleges to 'do more with less'. To tackle this challenge effectively, college leaders and managers need to ensure that their business is operating on the basis of a lean and efficient infrastructure and that the institution is positioned appropriately to respond proactively to the difficulties ahead.

Many colleges will need to engage in short term cost cutting to get income and expenditure back into balance quickly but this shouldn't be allowed to get in the way of thinking about longer term priorities.

Key questions to consider include:

- In what way are the Governments longer term policy and funding priorities changing and how are they likely to impact on the college?
- What types of changes are taking place in local business sectors and employment markets and how are the skills needs evolving?
- How should the institution and its partners re-position themselves to exploit the opportunities that are emerging?
- In what way should the institutional assets be re configured to take account of this rapidly changing landscape?

The configuration of land, buildings and accommodation assets usually represents the one of the largest areas of expenditure in the financial plan of an institution, yet is often one of the most inflexible elements. The demands of the curriculum are constantly changing, and the challenge facing all FE providers is to ensure that accommodation reflects these changing demands to provide a welcoming and high quality learning environment for students that promotes and supports success.

Buildings require constant maintenance, yet it is this maintenance budget that is often the first item to be cut in times of financial difficulty. Put this in the context of an abandoned capital investment programme, and the result could be a 'ticking timebomb' for many institutions.

Many college estates have been subject to years of under investment because of funding problems or planning restrictions with the net result often being a less than satisfactory estate in real need of attention. This can only get worse as colleges move into a period of intense financial constraint.

Taking the initiative

When confronted with this situation we propose a simple 4 point strategy to help people get back 'in the driving seat' and take control of the property situation.

- 1 Take stock of your current position. Recent events have simply 'changed the game' for many institutions. In this environment it is important to take a considered approach to strategic planning, taking time to re think what is required from the estate and how best to respond to changing circumstances.
- 2 Develop a clear sense of where you want to go. At its heart, leadership is about helping people find a way forward. Re designing the curriculum portfolio is a complex exercise and needs to take account of the diverse needs of multiple stakeholders.
- 3 Make the most of what you've got. You can only get a clear sense of how best to adapt and re-shape the accommodation when you have a clear sense of the demands that delivering effective teaching and learning place on the physical environment and how to make the most of what you've got.
- 4 Make sure you follow through. Half baked change programmes breed cynicism among staff and erode the student experience. It's important to see things through and make sure that commitments to upgrade and re configure college accommodation are kept even when securing funding is problematic.

How we can help

We understand the myriad problems that colleges face. Finding a way through the current difficulties require both resilience and commitment as well as an open mind and a flexible approach. Versa can provide range of services to help you move forward including:

- Help and support to enable you to work out how the changing policy and funding environment will impact on your institution and to identify how best to respond.
- Support and assistance with reviewing your curriculum offer to ensure that the portfolio you offer to both individual learners and employers meets their needs
- Specialist property knowledge and skills to enable you to adapt your estate to the changing needs of learners and the subjects they study.
- Funding advice and knowledge to ensure that your business case makes the most of the resources you can access.

If you would like to discuss any of the points raised in this document or if you think we can help in any way please don't hesitate to get in touch.