

## **Group Wellbeing and Mental Health Strategy 2025-2028**

### **Purpose**

This paper is intended to set out the South Thames Colleges Group's (STCG) approach to wellbeing and good mental health for the four years 2025-28.

### **Strategic intent**

STCG commits to being an organisation rooted in individual and collective wellbeing, based on inclusion, respect, mutual understanding and productive work.

The Group takes responsibility for actively supporting mental wellness and it's everyone's duty to engage with this.

We will foster wellbeing and resilience, celebrate people and generate happiness, and we will also respond effectively to any challenges to peoples' mental wellness when they arise.

### **Background**

The Group already has in place multiple approaches to the promotion of wellbeing and support for good mental health. It is recognised already as a leader in the FE sector for the comprehensive, multi-layered and collaborative approach it has taken.

The Group has implemented a number of initiatives to help its employees manage workload, stress and other workplace challenges. Expectations among our staff have risen significantly, in common with employees in many other workplaces in the UK, and the demands of work, especially in sectors such as education, have become greater over time. The Group acknowledges this and takes responsibility for mitigating these, although it cannot remove all of the affects driven by policy, funding and the operating environment.

The Group's students benefit from a sophisticated and mature system of mental health interventions. Our own resources have expanded and developed to match demand better, while extensive partnership with health agencies, charities and especially the NHS through its embedded Trailblazer team have allowed the Group to work alongside other, expert organisations successfully. Our staff have undertaken training on a broad scale to ensure they are thoroughly equipped to understand the challenges of mental ill-health. Rightly, Ofsted described the Group's mental health support as 'exceptional' when the Group was inspected in May 2024.

These challenges and our response to them place a greater responsibility on Governors and leaders in our Group to ensure our institution understands wellbeing and takes active steps to make life enjoyable and fulfilling.

During the lifespan of the Group's previous strategy, a number of important steps have been taken to handle the effects described above:

- A whole-organisation approach to wellbeing adopted by the Group
- Extensive training and support for wellbeing issues coupled with the resources of the NHS Mental Health Trailblazer in ensuring mental health is destigmatised and understood across the Group

- Regular student wellbeing conferences, surveys and forums to promote ownership and active strategies to improve wellbeing and tackle mental ill-health
- Additional leave allowances set in place for all staff with College closures at Christmas across all sites and wellbeing days added to colleagues' holiday
- A reduction in teaching hours for most teaching staff
- Free access for staff to ACL courses and other College activities
- Ongoing commitment from the Group to support celebrations of colleagues' excellent work alongside social activities renewed after the pandemic
- The Group achieved accreditation from the Time to Change campaign
- A developing parent/carer community supported effectively by the Groups and its partners through a series of linked, themed events
- A renewed enrichment strategy, setting out minimum levels of entitlement for students to access a comprehensive and rich offer of additional extra-curricular activities

## **Our approach**

In drawing this new strategy together, the Group's primary focus has been firmly on ways to make life at South Thames Colleges Group pleasurable without taking any of the interest and stretch out of it. We want everyone to go home happy after most, if not all, of their days here and to feel that the organisation embodies their values. The Group aims to motivate people to do well, acknowledging their successes and supporting them through the challenges that are a fundamental part of an ambitious FE College Group.

But we also acknowledge that life in education can be tough, for good and bad reasons and things can be difficult for some people sometimes. In this strategy, we also take responsibility for that and set out our proposed strategies to address such challenging times.

We continue to be committed to a whole-organisation approach, putting prevention, wellbeing and resilience at the forefront of our strategic development. We aim to generate a widespread culture of respect and understanding, where people's right to happiness in their life is promoted and no-one's vulnerabilities hold them back.

The Group has also developed a targeted policy to address mental health issues among students, defining its responsibilities and assigning resources to our efforts to mitigate the potential harm of mental ill-health.

We will adopt the following KPIs to monitor our progress:

- Inclusion, both staff and students
- Student and staff wellbeing metrics from survey data
- Student referral trends for support
- The impact of mental health on student attendance
- Staff sickness levels caused by stress

In order to organise the different elements of our strategy, we have adopted a framework that refers to the various domains of our wellbeing work:

1. Culture
2. Leadership
3. Recognition
4. Fulfilment
5. Togetherness

To finalise the strategy, a process of consultation with staff and students will be undertaken during the early part of 2025, enabling the strategy to be adopted in its final form in March 2025.

## **1) Culture**

The Group's culture will inevitably be diverse and rich, as it spans such a range of communities and draws people from many backgrounds; the more it does this, the better it will be as an organisation. The different Colleges have different histories and these are to be celebrated and upheld while we continue to progress the Group to more consistent and higher standards.

We will promote respectful exchange and learning from each other, based on sharing and development. The Group will also continue to be subject to financial pressures and challenging circumstances created by its operating environment, but the Group will mediate these issues and make this a happy place to be as best it can. It will continue to have positive and stretching ambitions for its students and its staff and it will be disciplined in its use of resources to make sure it is efficient. It will uphold fundamental values of fairness, respect, equality and inclusion, remaining ambitious for everyone involved in the organisation.

We will achieve these ends by:

### **Whole organisation**

- Ingraining transparency, fairness, respect and dignity into its procedures and operating by these principles in the way it deals with people, actively tackling any discrimination or harassment
- Promoting the diversity of its student body and workforce and continuing to raise levels of inclusion
- Ensuring the Group's spaces, both virtual and physical, provide a positive environment for wellbeing and clear signposts for mental health support
- Developing spaces specifically for wellness and support activities where possible
- Maintaining strong health and safety practices across the Group and ensuring everyone understands their duty to keep themselves and others safe
- Adopting a trauma-informed approach, providing training across the Group to embed these practices at all levels

### **Staff**

- Provide an extensive programme of CPD input for staff to help sustain vigilance, ownership and agency
- Maintaining awareness of demands on staff time among leaders and ensuring workload and stress are actively managed

### **Students**

- Sustaining and enhancing an active safeguarding environment to protect students against risks to their wellbeing
- Ensure students can be involved in advocacy, mentorship and other programmes
- Develop a wellbeing-focused attendance approach for students

## **2) Leadership**

The Group's Governors and leaders will be expected to set good examples, supporting staff to improve, promoting development, using time well and tackling challenges in a constructive way. Communications across the Group will be open, honest, clear and two-way: opportunities to discuss and understand issues will be a strong feature of the Group's leadership and Governors and leaders will seek consensus on collective solutions.

Students and their families will benefit from positive communications and active use of feedback, complaints and data to shape the Group's development. Partnership and transition arrangements

will continue to be well-developed, expanding and embedding others' expertise into the Group. Governors, leaders and managers will be trained to deliver these expectations. The Group will also seek external support and accreditation for its efforts to enhance wellbeing. It will link to its wider civic context to strengthen its network of relationships supporting wellbeing within the Group.

We will achieve these ends by:

### **Whole organisation**

- Ensuring positive, clear communication from leaders at all times
- Maintaining and developing an excellent mental health support service, using our own and others' resources to sustain an integrated set of layered services to protect anyone with mental ill-health
- Using wellbeing data capture systems, through audits, surveys and other evidence sources to monitor and inform policy and practice
- Ensuring leaders set good examples by managing time and resources well, embodying the Group's values and culture and communicating high expectations
- Embedding wellbeing and mental health in the Group's accountabilities so that Governors, managers and staff can see progress or its absence clearly
- Establishing excellent dialogue around and beyond the Group through clear, open channels for meaningful two-way communication and consultation, making good use of feedback and complaints to improve

### **Staff**

- Providing positive support for staff wellbeing and development through the appraisal system
- Continuing to train leaders and managers to understand their roles in promoting wellbeing and giving them the skills to achieve this
- Actively keeping workload and stress levels under review to address these at both system and case level wherever possible in partnership with trade unions
- Continuing to ensure colleagues have access to time and resources to enable opportunities for both reflection and supervision to support one another
- Further strengthening the organisation to maximise job security
- Developing new wellbeing-based employment policies and practices where needed
- Continuing to focus meaningful efforts on the diversification the Group's leadership

### **Students**

- Working in close partnership with external agencies to create a network of opportunities and referral routes and develop a robust set of transition protocols to support students
- Ensuring that the designated roles and responsibilities set out in the student Mental Health policy are resourced and deployed effectively

## **3) Recognition**

People should feel proud of their time at South Thames Colleges Group and there is good reason to highlight the many wonderful achievements around the Group. Students will often be working towards new challenging goals and their gains are fundamental to the success of the Group as a whole.

We are also committed to ensuring that our staff feel valued and appreciated in what they do, so our pay, grading and holiday arrangements will all be fair, open and as generous as possible. We also believe in celebrating the great things done by the people who work here and this will mean a strong cycle of different feedback activities that acknowledge exceptional contributions by teams and individuals.

We will achieve these ends by:

### **Staff**

- Ensuring that the Group has some of the highest salary levels in the sector and sustained generous terms and conditions
- Continuing and expanding our system of recognition for staff, including awards for high achievement and long service, team celebrations and other activities to create pride
- Exploring other opportunities to introduce staff benefits where possible

### **Students**

- Embedding positive formative feedback practices in all our pedagogy to ensure students are ambitious to do better
- Holding regular events to celebrate student progress, achievement and progression, awarding prizes and other acknowledgements of their successes
- Using new systems to capture the impact of employability and enrichment and showing how these have made a difference to our students
- Ensuring our curriculum and its associated qualifications are fit for purpose, widely recognised and support our students' progression

## **4) Fulfilment**

A very important part of life in a College is the ability to grow and progress, confidently gaining as a person. The Group is committed to building in robust development systems to ensure the people studying and working here can extend their skillsets, find and use opportunities and establish networks to help them progress. No-one should experience setbacks as failure and the Group's ambition for everyone within it is that they have the resilience to find solutions and support from others to implement them successfully. The Group is situated in a rich and dynamic context, a thriving part of London and it will work to create links to its environment that enrich and inspire the people within it.

We will achieve these ends by:

### **Staff**

- Exploring the possibility of a volunteering scheme to support the contributions staff can make to their local communities
- Ensuring teachers and support staff are enabled to make sure teaching and learning are always stretching, engaging and rooted in success for all
- Delivering a varied and captivating CPD programme for staff to help them grow and develop with access to great technologies and personal development funding
- Further developing its talent schemes for aspiring staff to collaborate in the development of their skills and capabilities as they look ahead for career opportunities

### **Students**

- Continuing to develop a programme of voluntary opportunities to support the contributions students can make to their local communities
- Ensuring students have exciting and varied opportunities to participate in work experience and enrichment programmes
- Building on our excellent guidance arrangements to support more students to progress to well-chosen and aspirational destinations

## **5) Togetherness**

The value of good relationships in College and the benefits of enjoying membership of a group or a wider community of peers are very important and they promote mutual appreciation. Alongside the development of positive group dynamics, the Group is also committed to strengthening its approach to attachment and it has made belonging a cornerstone of its new strategic plan. The Group is committed to finding ways to help shared bonds secure people's wellbeing and to making arrangements that ensure our College community is an asset for everyone.

We will achieve these ends by:

### **Whole organisation**

- Ensuring our online wellbeing communications are widely shared and easily available

### **Staff**

- Reviewing ways our procedures can be updated to include conciliation and restorative approaches, where relevant, in our grievance and disciplinary procedures
- Maintaining and enhancing our programme of social events to make sure there is time for staff to enjoy each other's company and mark particular moments in time
- Developing attachment-aware practices for staff so that all students can feel securely rooted in the Group and know that they belong here, whatever their background

### **Students**

- Exploring ways in which structured peer support programmes can make more difference to wellbeing
- Maintaining and enhancing our programme of social events to make sure there is time for students to enjoy each other's company and mark particular moments in time
- Continuing to use our enrichment programmes to foster positive relationships and a strong sense of belonging among our students

### **Charters and standards**

The Groups is already a signatory to the AoC's Mental Health and Wellbeing Charter.

It will seek to achieve:

- The GLA's Good Work standard (note costs associated with Living Wage Accreditation)
- The DfE's Workload Charter