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Investing in the health and welfare of college staff and students

When Bill Rammell, Minister for Further Education, announced the National Healthy FE initiative at this year's National Learners Panel annual event, was this a move by the government to progress the healthy learner agenda, or simply an attempt to catch up on the good work that has already been established in colleges across the country?

There is no doubt that the Healthy Schools initiative has been successful. Since the publication of 'Choosing Health' (2004) by the Department of Health, around 97% of schools have become involved with the National Healthy Schools programme and 60% have achieved Healthy School Status. This initiative also stated the government's long term intention to 'extend the principles of the NHSP to institutions providing education to an older age group' by fostering closer ties between health and education within the FE sector.

It is not surprising that in time attention would be focused on the FE sector, as 62% of 16 to 18 year olds in education are in FE and 64% of those in receipt of an EMA are studying in FE or sixth form colleges. Colleges have not, however, been sleeping giants but have been proactive in developing services that foster health and well being. The Kirlees Healthy College Standard epitomises this commitment and has been embraced by many colleges since its inception in 2003.

The college sector understands the importance of investing in the health and welfare of its staff and students, which in turn will help maximise achievements as well as recognising the importance of the

physical and social environment to learning.

Colleges have developed sexual health clinics and drop in centres; drug and alcohol support services; learner information theme weeks; help for the homeless and estranged; counselling, medical and mental health support; childcare facilities; advice centres; anti bullying, mentoring and peer support programmes; environmental and volunteer groups - the list is endless.

In addition the National School Sport strategy has more recently extended into the world of colleges, with the roll out of FE sports co-ordinators (FESCo's) from September 2008. This has been achieved by additional funding from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and is aimed a further promotion of the healthy learner agenda by providing the resources to link into the network of School Sport Partnerships.

Perhaps this is the key to understanding the way in which the National Healthy FE initiative will be viewed by colleges. In summer 2007 a consultation exercise was undertaken amongst colleges and Sam Mellor, Head of the NHSP said "The consultation report showed very strong support amongst colleges and FE bodies for a national healthy colleges scheme" - which undoubtedly there is. However, this needs to be more than a national quality assurance standard for FE. It must focus on supporting the vast amount of work that is already taking place throughout the country, to develop more positive learner environments that promote the health and well being of local communities now and into the future.