

Sector knowledge simplifies Cyber Essentials certification

Chichester College Group (CCG) is the largest college group in Sussex with colleges in Brinsbury, Chichester, Crawley, Haywards Heath and Worthing. The group also includes Anglia Examinations, assessing competence in the English language, and one of the county's largest providers of childcare services – First Steps Childcare (although these were both outside this project's scope). CCG has around 25,000 learners studying programmes that include GCSEs, A-levels and vocational training in business, catering, construction, design and media, engineering, hair and beauty, IT, land-based skills and performing arts.

Demonstrating commitment to online security
The government-backed **Cyber Essentials** (gov.uk/government/publications/cyber-essentials-scheme-overview) certification scheme provides assurance that an organisation has the most essential cyber security protections in place. **The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)** (gov.uk/government/organisations/education-and-skills-funding-agency) asked further education providers to make their 'best endeavours' to secure Cyber Essentials certification for the 2020/21 academic year and, similarly, Cyber Essentials Plus certification is likely to be 'best endeavours' for 2021/22.

The self-assessment process for Cyber Essentials requires the organisation to consider more than 50 questions about its security posture. Formulating the answers helps applicants identify any security weaknesses, put them right and ensure they have basic technical controls in place to safeguard against the most common cyber security threats including phishing, hacking and password guessing.

Jisc is a Cyber Essentials certifying body offering a **Cyber Essentials service** (jisc.ac.uk/cyber-essentials) to help its members gain their certificate.

"We used the service in December 2020. We wanted to meet the ESFA requirement as early as possible and wanted to go through the process as part of our own continuous development. We also think it is important for our reputation as a safe organisation to do business with."

Jon Dunster, group director of IT at Chichester College Group

CCG's IT team takes a robust approach to online safety and has a dedicated GDPR practitioner in Ben Phillips, who played a key role in guiding the certification process.

"We had a basic knowledge of the process so we chose to enhance this knowledge by attending one of **Jisc's Cyber Essentials drop-in clinics** (jisc.ac.uk/training/cyber-essentials-drop-in-clinic) and we took up the offer of the Cyber Essentials advice and guidance session with one of Jisc's assessors. Jisc told us we were in a good position and that we should start our assessment process straight away and then revise answers if necessary," says Ben.

When an organisation submits its application, the assessor highlights any areas that need to be revisited and the applicant must respond within 48 hours. In CCG's case there were only a handful.

"A few of the build numbers we submitted were in the wrong format and it was easy to put this right in time because we didn't have much else to rectify. Then we passed with flying colours," says Ben.

Sector knowledge brings benefits

The next step is Cyber Essentials Plus. An organisation will need to apply for Cyber Essentials Plus and pass the audit within 90 days of achieving Cyber Essentials and, with the ESFA's expectations for 2021/22 in mind, CCG went for this certification at the same time.

It's a lengthier process that involves internal and external testing to verify the information provided during Cyber Essentials as well as a series of tests to put various end user devices through their paces.

"You need to work with a partner to achieve Cyber Essentials Plus. We chose Jisc as our assessor and also for the **penetration testing** (jisc.ac.uk/penetration-testing) because they have so much experience in the education sector," comments Jon.

"We got together for a couple of planning meetings to scope out the work, clear up a few questions and make a plan for the penetration testing," says Ben.

This testing simulates real-world attacks on networks and systems to identify vulnerabilities. It took several days to carry out and then the Jisc team provided CCG with a list of vulnerabilities to address.

"All of them were pretty easy tweaks," says Ben. "The most complex required an upgrade for Moodle. The certification process is quite a big ask but it is manageable."

CCG's tips to make Cyber Essentials simpler

- **Plan ahead.** Make sure you've got all the information together before you start the CE questionnaire. Getting details like build numbers can take a while and you've only got 48 hours to do any rectifications.
- **Build some flexibility into your technical team's schedule,** so you have the resource if you need to resolve issues.
- **External support can help to iron out problems.** "We welcome the level of support we received from Jisc. It was flexible and we could just use what we needed. Their sector knowledge really helped things run smoothly," says Jon.



To find out how Jisc can support your organisation, please:



Contact:
professional.cyberservices@jisc.ac.uk



or visit
jisc.ac.uk/cyber-essentials