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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
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Melanie Lenehan
Principal and Chief Executive Officer
Fircroft College of Adult Education
1018 Bristol Road
Selly Oak
Birmingham
West Midlands
B29 6LH

Dear Ms Lenehan

Short inspection of Fircroft College of Adult Education

Following the short inspection on 10 and 11 October 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The inspection was the first short inspection carried out since the college was judged to be good in May 2014.

This provider continues to be good.

You have maintained a supportive learning environment and ensured that achievement rates overall remain high, or very high, through a period of major change. One of these changes is the increase in the proportion of learners who have multiple barriers to learning, such as mental health issues, long-term medical conditions, or family breakdowns, and have not previously had any academic success.

You have responded well to the needs of learners. The range of courses you offer as part of the community learning programme meets their needs well and provides them with the opportunity to achieve their goals. Staff provide good support to learners and identify well their barriers to learning. However, there is still more work to do in order to ensure that individual learning aims are clear and fully meet learners' needs.

Since the previous inspection you and your managers have maintained a clear focus on monitoring all aspects of training and you have a clear and detailed knowledge of your strengths and weaknesses. Quality improvement actions have maintained the high quality of teaching, learning and assessment. You have dealt effectively with almost all of the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection.

Staff have worked well to identify other weaknesses, and you have clear plans to improve them. Your self-assessment process remains sound but there is further

improvement needed. You have established a clear three-year plan to make major changes to your college and the courses that you offer. You have managed well the significant turnover in staff and, one year in, are on course to meet your objectives at this stage in the project. Since the previous inspection, leaders and managers have strengthened the lesson observation process. It now covers all aspects of the learners' experience. However, there is further development needed to ensure that it is fully effective at improving learning and progress in lessons.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and managers have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and take highly effective action to safeguard learners, both residential, and non-residential. Learners feel safe. They contribute well to ensuring their own safety and that of others. Staff treat the security of the site as paramount, with thorough arrangements for ensuring the physical safety of learners. For example, they carry out regular checks of the buildings and surrounds.

Appropriate processes and records are in place. Staff deal promptly and effectively with any potential safeguarding concern. Records are usually detailed, and risk assessment forms are thorough. However, in a very few cases records lack clarity and your risk assessments are not categorised in terms of likelihood and impact. Therefore, it is difficult for leaders to identify the key risks easily. You are aware of these issues and are in the process of changing the format of the risk assessments.

Staff work well with learners, including at the recruitment stage, to identify their needs and vulnerabilities, and whether they pose any challenges to other learners. Support staff provide detailed records of learners' needs for teaching staff to use, to ensure that each learner is provided with the appropriate support to maintain a safe environment. You have implemented well actions to ensure that learners and staff are aware of the dangers of radicalisation. Learners have a clear understanding of this topic and how to spot the signs that indicate someone may have been radicalised.

Leaders work well to ensure that resources are regularly reviewed and updated where necessary. Managers have recruited support staff with good knowledge and experience of working with learners with barriers to learning. They use this knowledge and experience to pick up clues to challenges that may exist for learners. Changes to the layout of your college continue to improve the way you ensure learners' safety.

Inspection findings

- You have managed well the first year of your three-year strategic plan. Managers have used your strong links with partner organisations to ensure that your new programme of community learning courses meets the needs of learners, with a clear focus on those who are most disadvantaged. Your transition towards more non-accredited provision has enabled staff to tailor courses even more closely to the varying needs of learners.

- Managers have improved the support provided to learners to help them overcome their barriers to learning. Staff work well with learners, including before they enrol, to identify these needs and prepare the necessary support for them. Staff use well their prior experience of dealing with learners with such barriers.
- You have not yet dealt effectively with the decline in attendance rates for the learners on the access to higher education course. You identified this year-on-year shallow decline in your self-assessment report. As part of your major restructure, you have introduced a range of initiatives aimed at improving learners' experience on this 30-week residential course. Attendance at all lessons during the inspection was very high. However, it is too early to see the full impact of this recent work.
- Managers have introduced peer observations and short themed visits to a series of lessons. As a result, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment has been maintained. The new observation forms are clear. However, observers still focus too much on the process of teaching rather than on what learners have learned in that lesson and the progress that they have made. In addition, managers do not use other evidence consistently; for example, the quality of learners' work or target setting, to monitor staff performance.
- You have maintained the high, and very high, achievement rates for learners on short courses, identified at the last inspection. The large majority of learners are on these courses. This is during a period of change, including the recruitment of a higher proportion of learners with multiple barriers to learning.
- Achievement rates on the access to higher education course continue to decline. This decline is shallow and rates are not yet low. However, it is a persistent year-on-year decline. You have introduced a number of initiatives this year which aim to improve the learners' experience. However, it is too early to judge the impact of this work.
- Leaders and managers have made good progress with plans to integrate the development of learners' skills to enhance their prospects of employment into all short courses. The schemes of work are detailed and staff make good use of clear links to help them see where opportunities to reinforce these skills exist in the course content. This work is new this term; it is too early to see its impact in dealing with the weakness that you identified in your recent self-assessment report.
- Teachers plan and deliver individual lessons well and take full consideration of learners' starting points. Teachers use the detailed information they get about learners' barriers to learning well. This was a weakness at the previous inspection and you have dealt with it well. As a result, learners make good progress in lessons.
- Staff do not consistently set clear individual targets to help learners get the most out of their short course and achieve their overall goals. They do not build up a clear picture of how the course will meet their needs, or how they will link one

short course to the next. This is a weakness from the previous inspection that you have not yet fully dealt with.

- Your self-assessment process continues to be robust and inclusive. Managers place a very strong emphasis on involving learners in self-assessment. Leaders have dealt well with almost all of the weaknesses found at the previous inspection. However, they have not yet dealt completely with all of them. The three-year strategic plan aims to move the organisation forward and early indications are that it is having a positive impact. However, it is too early to say if it will be completely successful.
- Quality improvement planning is not always specific enough. Some targets lack clarity or do not have indicators to measure performance. At this stage you do not monitor learners' destinations and progression sufficiently well to inform improvement planning. The self-assessment report does not analyse data sufficiently well to identify and deal with trends. Managers have set up new data dashboards to improve this but the work is not yet complete.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they closely monitor the declining trends in attendance and achievement for learners on the access to higher education course, then use this information to ensure that planned changes to this course bring about the desired improvements
- managers further improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that observations of teaching, learning and assessment focus strongly on what learners have learned and the progress that they have made during that lesson
- teachers work with learners to set clear targets to ensure that they achieve their aims for the course and for their overall programme of short courses while studying at the college
- quality improvement actions are clear and have measurable targets and data is analysed sufficiently well to inform leaders and managers about performance.

I am copying this letter to the Education and Skills Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Derrick Baughan
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, we were assisted by your director of education. We held meetings with staff and managers. We observed teaching, learning and assessment and looked at learners' work and their learning resources. We spoke with learners and incorporated their views in our findings. We reviewed key documents including those related to self-assessment, performance and safeguarding as well as qualification achievement rates.