

Fircroft College of Adult Education

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1 Outstanding

Grade 2 Good

Grade 3 Satisfactory

Grade 4 Inadequate

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made on www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of the inspection, inspectors take account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body. Where appropriate, inspectors also consider the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk), reports from the inspectorates' quality monitoring or annual assessment visits, and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.

In addition to reporting on overall effectiveness of the organisation, its capacity to improve further, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management, this inspection focused on specialist provision in:

- Community development

Description of the provider

1. Fircroft College, a registered charity, is one of four long-term adult residential colleges currently funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in England. It was founded in 1909 by George Cadbury Jr, and is based in the former Cadbury family home. In 20004/05 the college completed a £1.6 million LSC sponsored building development programme. The college mission is to promote social justice and offer seriously disadvantaged adults the opportunity to return to learning.
2. During the inspection week, a total of 59 learners were in learning. The thirty-week long access course had 24 learners, the Ransackers programme for the over 55's had six learners and the remaining learners were on short courses of 48, 72 or 96 hours duration. These open and closed courses have been clustered together as community development courses. Short courses make up 83% of the provision. Evidence from other parts of the college was used to support evidence of overall achievement and standards as well as leadership and management. The provision in access courses was graded as good at the previous inspection and was not graded separately during the current inspection.
3. All provision is directly delivered by the college from its base in Birmingham. The college works with a number of partners, particularly with voluntary and community sector organisations and higher education institutes. Learners on access courses have suffered various disadvantages including drug/alcohol misuse or mental health problems and need intensive personal, housing and study support. Most long course learners and all short course learners are resident at the college. The short courses, accredited through Open College Network (OCN) include humanities, community development, family learning, personal development and information and communications technology (ICT).
4. The college employs 63 staff. These include 20 domestic staff, eight administrative staff and 35 academic staff, which includes 25 visiting tutors. The senior management team consists of the principal, the director of academic development and programmes, the deputy principal for finance and resources and the head of staff and student support.
5. Fircroft College's learning provision is funded by Birmingham and Solihull LSC. Birmingham has a population of 977,087 and, of the 354 local authorities, ranks as the 15th highest deprived local authority in England. The unemployment rate is twice the national average. Some 30% of the local population are from minority ethnic groups. The percentage of pupils gaining five GCSE at

A*- C in Birmingham in 2006 was 58.8%, compared with a national average of 59.2%.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Outstanding: Grade 1
Capacity to improve	Outstanding: Grade 1
Achievement and standards	Outstanding: Grade 1
Quality of provision	Outstanding: Grade 1
Leadership and management	Outstanding: Grade 1
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Outstanding: Grade 1

Sector subject area

Community development	Outstanding: Grade 1
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Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Outstanding: Grade 1

6. The overall effectiveness of the provision is outstanding. Leadership and management, equality of opportunity and the provision in community development are all outstanding.
7. Achievement and standards are outstanding in community development and on the access courses. Qualification achievement rates are very high. The standard of learners' personal skills, as well as development of knowledge and skills, is of good quality. Learners make excellent progress to develop their skills and contribute substantially to the development of their communities.
8. The quality of provision is outstanding. Standards of teaching and learning across the whole college are very good. The promotion of equality and diversity in lessons is excellent. Most of the provision is accredited, and the range of courses and programmes to meet the needs of learners, employers and the voluntary sector are outstanding. Support for the learners who face substantial challenges in their lives is also outstanding. This includes support on personal and study matters including information, advice and guidance as well as numeracy, language and literacy support.
9. Leadership and management are outstanding. Team working is excellent and partnerships are highly effective and energetic. The college has used a broad range of strategies effectively to engage, support and progress learners from various disadvantaged groups, women, learners from minority ethnic groups and older adults. The college has made an excellent response to the Governments' *Every Child Matters* agenda. The promotion of equality and diversity in all aspects of the college life, as well as social inclusion, is outstanding. The college has a strong focus on quality improvement.

Capacity to improve

Outstanding: Grade 1

10. The college has outstanding capacity to improve. It has successfully dealt with all the weaknesses identified at the previous inspection and several have been turned into strengths. The college has

used the findings from their previous inspection to further sharpen its focus on quality improvement. The college self-assessment process is thorough and effectively involves all staff and partners. The self-assessment report is detailed, critical, evaluative and highly accurate. Staff are well qualified and experienced, staff turnover is extremely low and staff development remains very good. The focus on curriculum development and management is very good.

11. Financial management is strong and the college provides exceptionally good value for money. The accommodation has improved since the previous inspection with more recreational spaces, a refurbished crèche, tutor rooms, and a quiet/prayer room. The college has a successful record of reaching highly deprived communities in far greater numbers than other, counterpart residential colleges. Community groups as well as the learners value the college very highly. Very strong governors, experienced, highly skilled, and high performing staff and energetic partnerships maintain the strong focus on good quality provision.

Key strengths

- Excellent acquisition and application of skills to benefit individuals and communities
- High achievement of qualifications
- Very good teaching and learning
- Outstanding range of courses and programmes to meet the needs and interests of the learners, employers and the voluntary sector
- Good response to government's *Every Child Matters* agenda
- Wide range of effective support for learners to meet extensive range of needs
- Very strong strategic leadership and management
- Excellent team working
- Energetic and highly effective partnership working
- Very effective approach to widen participation and to promote social justice
- Outstanding embedding of equality and diversity in all aspects of college life
- Strong focus on quality improvement

Key areas for improvement

- No key areas of improvement

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Outstanding: Grade 1

12. Achievement and standards are outstanding. Learners develop high levels of personal skills in a relatively short period of time. Although many of the learners face multiple barriers to learning, they swiftly take charge of their lives, make substantial changes and achieve well in their personal and professional lives. Learners develop greater confidence and acquire new knowledge and skills in areas such as teaching methods and national curriculum, information technology, raising finance, making bids for lottery funds, diversity training and community development. Achievement and standards on long courses are also very good.

13. Parents on family learning courses teach their children rules of spelling and phonics. Their children make excellent progress in schools as their reading ability and grades improve. Some learners report that they work in their jobs more efficiently while others report improved quality of note-taking in meetings, conducting a SWOT analysis of their organisation to refocus its direction for funding purposes, improved level of service for the clients of the organisations such as refugees and asylum seekers. On a closed course for MENCAP, learners develop skills to devise a training programme for clients with learning disabilities and/or difficulties.

14. Learners attain high achievement in short qualifications on a broad range of topics. This enhances their personal development and future career aspirations to an excellent degree.

Quality of provision

Outstanding: Grade 1

15. Teaching and learning are very good across the whole college. Lessons are very well planned and include a broad range of activities that challenge learners well. Ice breakers, role-plays and a range of activities are used well to break down barriers and build positive group relationships. Tutors support both individual and group needs in a flexible and responsive way. They use very sensitive, skilful questioning to draw learners into learning. The content of sessions is very carefully chosen to positively promote equality and diversity. Learners' progression and attainment are outstanding and they all exceed their expectations.

16. The promotion of equality and diversity in lessons is excellent. Tutors give very close attention to supporting learners with learning difficulties. They make good use of pictorial prompts to help learners with literacy difficulties to understand tasks and activities. Gender, ethnicity, cultural and faith issues are explored sensitively through the use of examples and lively discussions. The classrooms are soon filled with learners work.

17. The programmes and activities to meet the needs and interest of learners, employers and voluntary groups are outstanding. Residential provision includes targeted and open courses as well as short and long courses during the weekdays and weekends. Ninety seven per cent of the provision is accredited. The college works very closely with community organisations, offering capacity-building activities as well as courses aimed at disadvantaged learners. Specific developments to attract older learners include a residential course for the over 55's. The focus on mental health, disability, gender and faith groups is strong. Courses are carefully designed to enable learners with multiple barriers to engage in learning and contribute. These are supported by childcare, nutritious meals and comfortable accommodation. The college has successfully met ambitious targets set by the LSC to increase provision for employers as well as the voluntary sector. Partnerships are strong and the college has involved partners in developing new progression routes, such as the development of a foundation degree in voluntary and community organisations.

18. The college response to the Government's *Every Child Matters* agenda is particularly strong. This includes Criminal Records Bureau checks for core staff, training on the Children Act 2004, very effective mapping of teaching, learning and support activities to the five *Every Child Matters* outcomes. This is also a thorough and detailed policy and guidelines on the protection of child and vulnerable adults'.

19. Guidance and support to meet the extensive range of learners needs are outstanding. Twenty eight per cent of learners have a declared need or social issue although the actual needs are much greater. An example of strong support is the 24 hour access to information technology and library facilities. All learners have valuable tutorials. Initial assessment of learners, including assessing learning styles, is good. Tutors use this information to alter their teaching methods and timetables of support. Learners also access specialist support, as needed, from agencies such as a community drug and alcohol team. Good literacy and numeracy support is provided on an individual or small group basis. Recent recruitment of an English for speakers of other languages tutor is designed to enhance satisfactory arrangements for language support. The policy and procedures to access increasing levels of learner support funds are clear. A wide range of specialist equipment is provided to support learners with disabilities and access in the new building, for people with restricted mobility, is good.

20. The information, advice and guidance needs of all learners are very carefully met. An experienced and well qualified guidance worker is supported well by other front line staff who provide learners with effective pre-course information and direct learners as appropriate. Systems to monitor progress and support are very effective. The student issues meeting effectively enables tutors to view a range of factors impacting on learner progress including attendance, punctuality, submission of assignments and their grades.

Leadership and management

Outstanding: Grade 1

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade: Outstanding: Grade 1

21. Leadership and management are outstanding. Strategic leadership and management are very strong. The college vision and mission of social justice is passionately shared by all staff. The governing body are strong and have good involvement with the college at all levels. Strategic planning for the future and to expand the curriculum is good. Curriculum management for the whole college is very strong. The constant search for excellence has improved physical resources enormously.
22. Team working is excellent. All members of staff, regardless of their roles, are fully involved in the decision making used to shape and develop the college. Communications are also excellent. The close knit college community has a strong sense of purpose and unity. Arrangements made during the absence of the principal were highly effective.
23. Partnerships are energetic and highly effective. The college is very proactive in establishing, nurturing and developing a wide range of partnerships to benefit learners and communities. They take full part in the college activities, including self-assessment. Communications with partners are very effective. Partners value highly the college and its ethical approach to curriculum provision. The college is easily accessible, extremely flexible and supremely responsive to the needs of the local communities.
24. Staff members take advantage of a wide range of opportunities to learn in cross-college teams. For example, household staff have attended dyslexia awareness courses. Performance management, including the management of the 360 degree appraisals, is outstanding. Staff feel that this has significantly improved the value of appraisals and the cohesion of the organisation. Plans for the development of ICT, and its use, are measured and proportionate.
25. Approaches to widen the participation of disadvantaged learners and to promote social justice are very effective. The approaches include single sex or ethnicity courses and closed courses for organisations working with disadvantaged individuals and communities. These courses are then broadened out to include other groups. Learners from all walks of life, regardless of their gender, disability, ethnicity and age, are participating in good numbers and they achieve well. To attract

men into learning, the college has set up dedicated short courses in anger management that have resulted in substantially higher rates of participation of 36% in 2006/07 compared to 26% in 2005/06. Similarly, 'look good feel good' courses, designed to attract Asian women into learning, have been expanded to include white women and men only courses. Participation rates for minority ethnic learners are very good, and have increased to just over 50%. Other examples include a 10 week residential programme for older learners and a course for ex-offenders to start up a business or social enterprise. The college engages individuals and community groups into learning who subsequently make a substantial contribution to their communities.

26. The embedding of equality and diversity in all aspects of college life is outstanding. The college has created a strong, socially inclusive ethos. Staff have an excellent understanding of equality and diversity issues. Equality and diversity policies, procedures and action plans are clear, comprehensive and challenging. These are revised and effectively overseen. The equal opportunities policy, and its principles, are usefully included in all college processes. Managers set challenging targets and priorities which are agreed and closely monitored by governors. Detailed equality schemes for race, disability and gender have been developed with appropriate action plans to monitor implementation. Staff training in a range of equality and diversity issues, as well as courses specialising in mental health, deaf awareness, drug misuse, dyslexia and learning disabilities are very effective. Training for catering staff to meet the full range of dietary and faith needs of learners has been good. Nourishing and healthy meals are produced to reflect the diverse range of learners needs. The college prioritises its work to focus on the most disadvantaged in society, clearly aligned to the Government's agenda on social inclusion and community cohesion. Twenty five per cent of learners are from the country's most deprived wards, which is a substantially higher percentage than in other residential adult learning colleges.
27. The college has a very strong focus on quality improvement. Target-setting to monitor and improve achievement is fully understood by all staff. Data is used very well to inform evaluation and action planning. Action plans are rigorously monitored and good practice is shared very successfully. Observations of teaching and learning are robust and highly critical while the quality of teaching is continuously improving. All observations are thoroughly checked to ensure consistent practice and grading. These now have a stronger focus on learners and teaching processes, though focus on measuring and recording learning outcomes is insufficient. Inspectors however, graded some lessons higher than the observers.

Annex

What learners like:

- 'This is a classless place'
- 'Fircroft college is the poor man's Eton'
- Very helpful staff — 'They always go an extra mile'
- 'My daughter always looks forward to her fun learning weekend class with her mummy at the college'
- Having OCN accreditation promotes flexibility
- Good family atmosphere and personal touch
- Being treated as equal in a positive learning environment with other adults with similar needs
- Excellent support from all the tutors — 'Tutors put a lot into the classes'
- Timely and effective response to meet our needs
- 'I have learnt more in a weekend at Fircroft than at other colleges, including a local university'

What learners think could improve:

- 'Not much to improve — they are doing an excellent job'
- Crèche timetable — 'The times of the crèche are not in sync with the classes'
- More information about the facilities for short courses
- Marketing and publicity of the college — 'I only found out about it from my friend'
- 'Access to kitchen facilities for learners on long courses to prepare snacks etc'

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Annex

- 'The quality of halal food'
- Clear entry criteria for children on family learning courses
- Disruption at the weekends caused by the children's activities

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