

Inspection of The SMB Group

Inspection dates:

7 to 10 February 2023

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education	Requires improvement
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Requires improvement
Education programmes for young people	Requires improvement
Adult learning programmes	Requires improvement
Apprenticeships	Requires improvement
Provision for learners with high needs	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this provider

The SMB Group was formed in 2020 from the merger of Stephenson and Brooksby Melton colleges. The SMB Group offers a wide array of courses for young people, apprentices, adults and learners with high needs.

At the time of the inspection, there were 1,411 young people at the college. The majority study full-time courses at level 3 in animal management, sport, construction and vehicle maintenance. There were 936 apprentices. Most study subjects such as engineering, construction, vehicle maintenance and electrical maintenance at level 2 or level 3. Approximately half of apprentices were aged 16 to 18.

There were 644 adult learners at the time of the inspection. Most adults study via distance learning at level 2. They study subjects to improve their work prospects, such as autism awareness, mental health first aid and customer service. A small number of young people with high needs study skills for working life or complete supported internships.

The college works with two main subcontractors.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

In too many subject areas, young learners do not gain substantial new knowledge and skills. Although they know well the elementary aspects of their subjects, they do not have an in-depth knowledge of what they study. Apprentices, however, mostly produce a high standard of practical work.

Leaders and managers work with employers across many curriculum areas, but the impact of this on learners and apprentices varies from subject to subject. Adult learning curriculum managers do not use their links with employers well enough to help learners develop their career goals. Although teachers on animal management courses know the skills that employers need, they do not thoroughly teach these to young learners. Level 2 bricklaying curriculum managers use employer links well to ensure that apprentices' courses include contemporary industry practices.

The large majority of learners and apprentices at The SMB Group enjoy their time at the college. Young learners appreciate the way in which college staff treat them as adults. Learners and apprentices study in an environment that is inclusive. Those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are well integrated into the college. Young learners who study animal care and sport rightly value the high-quality facilities that they use. However, across the three campuses, many learners and apprentices comment that the computer equipment is dated.

Teachers plan well opportunities for learners and apprentices to increase their confidence. For example, learners with high needs benefit from well-planned opportunities to develop their ability to live independently. Teachers of young learners on vocational courses plan well activities to develop learners' ability to communicate in groups.

Apprentices develop high levels of confidence and resilience for the workplace. Those who study construction become more resilient when working on site and can challenge assertively any inappropriate behaviour that they experience. In a few cases, however, apprentices do not develop their skills and knowledge beyond the vocational aspects of their courses.

Learners and apprentices feel safe while at college, both during the daytime and in the evening. They know whom to speak to if they feel unsafe and are confident that staff deal with safeguarding concerns effectively. Both learners and apprentices wear appropriate personal protective equipment in vocational training sessions.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The college makes a reasonable contribution to meeting skills needs.

Leaders understand well the current and future skills needs in their region. They work to a comprehensive strategic plan to help them devise a curriculum that reduces local and regional skills gaps. Leaders and managers also contribute well to local and regional skills forums. They accurately identify and nurture effective

working relationships with organisations such as the local enterprise partnership. College managers also work productively with the special educational needs team at the local authority to help learners with SEND and/or high needs as they move towards employment.

Leaders and managers undertake considerable work with local employers via skills forums. College leaders organise these forums by subject area. On well-established skills forums, employers and curriculum managers work well together to support learners' and apprentices' development. For example, employers help young learners to develop their skills and knowledge through guest speaker visits and work placements. However, in a minority of subjects, such as business, hair and beauty, and equine studies, skills forums are newly formed, and it is too early to judge their impact.

In curriculum areas such as plumbing or vehicle maintenance, leaders and managers consider emerging industry needs well. They work with employers to plan new skills that learners and apprentices need to gain, such as heat-pump installation for those who study plumbing.

In their curriculums, teachers focus on the knowledge, skills and behaviours that learners and apprentices need for employment at a generalised level. However, in a significant number of cases, they do not focus closely enough on the specialised knowledge that learners and apprentices need for future employment opportunities.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

In too many subject areas, teachers plan and teach curriculums that are not demanding or broad enough. For example, teachers of animal care do not explore in detail the knowledge and skills that young learners need, such as an in-depth knowledge of animal legislation. Learners on equine studies courses do not gain sufficient knowledge of advanced, practical riding techniques, and those who start the course with existing knowledge do not make swift enough progress. Apprentices who study heavy vehicle maintenance do not benefit from a curriculum that focuses closely on the skills they develop at work.

Teachers do not consider carefully adult learners' starting points and aspirations. In the majority of cases, adult learning courses include only a focus on the knowledge needed to pass the qualification. For example, adult learners who study hairdressing at level 2 do not learn the business or digital skills that would help them to work in the industry at the end of their courses. The large proportion of adult learners who study via distance learning do not learn about the personal, social or employability skills and knowledge that they need to get a job or to make progress in their careers.

In too many cases, teachers' assessment of learners' and apprentices' work requires improvement. The written work that learners with high needs produce is not consistently marked. As a result, these learners do not always know when they

produce incorrect work. Teachers of light vehicle maintenance and of plumbing suggest how young learners can improve their written work, but learners do not use this information to make appropriate changes. Teachers in subjects such as electrical installation do not use assessment to help apprentices improve their written English. In other cases, such as on carpentry and hairdressing courses, teachers use verbal feedback effectively to help learners and apprentices rectify errors in their practical work.

Across a significant number of subjects, teachers do not use assessment well enough to adjust their teaching. For example, teachers of equine studies or GCSE mathematics do not use the information they get from assessment activities to focus more closely on topics that learners find difficult. In other subjects, such as health and social care, teachers use assessment more effectively. They identify common misconceptions when learners submit written assignments and revisit these in subsequent lessons.

In a significant number of cases, teachers do not provide substantial opportunities for young learners to practise or recap what they learn. For example, level 2 beauty therapy learners do not get sufficient opportunities to develop their practical skills on clients. Learners with high needs do not recap thoroughly key topics such as healthy living or sex and relationships. As a result, they remember only basic details about these topics. Most apprentices and adult learners have substantial opportunities to practise new skills. Teachers revisit challenging topics with them, so that they master difficult skills and knowledge.

In the last academic year, the proportion of learners and apprentices who successfully completed their courses was too low. This was largely because a significant minority of learners and apprentices left their courses early. In the current academic year, a considerably smaller proportion of learners and apprentices have left their courses early.

The standard of work that young learners produce is not consistently high enough. For example, equine studies learners do not know enough about how to prepare a horse for competition, and those who study animal care do not demonstrate a sound knowledge of key, subject-specific terminology. Learners who study plumbing produce a low standard of theoretical work, particularly at level 2. In other subjects, learners and apprentices produce a high standard of theoretical and practical work. Sports learners at level 3 can, for example, explain the steps needed to create an effective training plan. Those who study agriculture at level 2 have a sound knowledge of practical tasks, such as worming animals.

Although apprentices largely develop a high standard of practical skills, those who study at level 3 make slow progress through their courses. For example, assessors of electrical installation apprentices do not carry out sufficient or timely workplace review and assessment activities. Apprentices who study heavy vehicle maintenance often struggle to complete their final assessments because teachers do not prepare them well for these. As a result, too many do not complete their qualifications

successfully. Those apprentices who study bricklaying or carpentry at level 2 complete their apprenticeships at high rates.

The large majority of adult learners successfully complete their qualifications. However, unemployed adult learners often do not get jobs as a result of their studies because their courses do not prepare them well for work.

Leaders and managers offer curriculums for young learners and apprentices that match well the current needs of industry. For example, learners who study sports benefit from close work between college staff and a subcontractor, Leicester Tigers. Staff from this rugby club provide learners with good opportunities to learn about professional-level sport and use well the high-quality equipment and facilities at the college. In agriculture and countryside management, the curriculum plan includes seasonal activities that match industry needs well. Apprentices who study bricklaying learn skills that link well to contemporary industry practices.

In the vast majority of cases, teachers have suitable skills and relevant industrial backgrounds. For example, teachers on health and social care courses have considerable experience of working in healthcare settings. They use this knowledge well to, for example, demonstrate correct clinical techniques when learners use the college's simulated hospital ward. In a small number of cases, however, new teachers with considerable industry experience do not receive sufficient support to help them teach effectively.

Young learners gain much from a well-planned series of tutorial lessons. These include pertinent topics, such as mental fitness, toxic masculinity and online safety. As well as seeing presentations on these topics, young learners engage in useful discussions that deepen their knowledge. Learners find that tutorials help them to identify risks to themselves and their peers, such as the signs of controlling and isolating behaviour and sexually inappropriate conduct.

Although apprentices do not attend the same tutorial lessons, they study important topics, such as good mental health during their courses. Apprentices have a good awareness of the impact of poor mental health and know how to work to help overcome this issue.

In the large majority of cases, learners and apprentices get effective careers information, advice and guidance. Young learners receive helpful advice from careers specialists, external visitors and their own teachers. As a result, they make informed decisions about their future career goals. However, adult learners do not benefit from careers guidance that is well structured.

College staff have high expectations for learner and apprentice attendance and conduct. As a result, on most courses, learners attend classes at high rates, and apprentices attend at very high rates. The large majority of learners and apprentices have positive attitudes towards their studies. They have respectful, professional relationships with their teachers. The college's three campuses are calm and orderly learning environments.

Leaders and managers are ambitious for their learners and apprentices. At the end of the previous academic year, both leaders and governors rightly recognised that they needed to make significant improvements to the curriculum. They introduced considerable changes to drive these improvements, such as improved quality assurance measures and improved continuing professional development. However, although these measures have led to some improvements, the quality of education is not consistently good.

Leaders select carefully the subcontracting partners that they work with. They work with subcontractors that enhance the curriculum and cease partnerships with those that no longer have this positive impact. The longstanding partnership with Leicester Tigers has a significant positive impact on young learners who study sport.

Governors have suitable experience for their roles, such as substantial experience of further education. They work openly and constructively with senior leaders and hold them to account well for making improvements when they identify weaknesses. However, governors do not have sufficient oversight of weaknesses across the entire curriculum, such as the lack of breadth in adult learning curriculums.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders ensure that there are sufficient specialist staff with safeguarding responsibilities across the three college campuses. When learners or apprentices disclose concerns, safeguarding staff take appropriate actions to provide support. Governors with responsibility for safeguarding check carefully that safeguarding processes are fit for purpose.

Safeguarding staff ensure that there is a suitable focus on the 'Prevent' duty across the college. They use links with regional 'Prevent' duty networks to ensure that college staff and learners know about risks related to radicalisation and extremism. However, in a significant minority of cases, apprentices have a limited knowledge of these topics.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Leaders and managers must ensure that teachers consistently plan and teach demanding curriculums for young learners, so that these learners produce a high standard of work.
- Teachers of apprentices should prepare all apprentices well for their final assessments, including through assessment of their workplace activities, so that the large majority complete their qualifications successfully.
- Curriculum managers must ensure that curriculums for adult learners are broad enough to help adult learners develop the skills they need for their careers.

- Teachers should assess learners' and apprentices' work thoroughly and use the results to adjust their teaching, where this is appropriate.

Provider details

Unique reference number	130754
Address	Stephenson Campus Thornborough Road Coalville LE67 3TN
Contact number	01530 836136
Website	www.smbgroup.ac.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Dawn Whitemore
Provider type	General further education college
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected
Main subcontractors	Leicester Tigers Learning Curve Group

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the assistant principal (teaching and learning), as nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

Saul Pope, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Angela Twelvetree	His Majesty's Inspector
Jackie Rossa	Ofsted Inspector
Ralph Brompton	Ofsted Inspector
Stuart Allen	Ofsted Inspector
Franki Williams	Ofsted Inspector
Karen Green	Ofsted Inspector
Janet Cannon	Ofsted Inspector
Nikki Brady	His Majesty's Inspector
Emma Woods	His Majesty's Inspector
Vicki Locke	His Majesty's Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

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