

Inspection of Fircroft College of Adult Education

Inspection dates: 21 to 24 November 2023

Overall effectiveness	Good
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The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Outstanding
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Adult learning programmes	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Information about this provider

Fircroft College of Adult Education is a specialist adult residential education provider based in Selly Oak, Birmingham. It provides a range of short community learning courses and longer accredited courses at levels 2 and 3. Community learning courses include free thinking, finding your place in society, English for speakers of other languages, anger management and understanding domestic violence and abuse. Accredited learning includes level 3 courses in access to higher education (access to HE), digital skills, and leadership and management. Fircroft also provides level 2 courses in academic skills, English and mathematics. Most learners attend on a residential basis, including during the weekends.

At the time of the inspection, there were 24 learners, studying access to HE social science and health, access to HE social science and humanities and level 2 functional skills English. In the current academic year, there have been 301 enrolments. Of these, 51 were students studying accredited courses. A high proportion of students are from disadvantaged backgrounds or have an additional learning support requirement.

The provider does not work with any subcontractors.

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

Adult learners benefit from a calm, welcoming and inclusive learning environment. They work purposefully in study areas between classes. Learners share meals with staff and have informal discussions about their studies over coffee breaks. Learners value the opportunity to be resident at the college and focus on their studies, away from the disruptions they face in their everyday lives. As a result, learners attend classes well and frequently remain in college after their lessons to do additional work.

Learners' behaviours improve significantly over time. Many learners have experience of homelessness, addiction, violence and trauma. Staff support learners to develop their trust and resilience. They are readily available to support learners when required. Staff have honest discussions with those learners who are not yet able to follow the agreed rules for behaviour about their conduct. They support learners to take time out from their studies and to return when they are ready to learn.

Learners appreciate the culture and values espoused by staff at the college. They research the work of folk high schools and explain how the core social justice and environmental themes apply within the college. On access to HE courses, learners complete high-quality research projects on topics such as anti-racism or climate justice. They swiftly develop the skills and behaviours needed to become valued members of their community.

Leaders encourage collaboration and inclusion. They encourage staff and learners to regularly sing together to improve their well-being. Learners improve their communication skills and resolve differences with others through controlled conversations supported by college staff. Learners are confident to give their opinions to staff and leaders, including through student governors and the student union. They feel that their opinions matter and can see the changes that leaders make as a result.

Learners benefit from a broad range of enrichment activities to develop their wider skills and knowledge. They take part in origami craft groups, yoga sessions, political discussions, quiz nights and gardening. Guest speakers from mental health charities, West Midlands Police, women's shelters and alcohol and drug charities encourage learners to participate in voluntary work to support their communities.

Learners value the supportive and positive relationships they have with their peers and college staff. Together, they create an environment in which difference is valued and nurtured. Learners feel safe and supported at college. They are confident that if they raise any issues or concerns, staff will deal with them effectively and efficiently.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The college makes a limited contribution to meeting skills needs.

Leaders work with a wide range of strategic groups to understand the skills needs of the local, regional and national economy. This includes the West Midlands Combined Authority, Birmingham City Council and the designated employer representative body for the West Midlands and Warwickshire, who lead on the development of the local skills improvement plan. External stakeholders recognise that the college specialises in adult residential education and is skilled at reaching learners who are furthest from the labour market. Leaders use their knowledge of skills gaps and shortages to shape their curriculums. However, leaders do not work directly with enough employers and stakeholders to design individual courses that precisely meet stakeholders' needs.

Stakeholder engagement in the design and implementation of too many courses is insufficient. In a small number of cases, courses are not preparing learners well enough for employment or involvement in the community. Some stakeholder contributions, for example individual sessions and talks, are not yet planned and integrated into curriculums. However, teachers on the level 2 skills for aspiring support workers course involve stakeholders effectively in the design and implementation of their curriculum areas. As a result, learners are prepared for future work in this sector.

In the level 2 academic and careers skills course, teachers support learners to develop essential work skills, such as self-confidence, resilience, teamworking and presentation skills. Teachers teach these skills by breaking them down into their component parts. Learners develop their work skills rapidly.

Leaders do not receive sufficiently detailed information to enable them to assess their contribution to skills needs. Leaders have recently implemented a skills impact framework. This will provide leaders with more detail on the impact of the curriculum on learners' preparedness for work. Leaders have committed to collecting more information on learners' next steps and destinations. However, it is too soon for the impact of this framework to be seen.

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

Leaders have selected a suite of both accredited and non-accredited courses, which targets adult learners who are furthest from education and employment. The curriculums provide opportunities for learners to develop their skills in stages to prepare them to move closer to employment, as well as to provide accredited qualifications to support them into employment or further learning.

In many cases, leaders have ensured that courses are well sequenced. In access to HE social science and health, the order in which learners study topics is clearly considered to support learners to build on their new knowledge and skills over time. Learners first understand human organs and systems before understanding the significance of diseases such as osteoporosis and other degenerative bone diseases on the effective movement of parts of the body. Learners link previous learning to the new topics they study effectively.

Leaders, teachers, and support staff understand the individual challenges and needs of learners who attend the college. They take these into account when planning teaching and providing the support that learners need. Learners feel valued at the college and are well supported to learn. Learners with additional support needs achieve as well as their peers.

Teachers plan lessons effectively and use a range of teaching and learning strategies to excite learners and support them to remember more over time. Teachers use the grounds of the college and the seasons to design interesting lessons outside. In mathematics classes, learners measure and record trees and other features in the gardens. In English classes, learners use autumnal language in descriptive writing. Learners remember what they have learned and are able to apply these skills throughout their studies.

Teachers make skilful use of assessment and questioning to check what learners have learned and to correct any misunderstanding swiftly. In access to HE social science and humanities, learners use evaluation and impact grids to select key facts about liberal reforms. Teachers question learners to check previous learning. They use this information effectively to monitor the progress that each learner is making. As a result, learners develop their knowledge and skills quickly.

On most courses, teachers support learners to develop their English and mathematics skills alongside their course. However, in a small minority of cases, such as in level 3 digital skills, learners do not routinely receive support to develop their written English. As a result, not all learners are suitably prepared for further study or employment.

Most learners receive suitable careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) that is tailored to their course. Access to HE learners receive extensive support when applying to higher education, including university visits and guest speakers. However, teachers on some non-accredited short courses do not personalise CEIAG to the individual situations of learners. Not all learners have a clear understanding of their next steps.

Teachers are ambitious for learners. Access to HE teachers provide feedback that stretches the most able learners to achieve distinction grades. Learners produce high-quality work, which prepares them for further study at higher levels. Almost all learners on accredited courses achieve their qualifications and go on to their intended next steps, such as higher education.

On non-accredited courses, most learners progress on to further study in digital skills, health, and personal development at the college. Many continue with volunteering at local establishments and gain valuable work experience. These courses provide learners with the confidence to improve their lives. However, leaders do not yet have a clear understanding of learners' next steps after their studies. They are unable to show the long-term impact of this learning.

Leaders support most teachers to develop their teaching skills effectively. Teachers take part in external training in understanding autism and trauma before teaching aspiring support workers. However, for a few teachers, there is too much reliance on individual research to support the development of their vocational skills. Too few teachers update their vocational knowledge through links with employers.

Leaders have appropriate quality assurance processes in place. These are largely effective in ensuring high standards of learners' work, feedback and tracking the progress of improvements. In a very few cases, leaders have not applied these processes to new courses, such as the new level 3 digital skills course. As a result, a few courses do not meet the expected standard.

Leaders have established an experienced and dedicated board of governors, which brings valuable experience in education, careers and environmental and social inclusion. The board plays an active role in the college, supporting leaders with new developments, such as the impact framework and projects on social justice, which are a key part of the college's mission.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Ensure that all learners develop their English and mathematics skills.
- Ensure that all learners have access to CEIAG throughout their studies.
- Ensure that leaders and teachers work with employers to develop curriculums that reflect the needs of employers.
- Monitor the next steps for learners on non-accredited programmes.

Provider details

Unique reference number	130467
Address	1018 Bristol Road Selly Oak Birmingham West Midlands B29 6LH
Contact number	01214720116
Website	https://www.fircroft.ac.uk/
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Melanie Lenehan
Provider type	Specialist designated college
Date of previous inspection	28 April 2014
Main subcontractors	None

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the vice-principal, 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

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